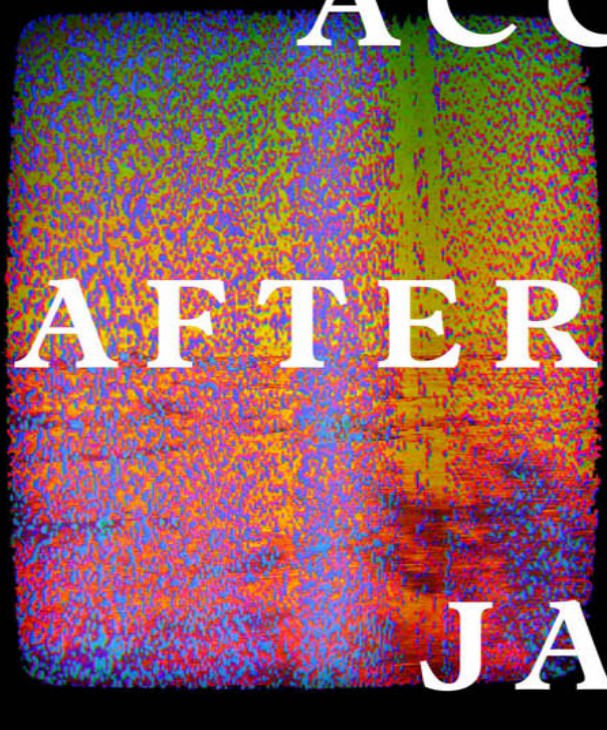
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"The literary voice I've been famished for."
—TORREY PETERS

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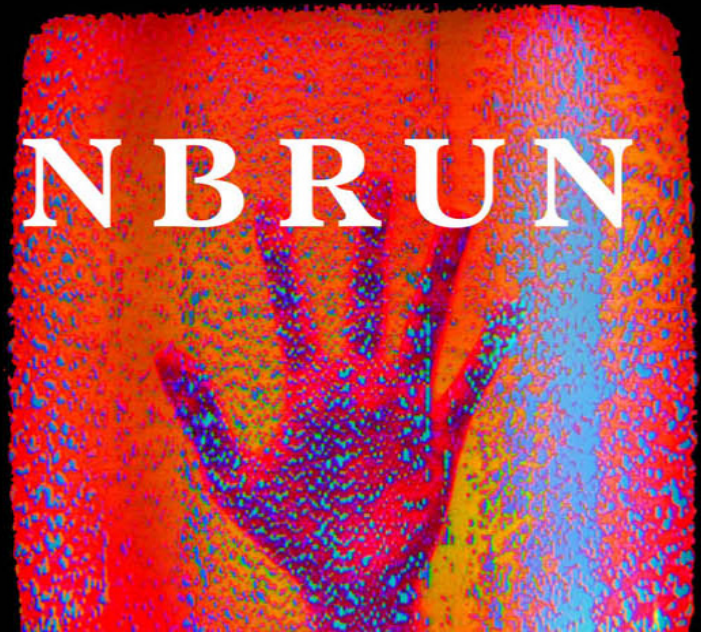


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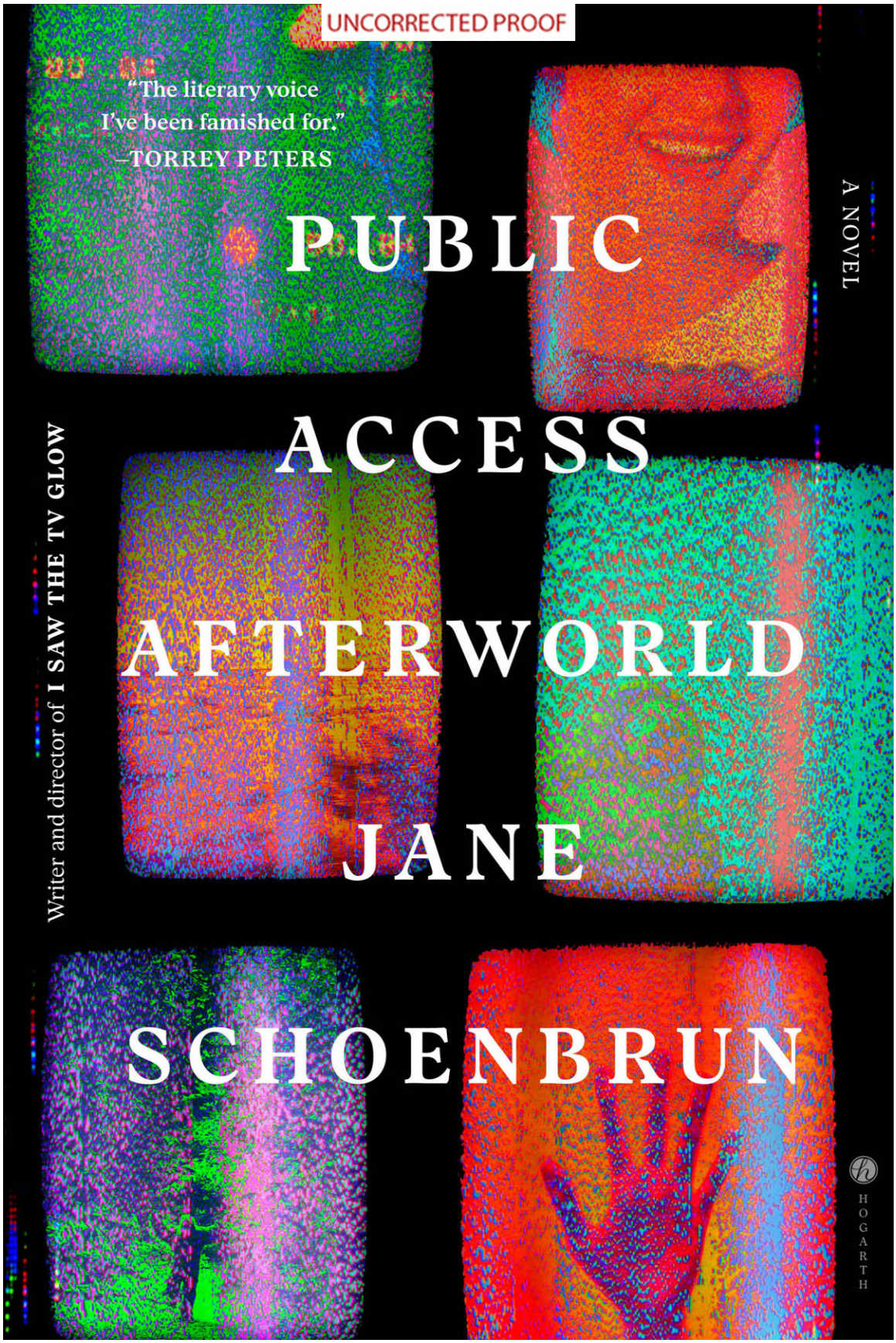
Writer and director of I SAW THE TV GLOW

JANE SCHOENBRUN





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A Novel

Jane Schoenbrun

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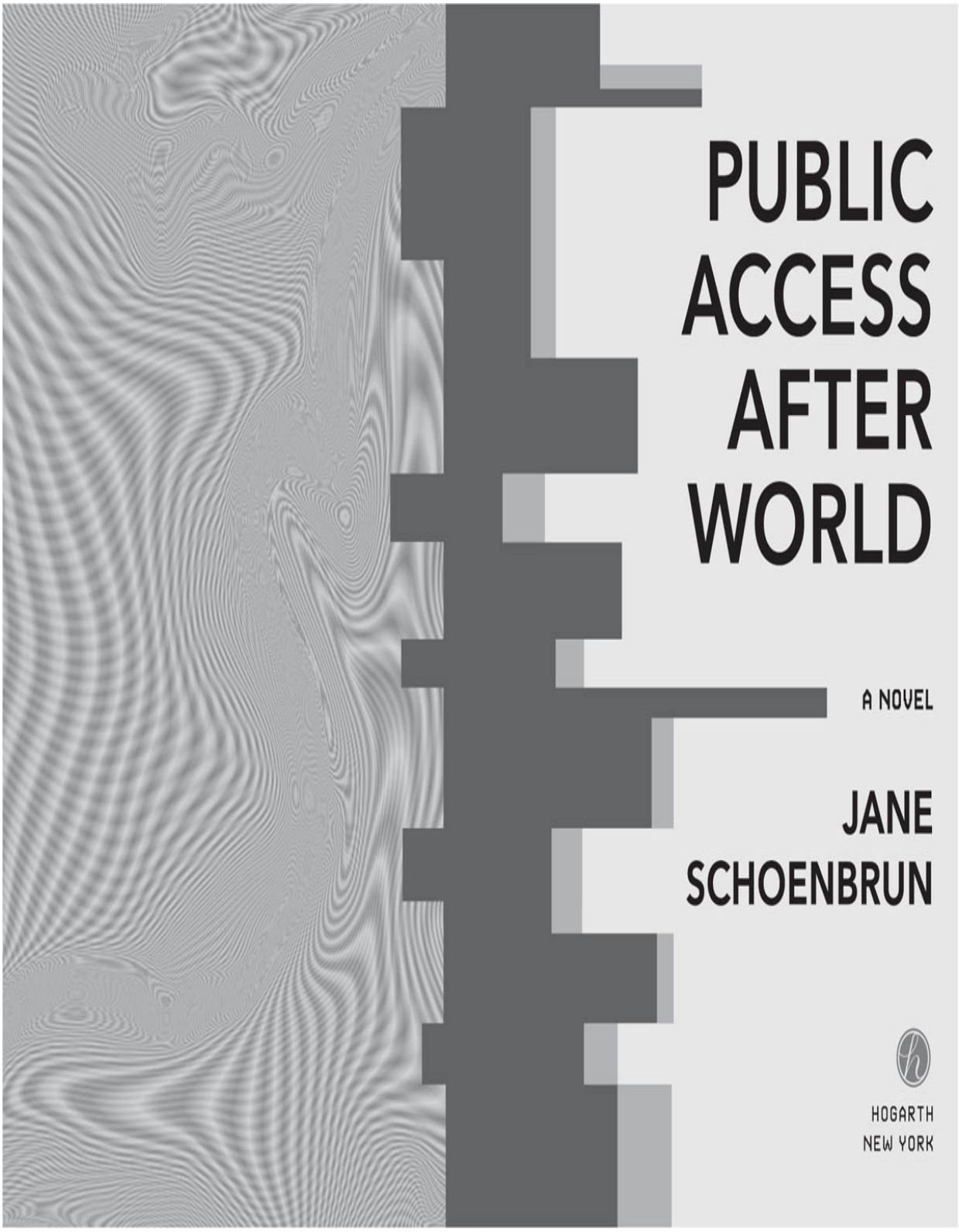
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A NOVEL

JANE SCHOENBRUN

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For Jack, who helped me sing without shame and
wrote on my skin the night I finally started this book.

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I’m telling myself the story of my life.

—Paddy McAloon, “I Trawl the Megahertz”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

THIS BOOK IS NOT my own. I wrote the words down on the page, but the stories did not originate with me. I want you to understand this up front.

The contents of what you're about to read were relayed to me over a single summer, my seventeenth. These stories, which I've attempted to transcribe as faithfully as possible in the pages that follow, were spoken aloud during a series of evening sessions by my friend and fellow patient at the Saint Thomas Youth Rehabilitation Center, a state-funded juvenile correctional facility with not exactly subtle religious ties. At the time, my friend was going by the name David Sawyer (the same name as one of the characters in their stories). But for reasons that I hope will become clear as you read these words, I prefer not to refer to them using this name.

Saint Thomas was a peculiar facility, its strangeness built into the architecture itself. Over the intervening years, I've met others who served similar stints in juvenile facilities as teenagers, but none of the buildings they described sounded anything like the shape of Saint Thomas.

There were *no angles* in the place, was the thing. The entire structure was perfectly round: a giant donut with a big open hole in the middle. This design scheme lent the hospital an uncanny geometry, which was part of its power. When you walked down the halls at Saint Thomas, it always felt as if the walls were slowly closing in on you, curving endlessly inwards. There were no corners everywhere you looked, in a very literal sense, there was no place to hide.

The hole in the middle of the donut housed a large outdoor area, the only such space visible from inside the facility. All summer long, I cherished that view. Mythologized it, even. Sure, the grass out there was overgrown and untended, thick with weeds. But it was *grass.* It was *outside,* where things were green and sunlit by actual sun (not the fake painted mural of a sun smiling in sunglasses on the wall of my windowless room). Of course, we lacked the key cards necessary to gain access to the hole at the center of the

donut. That area was off-limits to patients. Everything green was at Saint Thomas.

I hated the place. Not just the experience of being there, but *the place itself.* I hated the curving walls and the stale medicine smells and the orange lunch trays in the cafeteria and those cheap little pillows they gave us that felt like sleeping on dish towels [towels.] I'm convinced they made those pillows uncomfortable on purpose, not just as a cost-saving maneuver. They didn't want us resting. They didn't want us sleeping through the night, because a good night's sleep might have rendered us a little bit more alert.

You see, the goal of Saint Thomas wasn't "rehabilitation." The daily regimen of pills and Bible verses, the D-grade shepherd's pie they fed us, it wasn't meant to inspire or reform or even convert us. How could it be, when our "chaperones" derived such obvious joy, such consistent pleasure, from our suffering? Saint Thomas ran on sadism. This was its fuel and purpose. It existed to teach submission. The people in control wanted us to know who held the power. They wanted us to understand in no uncertain terms while we were still young and a little optimistic just how trapped we really were.

I hated the place. Hated it in a present-tense, minute-by-minute sort of way. I hated it all summer long, in a style I can only describe as *deeply passionate.* It's sad for me now to reflect on it all these years later, because I don't think I've ever loved anything or anyone half as passionately as I hated Saint Thomas. My hate was a means of survival. I held tight to it, like the safety bar on a rickety old carnival ride. I let it ground me and keep me inside myself through the spins and the nausea and all their attempts at disorientation. I think my friend's TV show served a similar purpose for them.

• • •

At first, the true narrator of this book (whose voice I've tried my best to replicate in the pages that follow) mostly kept to themself. As did I. I had no interest in anyone else at Saint Thomas. My only concern was escaping that donut-shaped Alcatraz, then staying out of reach for however long I could manage. But near the beginning of July, a rumor started to circulate among the patients about the peculiar circumstances that had landed the hospital's newest arrival in our midst. Apparently, before being admitted, my friend

had suffered an emotional breakdown and had attempted suicide. No great surprise there: Most of us had. What was unique in this case was the cause of the break. My friend, rumor had it, claimed there was a fake TV show stuck inside their brain, and that they desperately needed to get it out.

A few of the other patients volunteered to help, and coaxed me into joining them. We began to gather every night after lights-out to listen to my friend's show, which took the form of discrete "episodes" they spoke out loud to us like campfire stories. At first I worried that what we were doing by indulging them was in bad taste. It felt exploitative to me, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly why. But my friend seemed eager to share, and the rest of us, starved for any secular entertainment, were certainly happy to indulge. So each night, a small group of us sat on the carpet, hushed and rapt, and together we listened to the fake TV show stuck in my friend's head.

There were thirty episodes total, but we only ever got a chance to hear twenty-nine.

• • •

After my time at Saint Thomas, I was never able to locate my friend again, though I can assure you I've tried. Unfortunately, I'm not sure if they're even still alive.

I'm writing this all down now for two reasons. First, because it feels like the least I can do. In ways both ephemeral and literal, I owe the true author of this book my life. And by recording their stories here, I hope to preserve some embers of what they meant to me.

But I'm also writing this for myself. Because that fake TV show I heard that summer . . . well, now it's lodged in my own brain, like a virus transmitted from one hospital patient to another, and it feels wrong to keep it inside myself. I don't want it stuck in there anymore, and I don't want these stories to vanish from existence like my friend did. Like, before too long, I fear I will as well.

Maybe think of this text as a séance. I'm hoping, probably foolishly, that by putting my friend's TV show down on the page as best as I can remember it, I'll help them find a safe path back to this world from

wherever they've been hiding. Or, I suppose, from wherever it is they've been trapped.

Perhaps that's naïve. Likely it's wishful thinking. But I feel the need to try nonetheless. To "make it real," as they would always say, like it was the official tagline of their fake TV show.

Back at Saint Thomas, my friend always insisted that someday these episodes would be exactly that. *Real*. That the TV show stuck in their head wouldn't have to be whispered in secret after lights-out at underfunded East Coast clinics run by evangelicals with anger issues. That it would air on Sunday nights, on HBO, in the *Game of Thrones* time slot. That millions of people would watch it. They seemed so sure of themself then, and I always admired their confidence. But I never really believed it myself. Because they don't give people like us the Sunday-night time slot on HBO.

They put us in hospitals. They send us to hell.

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EPISODE ONE

THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION

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1

MY TV SHOW STARTS nine feet under the American suburbs, in Erin Morrison's basement.

That basement was a refuge. A nook to hide from the town above. Waste your youth watching horror movies and weird early internet videos. A cocoon without windows, incubated by central air.

My TV show starts on Friday, June 12, 2009, the night of the analog-to-digital switch-off. Maybe that date doesn't mean anything to you, but if your high school experience was anything like mine, you probably remember the legally mandated deadline when every television network in America, be it local or national, was required to flip the switch and put analog broadcasting out of its misery forever. David Sawyer and Erin Morrison had been quietly anticipating the deadline all school year long. They were, of course, losers.

It had all been a long time coming. Analog broadcasting had spent at least a decade in the TV equivalent of hospice, and during that time, houses all over town had been leveling up to flat-screens and TiVos, banishing their old bulky sets to collect dust in attics and basements. Digital television was the future. It meant more channels, crisper picture quality. Analog television meant fuzzy images and . . . I don't know, *Dick Van Dyke* reruns? Maybe back in the 1950s, all that had been a necessary stepping stone, but now analog was a relic, one whose government-mandated extinction date was way past due.

For David and Erin, the switch-off was an excuse for celebration. The best friends stayed up late that night, throwing themselves a two-person kegger in the basement with a bottle of Tito's they "borrowed" from Erin's mom's liquor cabinet. As the hour approached, they traded swigs, passing the bottle back and forth from beanbag to couch, waiting for analog broadcasting to end and the digital era to begin. That's what they would say

on the news later that night (for the very first time broadcast exclusively over cable boxes and digital receivers): “The digital era has begun.”

Around eleven-thirty, David stumbled to his feet and got to work setting up his Canon VIXIA. He fiddled with the tripod, trying to get the framing just right so he could capture the exact moment in history when some Cronkite-style newsman, nearly extinct himself, in some television studio somewhere, flipped the switch and transitioned eighty years of television back to that which came before it: static.

Never-ending static. Fuzzy and numbing.

Keep your eye on the static: It’s an important part of my TV show’s mythology.

• • •

David loved Erin’s basement. You could call it his second home, but that would be giving too much credit to his first. To David, Erin’s basement was a sanctuary. Its lava lamps and glow-in-the-dark alien smoking weed posters from Spencer Gifts. That “I Love NYC” snow globe on the mantel that Erin brought back from a school trip to the city at the end of the third grade, just months before 9/11 rendered its miniature skyline as outdated as the analog signal David and Erin were tuning into for the very last time.

A short list of things David loved: Erin’s basement, which we’ve already covered. Television, obviously. Blockbuster, before it closed. Ms. Walsh’s AV dungeon and the Auxiliaries who spent their time down there. Reading the plots of horror movies on Wikipedia without ever watching them. Double Stuf Oreos (David liked to combine the frosted halves of two to make a custom sandwich he dubbed the Quadruple Stuf Oreo).

And Erin. There was no one and nothing in this world David loved more than Erin Morrison, not even television. Erin, that anxious, mousy girl who’d first talked to him in the cafeteria back in fourth grade because they were reading the same *Animorphs* book. Erin, whom David had started having weekly playdates with before elementary school was over, even though both their moms were clearly uncomfortable with them being coed best friends.

And okay, look: Yes. If you need to know, David was utterly, totally, one hundred percent madly in love with Erin. Obviously. Always had been.

Always would be.

David loved Erin. David loved watching TV with Erin down in her basement. And David knew without a doubt in his mind that before too long, Erin was going to leave him.

• • •

“Okay, it’s . . .” David checks his watch. He grins at his camcorder, standing in front of Erin’s old Toshiba.

“It’s 11:58 P.M., June twelfth, 2009. And this is the biggest moment in television history since the Man on the Moon. The Fall of the Berlin Wall. Or when JFK got shot by someone who was definitely not Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“It’s the end of analog broadcasting,” Erin says from behind the camera.

“It’s over, baby! RIP!” David shouts.

Erin smiles, watching her best friend from the beanbag and beaming like a proud parent at a school play. David checks his watch.

“In just one minute and eleven seconds, Uncle Sam is gonna flip the switch, and eighty years of television history is going to go up in static. And the last thing ever broadcast on analog television was . . .” David looks behind him. “*Sex and the* fucking *City.* The lamest show ever!” On the screen, the *Sex and the City* credits begin to scroll faster than anyone could possibly read.

Now midnight approaches. David checks his watch again and hams a countdown for the camera like it’s New Year’s Eve and he’s a young, lactose intolerant Dick Clark.

“All right. In EIGHT. SEVEN. SIX . . .”

From her spot on the beanbag, Erin joins in on the count.

“FIVE. FOUR. THREE.

“TWO.

“ONE.”

They don’t hit the mark exactly. Maybe David’s watch is a little off. Or maybe that decrepit Cronkite in his radio tower flips the switch a second or two past midnight. But who cares? Because even though it happens a moment later than it’s supposed to, it still happens.

TSSSSSSSSSSS—

• • •

Static. Without warning. A signal washed of its image. A transmission cut with the abruptness of lightning.

TSSSSSSSSSS. The static hisses from its boxed enclosure. Vibrates against the glass of Erin's newly useless Toshiba.

Do you know what static is, literally? *Radio waves.* Invisible to our sense perceptions, but surrounding us at all times, like water we don't even know we're swimming in. For centuries, millennia, since before the Big Bang, we didn't know these waves existed. But that doesn't mean they weren't there, waiting to be discovered.

And then about a century ago, we tuned in. We learned how to recognize those waves, to conjure them onto a screen in a digestible form. We tapped the signal, and soon we learned to work with it, to control it, to bend the static to our will.

We made shadows and shapes. Transmissions in color and black and white. *The Honeymooners*. *The Andy Griffith Show*. *Sex and the* fucking *City*. Soon, as the decades passed, we discovered newer, more cost-effective ways to control electricity. To recognize and manipulate that invisible water that surrounds us all. To remake it in our image. So we allowed the analog signal to revert back to its original form: wild, endless static.

It's still there, of course. Even if our world moves on. Even if we hide our analog sets in storage closets and garbage dumps. The static remains underneath everything.

• • •

Eight percent uploaded.

Erin balances her mom's bottle of Tito's on her belly, sprawled out on her beanbag still watching the static on her Toshiba. David's in a leather chair at the computer desk, hunched over Erin's family desktop, uploading his video to GlobalVill.com, that new streaming platform people say is two times faster than YouTube, better quality than Dailymotion, more community-oriented than Vimeo.

This, too, another sign of the changing times. The streaming revolution is at hand. It seems like just yesterday it took David forty-five minutes to play a Flash game on his parents' 56K dial-up, three hours to download a WAV file from LimeWire. But recently, suddenly, streaming video was instantaneous. Anything was ready to watch or upload anytime. Anyone could start a TV channel of their very own.

David's not the only person racing tonight to upload his documentation of the analog switch-off, not the only loser who's dedicated his Friday night to playing amateur television historian. But he's probably the youngest. Some videos are already up on GlobalVill.com. "The Exact Moment that Analog Broadcasting Ended!" uploaded by JakeMonster. "Analog TV is Over You Guys!" uploaded by triggerhappyninja. David's been scooped, beaten to the punch thanks to Erin's mediocre DSL connection.

Nine percent. The upload stutters along.

"I switched your settings off Energy Saver," David tells Erin. He stumbles across the room, scoops up his cellphone, then grabs his house keys from next to that Twin Tower snow globe up on the mantel.

"I'm okay to bike. I think I'm okay to bike."

"It's one A.M.," Erin says. "Crash on the couch. Mom can make us waffles in the morning."

David looks towards the staircase and thinks about emerging out of air-conditioning into the swamp outside. A minor bout of vertigo wobbles him.

Erin rolls her eyes. "You're drunk," she says. Static hums from the screen across the room.

"Okay. Yeah. I am." David stumbles over to the beanbag and collapses next to Erin. It's not his usual sleep spot. David knows he should get up and sprawl out on that couch he's crashed on countless nights before. He knows this beanbag hardly sleeps a cat, let alone two drunk teenagers.

But he doesn't want to move. Why should he sleep on Erin's couch when this warm body is right here next to him? When he could drift off to sleep listening to his best friend breathing just inches away, feeling her body stretch and resettle on the fabric they're now sharing?

Maybe Erin's surprised at David's boldness, or maybe she's too drunk to notice. Either way, she just nuzzles into the beanbag, moving a little closer

to him. And then she asks the question she always asks at the end of nights like this one.

“Hey. What do you think TV will be like in one hundred years?”

David smiles. It’s a game they play. Another ritual they share. And of course David’s got his answer memorized, like the first page of a prayer book to his own personal religion.

“Oh my gosh. It won’t even look like television.”

Erin nuzzles in closer. She closes her eyes. David can feel her breath on his neck.

“Well, first of all, it’ll be beamed directly to a chip in your brain. Or to, like, nanobots. But the point is, there won’t even be a screen.”

“No screen,” Erin says. “Check.”

“And every show will star whoever you want it to. Like next week, if you want your mom to play Marge Simpson on *The Simpsons*—”

“Then my mom will play Marge Simpson on *The Simpsons*.”

“And shows never have to end,” David tells her. “Unless we want them to. No more cancelations or series finales. We’ll be able to live in our favorite shows for as long or as short as we—”

It happens effortlessly, as if in that moment it just makes more sense for David’s and Erin’s lips to join together than remain apart. The kiss feels warm and wet and soft, as fuzzy and blanketing as the static still blaring from Erin’s TV across the room.

And now David and Erin’s bedtime routine is broken, probably forever. Because Erin isn’t just listening to David’s drunken bedtime story like she always does on nights like this one. She’s kissing him. The two of them are kissing. *Right now.*

And it’s so easy. David feels like a puppet, drunk on Tito’s, the inebriation providing him cover to finally fall into this moment he’s dreamed about ever since he first laid eyes on Erin Morrison and her *Animorphs* novel half a lifetime ago.

Or maybe it’s something else. Not the Tito’s. Maybe it’s the static pulling his strings, humming him towards this moment that now seems inevitable, crazy, actually, that it took so many years to arrive. The utter obviousness of kissing your best friend on a beanbag in a basement in your shitty

hometown on a Friday night near the end of junior year. Everything's changed now. Analog television is over. Static reigns.

The kiss lasts fourteen seconds, maybe fifteen, before David chickens out.

"I'm sorry," he says as he pulls away. "I just—we just—it's not that I don't want to . . ."

Erin looks at her best friend with sympathy, but not surprise. David jumps off the beanbag. "That was a big deal," he says. "And this . . ." He looks at the glowing television, then at the computer desk. Anywhere but at Erin.

"I'm really drunk."

"I thought you wanted to?" Erin asks.

"I did. I do. I just—" David grabs his flip phone. "I've gotta go. I think I'm okay to bike . . ."

Erin doesn't move from the beanbag. David runs up the stairs in panicked retreat.

"I'll see you in school Monday, okay?" He doesn't wait for Erin's response. He's out the door, and then Erin's alone, totally humiliated.

The static continues to hum, like it's whispering to her.

• • •

Out on the street, David plays it back in his head. They kissed. He can still taste it, can still feel it. His first kiss actually just happened. He and Erin will never exist in a reality where they've never kissed ever again.

God. He's such a fucking loser. Why couldn't he be present then, *even then,* in that moment he'd fantasized about for years?

David's not ready to bike across town yet, not ready to slip into his house, check the internet, masturbate, and probably stay up all night in bed stewing in the overwhelming humiliation of that kiss. No. David just wants to stand here, hugged by the humidity of the suburbs, ashamed by his inability to be like the other teenagers in this town who don't retreat in terror when a girl they like kisses them.

He feels the urge to rush back down to the basement and tell Erin everything he's feeling. He should go back inside. Erin's still awake. She

wants him to come back.

But he doesn’t. Of course not. David bikes home. He checks the internet. He masturbates. He spends the night awake in his childhood bed, marinating in his utter cowardice. The digital era begins.

And that next Monday, after David spends a full weekend overthinking how he’ll greet Erin in Ms. Walsh’s AV dungeon before first period, how he’ll be casual and friendly, give off the calming impression that nothing has changed between them in hopes that things will continue to do exactly that, David will discover that, actually, Erin isn’t waiting for him in her usual spot by the slide projectors.

In fact, Erin will never show up to school on Monday at all. She won’t call out sick, and none of her other friends will have heard from her since Friday night.

And then, things will get even stranger.

You see, ever since he was a child, David Sawyer had wished his life could feel more like a TV show. After the night of the analog-to-digital switch-off, it finally became one.

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2

LOCAL WEATHERMAN RAY "CAN You Say Sunshine" Davino killed himself live on air at 5:35 P.M. on September 3, 1988, on Dallas–Fort Worth ABC Channel 8 WFAA, pointing a gun at his head in the middle of the five-day forecast, rambling for forty-eight seconds in a half-coherent final monologue about the absurdity of reality, then pulling the trigger as if it was all part of his nightly routine. No one in the studio that day thought to cut the feed. The news crew and anchors and station heads all stood frozen, watching the whole debacle play out, waiting for instructions on proper protocol that would never arrive.

Before he splattered his brains across a green screen loop of the Dallas skyline live on regional television, before that final morbid act would canonize him forever in academic footnotes and specialty Wikipedia rabbit holes, Ray "Can You Say Sunshine" Davino was already a local legend among DFW's college-aged stoner population, infamous for the half-lucid conspiracy theories he'd ramble through nightly while delivering the forecast. He was nuts, basically, and everyone knew it. No one really understood why the station kept him on air. Maybe he was someone's cousin. Or maybe the producers were in on the joke like everyone else, chasing ratings by giving this local lunatic an ill-sized soapbox on which to practice his personal brand of buffoonery.

After that gruesome final broadcast, everyone felt bad for thinking it was hilarious that Ray "Can You Say Sunshine" Davino was nuts, for egging on what had clearly been debilitating mental illness. For weeks following the incident, the Dallas community talked soberly in church services and at business lunches, in newspaper editorials, and even on the TV news itself about how this could have happened, about the state of "our culture," about the ways that television had desensitized us all, what this country was coming to, etc., etc.

Some time passed. The station got a new weatherman who didn't have a bad habit of digressing into discussions of secret holocausts when he should have been talking about cold fronts. Eventually everyone just kind of forgot altogether about Ray "Can You Say Sunshine" Davino.

Then, some years later, the internet came along and gifted Dallas's preeminent suicidal weatherman a posthumous second act. Those same Southern stoners who had heckled Davino in SMU dorm rooms were now cresting towards middle age. Their memories of the weatherman's infamous rants had been embellished over the years until the dude had risen in their estimation into some kind of folk hero, a Don Quixote figure for all that felt uncanny and absurd about their increasingly distant youth. They reminisced in chat rooms and online forums about Davino's craziest rants, his bad toupee that looked like it was trying to slide off his face and start a new, better life somewhere else. They speculated about what the weatherman must have smelled like (stale orange juice, probably; mothballs, certainly). And those who had witnessed that final, fateful broadcast live shared their memories of watching it with hushed reverence, as though Davino had been a one-man version of the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, if the Beatles had killed themselves on *Ed Sullivan*.

Soon everyone decided again that the whole thing was hilarious. Video compilations of Davino's most unhinged broadcasts were some of the first uploads to go viral on platforms like YouTube, Dailymotion, and GlobalVill.com, providing the kind of morbid content that's still a mainstay at sleepovers after the parents go to sleep.

This was the late 2000s, and the young streaming platforms were just starting to engage with the question of content moderation, about what to do with videos that were too disturbing, offensive, or just plain illegal for public consumption. And that grainy video of Ray "Can You Say Sunshine" Davino's infamous final broadcast was one of the streamers' most frequent early thorns, the one where Davino raised a gun to his head, told the audience that he'd see them "on the other side of the screen," and cemented his place in television history with a bullet through the temple. No matter how many times each platform would remove that damn clip and ban the user who had uploaded it, new accounts would just keep popping up and reuploading it, as if the streaming platforms were playing an endless game of online Whac-A-Mole with the suicidal weatherman.

As a child of internet message boards, David Sawyer knew all about Ray “Can You Say Sunshine” Davino. He even had a few of the weatherman’s most infamous one-liners memorized. What David didn’t know was that three months before Davino’s on-air suicide, during one of his lesser-known rants, while he mumbled bitterly about the upcoming Dukakis-Bush election being “two sides of the same double-edged spear,” Davino made an offhand reference to wanting to send both candidates “to Public Access Afterworld.” The aside went unnoticed as just another one of the strange, seemingly random turns of phrase Davino was infamous for spouting nightly. And it stayed that way for over two decades, until the events that followed the analog-to-digital switch-off. Until David Sawyer began his own ill-fated investigation into the white whale he too would come to know by the name Public Access Afterworld.

• • •

It was a channel, Erin insisted, buried under all the other channels, under even the static.

David found his best friend after school the following Monday just where he had left her: in her windowless, climate-controlled cave, perched a little too close to the television screen, staring at the static still broadcasting from her Toshiba.

He’d rushed over after eighth period, following an anxious school day spent checking for Erin between classes in all the spots she’d usually hide. But his best friend was nowhere to be found, and she wasn’t picking up her phone at home. David had tried her six times on the school’s last remaining pay phone.

He was sure something was wrong, and that he was to blame. At first, David assumed Erin was faking sick specifically to avoid him, that she was embarrassed or angry about their botched kiss on Friday night. David knew how badly he had blown it, that he had rendered their friendship permanently, irreversibly *weird.* That whatever romantic possibility had been slow-brewing under their supposedly platonic situation was now spoiled forever.

But as lunchtime gave way to precalc, the dormant volcano in David’s stomach started churning real lava. He began to wonder: What if something

worse had happened to Erin after he'd run away? Something horrific and irreversible, a cosmic revenge doled out by the universe to rub David's nose in his own utter cowardice?

What if Erin was dead? What if some psycho killer had been waiting in the wings to abduct her, to carry her far away where her body could never be recovered? David knew the thought was absurd, the kind of convoluted plot twist that happened in horror movies, not in real life. But all afternoon, he couldn't shake the sinking intuition that he'd never see Erin Morrison alive again on this earth.

The moment the final bell rang at the end of eighth period, David rushed across campus to the school's back parking lot and caught the wrong bus home on purpose. He didn't really think about what he was doing as he sprinted from Erin's bus stop to her house up the hill at the end of the cul-de-sac, as he let himself in through the back patio entrance he knew Erin's mom always left unlocked. He let muscle memory carry him across the kitchen towards the door leading into the basement.

When David found Erin sitting there, alive and well, watching analog television (or, more accurately, *the absence* of analog television), he felt a rush of calm wash over him, a feeling he knew well, one he always looked forward to after bouts of really bad anxiety. He loved that feeling, but only because all the other feelings that came before it sucked so bad. Erin greeted him without taking her eyes off the screen.

"Hey."

David had been so sure that he was about to walk in on a grotesque *Saw*-style set piece that he hadn't actually thought through what to say in the event that Erin was totally fine. What excuse he'd make for his sudden appearance, or how to address Friday night's romantic calamity.

"I'm sorry. I—I was worried something happened," he said.

But Erin wasn't listening. She was staring at the static.

"David . . ." she said. "*I saw something.*" Her face was pale, her eyes hollow little ant holes, as if she hadn't slept in days. "I saw something underneath the static. A transmission. A broadcast."

David looked from Erin to the screen, then down at a stack of blank VHS tapes spread out on the carpet in front of her. A little red light blinked from

the VCR. She was recording, David realized. She'd skipped school to record static onto VHS tapes.

"What did you see?" David asked, a little put off now by her whole "trying to catch the Zodiac killer" insomniac vibe.

And in the pit of his stomach, David felt something else, something embarrassing that he didn't want to admit was even there: *disappointment.* Of course David felt happy that Erin was still alive. But part of him had been so ready to barge in on one of those horror movie set pieces he'd spent the school day imagining that now the anticlimax felt somehow dissatisfying. Like an itch reality had failed to scratch. This was a bad habit he was always getting himself into: wishing his life could be more like a movie, then getting disappointed when reality inevitably let him down.

"Public Access Afterworld," Erin told him.

• • •

She'd first spotted it between two and three A.M. the night of the switch-off, about an hour after David's panicked retreat from her basement, as she was putting her mom's vodka bottle back in the liquor cabinet. Out of the corner of her eye, she registered a subtle rhythm in the static on her Toshiba screen, as if the thousands of tiny electric molecules that made up the fuzz were pulsing, dancing with one another, organizing themselves into . . . *something.* Not quite a shape, more like a motivation, a subtle pattern standing in for a clearer image, like those *Magic Eye* pictures Erin used to squint at in elementary school until finally, eventually, the outline of a sailboat would come into soft focus.

At first, Erin blamed her impaired visual faculties, which were wobbly from both the vodka and the tears she'd cried in the wake of David's rejection. But the more she stared at the static, the more she was sure of it: This wasn't a trick of the eye. She wasn't making this up. There was something there. Something that was slowly becoming an image.

She thought about calling David. She knew he'd still be up in his bedroom across town. But it felt too heavy. David was trying to distract himself, she assumed, from that awful, uninvited kiss she'd sprung on him, that ill-conceived move she'd been careless enough to finally make.

Ugh. Why the fuck had she done that? She knew David loved hanging out with her and watching TV. And she was basically sure he was straight—David never talked about girls, but he got all blushy and defensive whenever Seven of Nine showed up on *Star Trek*. But Seven of Nine was played by Jeri Ryan, and Erin was . . . just herself, sexless and awkward, the future valedictorian of Hartsdale High.

• • •

"Amazing grace . . . how sweet the sound . . ."

Soon the static formed into something unmistakable: an animated logo, hand-drawn and bouncing, letter by letter. It read "Public Access Afterworld," like the name of a phantom TV station that had been hiding underneath all of the old channels, waiting for the switch-off so it could finally be discovered.

There was someone singing: a fragile, off-key voice clipping through the white noise.

"That saved a wretch like me . . ."

Without taking her eyes off the screen, Erin popped open the cabinet below her TV. She was afraid that if she looked away, whatever she was witnessing would dissipate back into static. She withdrew one of the blank tapes she kept stored below the set and fed it into the VCR. She hadn't really recorded anything in a couple years, not since Best Buy started selling TV shows on DVD. But now she felt glad she hadn't thrown away her old blanks. She hit record on the VCR in time to catch the last few seconds of that bouncing logo and the eerie singing. If this wasn't a hallucination or a dream, now she'd have proof of it, captured forever on VHS.

The image changed. Now a skinny blond woman wearing a yellow summer dress stood at a kitchen sink. She was washing dishes. Tracking lines wobbled and fuzzed, distorting the image so you had to squint to really get a good look at the picture.

"I once was lost but now am found . . ."

The woman was singing, quietly murmuring "Amazing Grace" to herself while she washed two cheap plastic spatulas. Or . . . no. Erin squinted harder, trying to make out the image: The spatulas were actually *part of her*

body, fused with her arms, replacements for the hands Erin now realized were missing from the picture.

"Was blind but now I see . . ."

Soap bubbles ballooned up from the sink. The woman continued singing. She clanged her spatulas together over and over again. She was still trying to clean them, as though she didn't understand that they weren't dishes but part of her body. Erin shared her confusion: The fuzziness of the image made it impossible to tell where this woman's skin ended and the cheap plastic dishware began.

Soon the soap swallowed the woman up like a bubble bath. She kept fruitlessly trying to clean the spatulas that were also somehow her hands. And then the sink disappeared, dipping back to nothing. The woman remained on screen a few seconds longer, and then the tracking lines ate through her, too. And where just a moment ago there had been an image on Erin's television, now once again there was nothing but static.

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3

A FEW DAYS LATER, David started his first-ever thread on his favorite online horror message board, TheUncannyValley.

SUBJECT: WHAT IS PUBLIC ACCESS AFTERWORLD?

> Has anyone else experienced weird pirate transmissions beaming through the static from a station called Public Access Afterworld? Somehow it is breaking thru on my friend's decommissioned analog set and broadcasting weird shit. Check out this recording from the other night. Captured at 2:56am on channel 4 in hartsdale, ny, three hours after the switch-off. WTF is it? Who (or what) is responsible?

David included a hyperlink at the bottom of the post to a GlobalVill upload of Erin's recording.

In the cold light of day, that tape Erin had loaded into her VCR still played back the broadcast of the woman with spatula hands, just as she had witnessed it. Erin was almost surprised it wasn't a hallucination, that she had managed to carry this transmission back with her from whatever dreamworld she had briefly tuned into the night of the switch-off.

David insisted they digitize the recording ("It's not safe to have it saved on just one tape"). And so before first period on the last day of junior year, the two of them dubbed Erin's recording from VHS to DVD on the equipment in Ms. Walsh's AV dungeon so David could upload it later on his desktop at home. Erin sat on the floor between a tangle of HDMI cords and slide projectors while the rest of the Auxiliaries gathered around the screen.

"I just want to remind you all that sunlight is a thing that exists," said Ms. Walsh, the club's thirty-five-year-old teacher-chaperone. "It even feels good. On your skin. *Everywhere*, actually."

Ms. Walsh made fun of the Auxiliaries. This was the deal, and everyone kind of liked it. The bored ex-hipster teacher and her gaggle of teenage outcasts, spending every free moment of every otherwise soul-crushing school day together.

“It produces vitamins,” Ms. Walsh said, then took a sip of coffee from her famous “World’s Best Nephew” mug. “There’s a rumor going around that it even powers life on earth.”

“This video is a fake,” Ralph said. He shook his head at Erin. “I can’t believe you let David put you up to this. Nice hoax. Next, please.”

“Unfortunately, I have to agree,” said Fran, one of the twins. “It’s layered like a bad Photoshop. You can tell it was made in iMovie.”

“Exactly,” Ralph said. “Total student film energy. Super pretentious, without the craft to back it up.”

“Oh my god. I just got an email alert marked *urgent*,” Ms. Walsh said, then squinted at her computer screen and pretended she was reading a bomb threat. “It says . . . you will all die virgins.”

David watched the tape play back its loop of dish soap, body horror, and static fuzz. He’d seen it dozens of times by now.

“It’s not fake,” he said. “Erin, tell them.”

Everyone looked at Erin. She looked down at her sneakers.

“Yeah,” she said. “I saw it.”

Erin had been feeling under the weather all week, which had made her even more laconic than usual.

“I’m sorry,” Ralph said. “But I refuse to fall for this.”

“Hey, brain twister: What never stops moving but always remains static?” asked Fran. This was part of her signature brand of autism—posing original riddles, then offering the answer before anyone else had a chance to guess.

“Static,” she said.

“If Erin says she saw it, I believe her,” said Leslie, the other twin. “Come on, guys. Maybe someone chose the night of the switch-off to pull one last signal intrusion for old times’ sake. Remember Max Headroom?”

Leslie put her head on Fran’s shoulder. The two weren’t actually twins. They just dated and kind of looked alike, so the nickname stuck.

“Or maybe it’s a signal from an alternate dimension. Right, David? Maybe it’s *Videodrome*.” Ralph shook his head. “You guys are so gullible. David’s a bored little troll and he’s convinced Erin to mess with us one more time before summer break. This is lazy work, and you all are falling for it.”

David punched Ralph in the arm.

“Ow. Fuck!” Ralph said, then punched David back.

“Knock it off!” Ms. Walsh shouted.

The tape finished converting. First bell rang.

• • •

Unfortunately, the denizens of TheUncannyValley message board seemed to agree with Ralph’s assessment.

David’s post had sat mostly untouched all day, save a few dismissive replies to the tune of an all-caps, single-word “FAKE” or a quickly fired off “waste of time // don’t watch.” And then, a mod posting under the username platformagnostic had dealt David’s post its final death blow.

“Cursed videos belong in the ‘board art + writing’ subforum, not on main,” the mod wrote, then locked David’s thread so no one else could reply. And that, it seemed, was that.

Message boards operated with a social logic that David understood well. At this point, he fancied himself an expert on online etiquette, having clocked infinite hours on countless forums. But always as a lurker, never a participant. David wouldn’t have ever admitted this to anyone else, but he had always been too intimidated by the fast-paced, survival-of-the-fittest style of message board discourse to make an account, to introduce himself, to post a pic in the “revealed” thread, and take his rightful place amongst the shit-talkers. Message boards were dog-eat-dog. If you were new to a forum, you better be the wittiest motherfucker around, or else you were guaranteed to be bullied and humiliated and banned on sight for being lame or gay or a noob. Or worse still, you might just be ignored, your thread locked without a second thought.

David had been waiting years for the chance to make his grand online entrance, to jump from lurker to poster, and the Public Access Afterworld mystery had seemed like the perfect opportunity. Here was a genuine slice

of unexplained phenomena, one he had only happened upon thanks to Erin's quick trigger finger on the VCR. And judging by the lack of search results for "public access afterworld" on Google, no one else had recorded or even noticed the signal intrusion that Erin had managed to capture. David had no idea how localized the broadcast had been. Maybe this was just something affecting stations in the Westchester area. Or maybe Erin's Toshiba had picked up the signal all on its own.

Regardless, David now had exclusive access to something significant, something *rare*, a perfect entrée into this community he had lurked within for so long. He had no idea how to explain or solve the mystery. But David knew if anyone could help, it was going to be the denizens of TheUncannyValley web board.

So, when no one replied to his first-ever thread except to dismiss it as a piece of fiction posted to the wrong subforum, of course David was devastated. It seemed he was destined to remain an outcast, even to this community of outcasts. He felt ashamed for blowing his best chance at online community.

• • •

There was something else David was ashamed to admit to anyone about the Public Access Afterworld broadcast Erin had captured: He didn't really *get* it.

When Erin first showed him the tape in her basement that Monday after school, he'd made a big scene out of how shocked he was by what she'd recorded. But honestly? He'd just acted that way to validate Erin's own excitement. He could tell how freaked out she was by what she had stumbled upon under the static. She needed someone to commiserate with about it, and David had been very happy to play the role. He still feared that their bond had been ruined by Friday night's botched kiss. By his eternal sexual weirdness.

That Monday after the switch-off, once David had managed to successfully tear Erin away from her spot on the carpet recording static onto VHS, she had described her experience of witnessing the Public Access Afterworld broadcast to him in the most hushed and rapturous of tones. How she'd felt her heart drop and the carpet rearrange under her as she

realized something impossible was happening on the TV screen. How it had seemed that the static itself was sentient, rearranging into a new form visible only to her. How those bizarre images shimmered and danced like a watercolor bled through a circuit board. And how she knew intuitively in that moment that what she was witnessing was something that had always been there: The guts under nearly eighty years of analog broadcasting. The image under the image.

But when David watched Erin's tape, all he saw was bargain-basement surrealism. A bad student film, as Ralph had put it. He felt in his guts what the Auxiliaries and his message board peers had diagnosed on sight: that this was the work of a troll. Someone dead set on putting the "hack" in the word *hacker*.

But regardless, when Erin described the dread she felt watching that broadcast, David made sure to nod along emphatically. And when others questioned the veracity of Erin's discovery, David would go full convert mode, preaching so rapturously about the supernatural mystery of Public Access Afterworld that he even started to convince himself he believed it was real.

He egged Erin on. He built up the mystery. He feared if he didn't, he would lose her.

• • •

Summer in Hartsdale proved even more soul-crushing than the school year before it. In his childhood, David's parents had punted him off to a nearby day camp where he spent five days a week swatting away mosquitos in an oversized graphic tee, the smell of suntan lotion lodged in his nostrils. But now he was old enough to get a summer job, and his parents had made it clear that he'd better plan on getting one. "What else are you doing all day and night in your room?" his mom asked. She seemed genuinely curious to know the answer.

David had never had much career ambition. He'd always imagined himself getting a job at Blockbuster after high school, then working there until he died at forty-five. But the last Blockbuster in the state had closed for good last autumn, and now David needed a backup plan.

His mom drove him all over town so he could hand out copies of his résumé. Eventually he got a call back from the CVS. Despite his best efforts to blow the interview, he found himself hired.

So that summer, David spent his Fridays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays waking up at four A.M. to unload the delivery truck, listening to the same store mixtape of pop-country on repeat as he stocked hemorrhoid cream and self-administered douches. Each afternoon towards the end of his shift, he ordered baked ziti for lunch from the pizza place down the shopping center. He ate alone on the grass between the stores and the highway, collecting ant bites on his ankles. After his break, he'd fight post-lunch fatigue for the last hour of his shift, working up the anticipation to get home and collapse into bed for a three-hour nap that would take him safely to sundown.

And then his nights were spent in Erin's basement, sometimes watching movies or TV like they used to, but most nights now monitoring the static for another possible glimpse of Public Access Afterworld. They sat together, a stack of blank VHS tapes on hand nearby, both of them trying to zone in and re-create the circumstances that had willed that first broadcast into existence. They never saw anything except fuzz.

It was mind-numbing, even more arduous than stocking shelves at CVS. Since David's message board thread had been locked, the whole thing had started to feel dumb and embarrassing to him, a momentary blip of excitement that had utterly failed to pay off. David could tell that even Erin's interest was starting to wane. That whatever magic she had felt after that initial broadcast was drying up with the late June heat.

But still they gathered each summer evening for this shared ritual. David knew they were doing it to avoid something inevitable, something that had changed in their friendship that neither one wanted to acknowledge. But they just kept watching the static. It was difficult to tell who was humoring whom anymore.

During the last week of June, Erin took a trip to Boston with her dad to tour the MIT campus, where she'd be applying Early Decision in the fall. When Erin was six years old, her dad had gotten the idea in his head that she was destined to be a NASA astronaut. "The youngest one ever in space," he'd always brag, as if he was predicting the actual future. It had started as a cute father-daughter inside joke, but as Erin grew up, it

somehow evolved into the actual plan. She could tell how much her father wanted it, and that made her want it, too. Sure, Erin had always felt more comfortable in English or the photo lab, but she was brilliant in every subject. Straight A's across the board. She could apply wherever she wanted, and almost certainly get in, too.

Before Erin left for her trip, David assured her he would monitor the static while she was away ("every waking moment I'm not selling Benadryl and foot cream," he promised her).

But with Erin gone, he couldn't muster the energy. He played *Assassin's Creed* and binged season six of *24* on DVD each night after work. He felt guilty for abandoning their shared mission, and anxious for Erin's return from Boston, the city he suspected he'd soon lose her to forever.

And then, just as David was ready to give up hope in Public Access Afterworld, a new lead arrived in his inbox.

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4

ON JUNE 28, DAVID received a private message on his GlobalVill channel from a user named “Jim” (quotation marks included in the username). “Jim’s” account had been created three days prior. The message he sent read:

> HELLO. I am not sure who you are or where you are located but I’ve been tracking the Public Access Afterworld broadcasts for many years. Have we met? This is an uncataloged transmission I was not aware of. Sincerely, Jim.

David’s thread on TheUncannyValley message board had been locked for two weeks now, but the accompanying video upload was still live on his channel on GlobalVill.com. And even though the upload had a lackluster thirty-eight views total, it seemed now that someone had stumbled upon it who knew a lot more about what was happening here than either David or Erin.

David’s first instinct upon receiving “Jim’s” message was to interrupt Erin’s trip, to call her in excitement and tell her about this latest twist in the would-be saga of Public Access Afterworld. There were so many new breadcrumbs to follow in “Jim’s” message. For one, it appeared someone else had been investigating the phenomenon for a lot longer than they had. And there were apparently “broadcasts,” like plural. More strange transmissions to pore over, and many years of them at that. It also seemed there existed some kind of “catalog” of other transmissions, perhaps even a community dedicated to researching them.

David’s mind raced with the possibilities. “Jim’s” message was hardly fifty words long, and yet it utterly revitalized his and Erin’s dead-ended investigation.

Then David realized it was probably all bullshit. Someone stumbling across his video and deciding to have some fun at his expense. Or this "Jim" character had assumed, like the message board mod who locked his thread, that the video David posted was fiction—an invitation for others to join him in some online roleplaying. This guy was making it up, because he assumed David was as well.

Then David thought of an even worse possibility, and the moment it occurred to him, he knew it was true.

This was Ralph, posting under a pseudonym.

Ralph knew all about David's message board post. He knew how desperate David was for his investigation to bear fruit. And so he'd made a burner account (with quotation marks around the fake name, just to rub it in) to troll David from across town.

The more David thought about it, the more it made sense: "Jim's" GlobalVill account had been registered three days earlier, as if it had been created just to send David this message. And there was no personal info to be found on "Jim's" user page. No videos uploaded to his channel, no link to anything that could confirm this was a real person. Soon David was all but convinced: "Jim" had to be Ralph fucking with him, testing how far down the rabbit hole he was willing to travel. David felt stung by his own gullibility. He didn't interrupt Erin's trip. He knew that yet another false alarm would be the end of his and Erin's summer investigation, and probably their friendship as well.

David crafted a reply to "Jim" and sent it the next day.

> This is not a creepypasta or an MMORPG. Please don't waste my time because I can smell BS a mile away. If you have real information to share, share it. Otherwise, fuck off.

"Jim" wrote back within minutes.

> It is very important that we speak asap, in person. I live outside Troy, New York. Are you and your friend able to drive to my home?

Nice try, Ralph, David thought. He didn't write back. He got dressed and went to work his Monday shift.

A day later, “Jim” messaged again.

> Uploading a sample so u know i’m for real. Very important we meet as soon as possible. My name is Jim Davis. I live at 3462 Oakwood Drive.

Alongside this newest message, “Jim” had uploaded a short video, the first one posted to his GlobalVill channel. David clicked the link and gave it a watch.

It was called “Public Access Afterworld sample broadcast.” It was seven seconds long, shot on digital camera inside what appeared to be an empty high school gymnasium.

In the video, a lone basketball idled on the gym floor. No one could be seen in frame. The handheld camera bumped around a bit, panned left to right, filming nothing in particular. Then the video ended.

This purported evidence was unremarkable, downright lazy, even. If this was some creepypasta fan trying to respond to David’s upload with a mysterious video of his own, he was doing a half-assed job. There was no jump scare. No haunting imagery or special effects. There wasn’t even any static blended into the footage, no indication at all that this video had been recorded off TV, as David’s upload had been. It was just random footage of some random person filming a basketball.

The Ralph theory held. David was being fucked with.

After some googling, David discovered to his mild surprise that someone by the name of Jim Davis did indeed live at 3462 Oakwood Drive on the outskirts of Troy, New York.

This Jim Davis, of course, was clearly not the same Jim Davis famous for creating the long-running *Garfield* comic strip and entertainment franchise. No, Jim Davis of Troy, New York, was just *some dude:* a guidance counselor currently employed at a private high school for students with special needs in Schenectady, New York. There were a few yearbook pictures of the guy on Google, and let’s just say that “Jim” wasn’t the most photogenic man in the greater capital region. He looked exactly like the sort of dead-eyed creep you’d expect to be messaging teenagers on the internet about mysterious videotapes.

David felt humiliated for buying any of this for even a second. The whole thing was too perfect. How could it be anything but a setup?

It was Ralph, David was sure of that now. Ralph had found some random creepy guy with a funny name to impersonate online, made a burner GlobalVill account, and tried to convince his gullible friend to drive three hours upstate chasing VHS ghosts. *But you showed your hand with that* Garfield *bit*, David thought to himself. *Couldn't resist the allure of a* Garfield *bit, could you, dear Ralph?*

David resolved not to take the bait. He replied one more time to the thread with a short message.

> Fuck you Ralph.

• • •

When Erin returned home from her trip two days later, David showed her the whole exchange, couching it with enough caveats to not get her hopes up that this would be any kind of actual lead.

But to David's surprise, as Erin clicked from "Jim's" messages to that video of the empty gymnasium floor, she went bug-eyed and pale. After watching, she sat silent for a full thirty seconds at her mom's desktop computer.

"It's real," she said.

"What makes you think that?" David asked. He was genuinely confused.

"I can just feel it. Can't you?" Erin looked at her best friend as if he was failing to grasp something that couldn't be more obvious. David glanced from Erin back at the computer, back at that low-rent video that sure seemed to him to be a cheap forgery.

"I mean . . . I guess a little bit, yeah," he said. "I'm not really sure . . ."

Erin reloaded the video and watched it again, her eyes closer to the computer screen this time. Once it was over, she clicked the little arrow icon and watched it for a third time. And then a fourth.

David eavesdropped over her shoulders. It was just the two of them down here in the basement, but he suddenly felt like the third wheel.

• • •

At Erin's urging, David messaged the guy he was still convinced was Ralph to apologize.

> Hey i'm sorry i cursed at you. I thought you were my friend messing with me. If you're still open to it, we're down to meet.

"Jim" responded quickly, like he always did. He suggested once again that the two of them visit his home in Troy, New York. He promised to explain more in person once they arrived. Erin seemed happy to accept the invitation, sight unseen, but David talked her out of it.

"We don't know this guy. If it isn't Ralph, and it's actually some random guidance counselor inviting us to his house in the woods, that's some textbook pedophile shit. Think about it."

"I trust him," Erin said. "I believe he wants to help us. I just do."

They compromised. David picked a public place, a diner off the highway with more than a hundred Yelp reviews where he reasoned it'd be hard for them to be murdered or abducted without anyone noticing. And then he reluctantly messaged the GlobalVill user account he still felt pretty sure wasn't actually a guy named Jim Davis, and they set a date to meet.

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5

ON JULY 3, DAVID worked a double shift at CVS, near the end of which he came down with a sudden bout of food poisoning presumably caused by some bad baked ziti.

He spent that night and most of the next day in the throes of violent diarrhea at home, but felt well enough by the evening to join his parents on a blanket at the train station for the town's annual Fourth of July fireworks over the Hudson River. Erin and her mom watched from their own blanket on the other side of the park. The sky lit up. Embers pirouetted down like stray bits of fuzz escaped from Erin's basement Toshiba.

The two families crossed paths in the parking lot after the celebration. David's parents chatted with Erin's mom, making the sort of empty small talk parents make when all they have in common is the fact that their kids are friends. Erin and David hugged hello, but didn't talk otherwise.

"He was sick as a dog," David's mom told Mary. "The bathroom was a radioactive zone."

• • •

On July 5, David borrowed his mom's Volvo and picked Erin up from her house around five P.M.

By the time they arrived at the Majestic Diner off Route 4 in Troy, the sky was fully dark and it had started to rain. David and Erin hadn't talked much on the ride up, except to go over the game plan.

"If he shows up—and that's a big if—we hear what he has to say," David said for the sixth or seventh time that night. "But when we're with him, we make sure we're always in sight of other people. If one of us has to go to the bathroom, the other goes too so no one gets left alone at the table. And

remember: Don’t order anything that he can easily roofie when we’re not looking.”

Erin stared out the window at the reflective green of passing highway signs. “Okay,” she said. David could tell she wasn’t really listening.

“We don’t give him any personal information about us except our first names,” he said. “We hear what he has to say, and then we get out of there and drive straight home. That’s it.” He flipped on his right blinker. The turnoff for the diner was approaching. “And all that is only *if* he shows up. Which he probably won’t . . .”

• • •

When David and Erin entered the Majestic, the very same man whose face David now knew well from Google Image Search was sitting at a booth in the far corner. Jim Davis himself, in the flesh.

It took David a few seconds to process that this guy actually existed in real life, that it had really been a stranger on the other end of those online communications, and that the man had actually had the courage to show up tonight.

Jim stood to greet them. His reflection bent fun house–style in the conjoining silver plastic mirrors of the corner booth. The smell of ketchup wafted off his fingers and hands. David glanced at Erin to confirm that this was something they were actually moving forward with, but she was already on her way over to Jim’s table.

“You must be David,” Jim said. “I’m very happy to meet you.”

He was a large man, larger even than his photos online let on. He towered above the two teenagers, probably weighed more than both of them combined. But there was something gentle in his demeanor—timid, even—as if he housed the soul of a house cat in the body of a professional wrestler.

“And you must be David’s friend,” the guidance counselor said, zeroing in on Erin. “I wonder, what is your name, if it’s okay to ask?”

“Erin,” she told him.

David watched Jim stare into Erin’s eyes. He watched Erin stare back, too.

“Please. Join me. I ordered disco fries.” Jim motioned for them to sit. “I won’t finish them all. Please have some.”

David looked down at Jim’s plate, a battlefield of gravy, ketchup, and dismembered fries.

Jim sat back down. He continued eating in big, voracious bites. He spoke while chewing. “Thank you for coming to meet me,” he said. “I know it required a leap of faith.”

Erin sat down across from him. David followed. He felt a subtle melancholy wash over him, and he thought to himself, *This is the price*. This is what happens when you try to turn your horror movie fantasies into reality. You imagine you’re going to enter some magic world of supernatural conspiracies, but you end up in a diner booth in Troy, New York, watching a guidance counselor who’s not even the *Garfield* guy eat disco fries with his bare hands.

Jim wiped his mouth on a napkin already stained with gravy. “Okay, so, my first question is: Which one of you saw the broadcast first? Was it David or Erin?”

David looked to his friend, hoping to get their story straight. But Erin answered quickly: “I did.”

“Yes.” Jim nodded. “I thought so. I could see it in your expression when I met you. You’re the special one.”

Jim didn’t take his eyes off Erin. “What I mean is . . . you’re the one it wants. You’re the one Public Access Afterworld is inviting inside.”

“Inside where?” Erin asked, the breath catching in her throat.

“The video store,” Jim told her.

• • •

When the elderly waiter came by a minute later, David ordered a coffee and Erin ordered a vodka cranberry. The waiter didn’t bother to ID her, probably because the idea that someone underage would come to a place like this to drink was too sad to register as a possibility.

“You’re good to DD, right?” Erin asked David as she took her first sip, finishing half the glass in one gulp. David shot her an annoyed look. No. He wasn’t good with any of this.

Over the next thirty minutes, Erin drank two more vodka cranberries while Jim told them everything they could ever want to know about Public Access Afterworld, outlining a mythology so convoluted it made the last few seasons of *The X-Files* seem coherent.

“It chooses you,” he said. “What you witnessed that night was, in essence, a distortion between worlds. Between *realities.* And it was no accident that it appeared to you specifically, Erin. That was its way of making the first move. Of inviting you inside, so you can fulfill your destiny: to travel through the screen, to the special zone underneath all other possible realities.”

“So why’d it show us a woman with spatula hands?” David asked. “That’s kind of random, right? Kind of a random invitation.”

“Public Access Afterworld works in mysterious ways,” Jim said. “We couldn’t hope to grasp its methods fully.”

“‘Mysterious ways,’ got it,” David said. “‘Couldn’t hope to grasp its methods fully,’ check. Hey, did you write this dialogue yourself? Because it’s a little hacky . . .”

Jim exhaled loudly. “Make fun of me all you want,” he said, speaking now to David like a petulant child. “But I’m telling you the truth. Your friend here is a very special person with a lot of important work ahead of her. The fate of the entire universe might very well rest on her shoulders.”

“Wow. Guess she better load up on disco fries,” David said.

“Stop it, David,” Erin told him. She shot him an annoyed look. It made him feel ganged up on, like the third wheel once again. “Please,” Erin told Jim, “tell us what you think we need to know.”

Now Jim Davis launched into a long expository monologue. David followed about a third of it, but the gist went something like this: Contrary to popular belief, television screens didn’t just exist for the sake of entertainment, to house news networks and cooking shows, soap operas and infomercials. No, Jim claimed, the screen served a hidden, deeper purpose. It was part of a complex, interdimensional system that held reality itself in equilibrium. TV shows, you see, didn’t actually originate in the minds of writers in Hollywood. Well, Jim tried to explain, in a sense, they did. But there was something else, something *deeper* that inspired the content on our airwaves, similar to how our subconscious invisibly inspires our conscious

thoughts. There were certain special people with special abilities, Jim explained, who could literally travel “through the screen,” who could leave their bodies behind and cosmically prime the broadcast pumps, so to speak, by psychically creating the TV shows we see on our screens back on earth.

Erin, Jim insisted, was one of these “special” people (he kept repeating this word, probably because he could tell it made David jealous). It was Erin’s destiny, Jim claimed, to travel to a mysterious, interdimensional zone called Public Access Afterworld where she would create TV shows by living inside them. All the way down in Public Access Afterworld, the guidance counselor promised, Erin would be liberated from her physical form, would become something more like a god: a creative force of energy capable of birthing pure fantasy into reality. David was kind of fuzzy on the details, but Jim claimed that in this place, Erin would literally *become* a TV show. She’d be all the characters and the episodes. The camera angles and the plot twists and the opening credit sequences, too. There, in Public Access Afterworld, if she could dream it, she could live it.

David kept his mouth shut and listened, spacing out during the extended explanations of electrical currents and string theory, “quantum vibrations” and “cosmic singularities.” It was a lot of confusing technobabble meant to dress up what was, in David’s opinion, a pretty hacky central premise.

“If you don’t believe me,” Jim said, “I can show you. There’s a demonstration. I have the necessary equipment at my house. That’s why I suggested we meet there. I can still show you. It’s not far away.”

Erin wrapped her fist around her fourth vodka cranberry. She gripped the glass, slowly melting the ice.

“We really appreciate the offer,” David said. “But they taught us in school not to follow strange men home. You’re a guidance counselor, right? You should know about that.” David smiled, sensing himself regaining the upper hand. “That’s right. We know who you are. We know where you work. We could call your principal right now and tell him what a bad boy you’ve been.”

“Please,” Jim said. “I’m just here because I want to help. I’m not one of the special ones, but at least I can help.”

David stood up from the diner booth. He looked at Erin. “Come on. It’s late. We’ve got a long drive home.”

But David already knew he'd lost. He could see it in Erin's eyes. In the way she was staring at Jim Davis like he was a stray puppy she wanted to adopt.

"David . . ." Erin said in a tone that made it clear their night was far from over. She kept her eyes on Jim. And all David could think was, *Why doesn't she ever look at me like that?*

• • •

Jim's mythology was pretty well-developed, David had to give the guy that. You could fill a show bible with all the overcomplicated exposition he overviewed during their meeting at the diner. As Jim spoke, it was like he was jumping around a massive wiki in his head. He had it all memorized. He must have put weeks into thinking his story through.

"I need to see it. Whatever he has to show us, I can tell it's important," Erin said. She stood under the shimmering blue glow of the diner's entryway as Jim waited patiently by his Jeep across the parking lot.

"Why?" David asked. "The guy's story is insane. Psychic TV shows and alternate dimensions? Why are you buying any of this?"

"Because it's real," Erin said. "Can't you feel it?"

"No," David said. "*I can't feel shit.* This whole thing is ridiculous, and now it's gotten dangerous, too."

David realized only after he spoke what he'd just confessed. That just like Ralph and the others, he'd never really believed in Public Access Afterworld. That even the first time he'd watched Erin's tape and feigned awe, he'd only just been pretending.

"I don't care," Erin said. She lowered her gaze to the pavement and her voice turned mean. "I'm going there either way, so you better just come with me."

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6

DRIVING AT NIGHT THROUGH downtown Troy felt like taking a tour of a movie studio backlot that had been abandoned for fifty years. The empty storefronts and undemolished bones of old factories each whispered their own ghost story. On their way into town earlier that night, David had spotted a faded Warner Bros. logo emblazoned on what looked like a long-closed 1950s department store.

“They must have had an office here once,” he’d speculated out loud. “Kodak headquarters are in Rochester. Maybe they used to make movies in this part of the country.”

Now, just over an hour later, driving past that logo again, it felt to David like a harbinger; the last warning on the way out of town to get back on I-87 and escape the unreality of this whole situation.

Erin sat slumped in the passenger seat, resting her head against the cushion like it was a sickbed. She wasn’t sobering up yet, but her hangover had somehow still managed to arrive early.

“No one knows we’re here,” David reminded her as he followed Jim’s Jeep off the main roads towards wooded seclusion. “That means no one will be able to find us if we don’t come back . . .”

• • •

Jim lived in a little log cabin on a dirt road that was only accessible via several other dirt roads. There were a few other houses on his street, but Jim’s property was nestled in relative seclusion, sandwiched between several acres of undeveloped woodland on either side.

The rain had stopped falling while David and Erin were inside the diner. Now the sky was a dark void, the stars obscured by clouds.

David navigated his mom's Volvo up Jim's driveway. His pupils dilated for a moment at the red of the guidance counselor's brake lights as the Jeep slowed to a stop in front of him. Then Jim shut off his ignition.

"You don't have to come in," Erin said. "You can wait in the car if you want."

David watched Jim get out of his Jeep. Gnats crowded around the Volvo's headlights. Jim waved for his guests to follow him inside.

"I'm not letting you go in there alone," David said. He opened his car door and stepped out into the night.

• • •

Jim's cabin was built railroad style. The place felt like one long hallway. As Jim led his guests inside, he tugged a string and a single-file line of yellow lights flickered on one by one, revealing a pathway painted in dull shades of green and brown and yellow, various hues of vomit. There were no fixtures built for the lights, just bare bulbs screwed into homemade holes.

"Shoes off, please," Jim said.

Erin kicked her sneakers off. David shuddered at the thought of the bare feet under his sandals touching carpet.

"I'm gonna keep mine on, actually," he said. Jim hesitated a moment, as if deciding whether to allow David's disobedience to go unchallenged. Then he walked down the hallway, beckoning for David and Erin to follow behind him.

As David walked through the house, he glanced into the various rooms he passed as if he were in a museum. It would be a lie to call Jim's place undecorated, but it also didn't feel like anywhere someone would actually *live*. More like an antique dollhouse, or a restoration of a famous recluse's mansion. Any furniture David managed to glimpse was covered in plastic, kept mint and off-limits. The walls were lined with framed movie posters of long-forgotten B movies from the 1940s. Westerns and noirs and monster pictures, too.

Erin pointed to one of the posters up on the wall and whispered the movie title to David.

"*Chimotera.*"

It was a long-running classic horror movie franchise David had been briefly obsessed with back in the sixth grade. The black-and-white original film had told the story of a mad scientist (played by Lon Chaney, Jr.) who's eventually transformed into his own experiment: a horrific half-man, half-bat hybrid. Now the famous monster stared down at David and Erin from Jim's wall.

"A new evolution in terror!" the faded poster's tagline read.

Lon, buddy, David thought to himself, *you've got no idea*.

• • •

Jim pushed a door open and led his guests into a walk-in closet adjacent to the kitchen. He pulled another string with a light on it.

"We need to wear these for protection," he said.

The moment David saw what Jim was referring to, he actually laughed out loud. About a half dozen off-white hazmat suits hung from overtaxed hangers in the closet. They were clearly homemade, stitched together haphazardly, the fabric entirely obscured by a mélange of duct tape and black tinfoil.

"I am not putting that on," David said. "There's no way."

"*No,*" Jim said forcefully. "You can leave your shoes on in my home if it makes you feel better, but this part is nonnegotiable."

His voice was stern, angry almost, the loudest by far it had been all night. Then he softened, catching his own temper. "I'm sorry, but it's for your own safety."

Jim took one of the suits off its hanger, slipped his hands through the armholes, then draped the costume down over his bulging frame.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm going to take my chances without one," David said.

"No," Jim told him. "That's not allowed. If you won't take the proper safety precautions, you can stay up here. We'll go down to the basement without you."

Again David sensed something intimidating, almost cruel in Jim's voice, as if the timid, self-deprecating loser he and Erin had met at the diner had

been only one of the many skins this man was capable of wearing.

And now Jim suited up in another. He grabbed a helmet from the closet's top shelf and slipped it on. His face disappeared under reflective glass until soon he looked like a rearview mirror. David stood there awhile in protest, but he knew from the look on Erin's face that he had lost this battle as well. So he pulled one of Jim's stupid costumes down from its hanger and started suiting up.

Erin moved to do the same.

"No," Jim said, putting his arm out to stop her. "You don't wear one."

• • •

A few years earlier, the cops in David's town had brought in a pair of "drunk goggles" to health class. It had been part of the D.A.R.E. program, a federal curriculum of scare tactics aimed at keeping kids off drugs. That day, the cops towed a totaled car that had been wrecked in a gruesome drunk-driving accident into the school's front parking lot, and forced every high school student to sit one by one in the driver's seat wearing a special pair of goggles, the lenses of which had been intentionally scratched up to mimic what the cops claimed was the equivalent experience of driving under the influence.

David was skeptical about the scientific accuracy of the experiment. And he had laughed when he heard a rumor the next week at school that some burnout kids had stolen the goggles from the wrecked car between classes, right out from under the stupid cops' noses. Apparently those kids had spent the weekend drag racing through the streets of Hartsdale with the goggles on, stone-cold sober but artificially inebriated thanks to the D.A.R.E. program.

David thought of the drunk goggles as he followed behind Erin and Jim, stumbling back past movie posters in the hallway but unable to see them now as anything except hazy shapes and colors. His helmet was so heavy. It weighed him down, made it hard to walk.

"Erin," he called through the helmet's mouthpiece. The sound of his voice echoed inside the helmet extra loud. It made his ears hurt. Erin turned around to glance back at David briefly, and now, through the helmet's obscurity, David sensed something new in her eyes. Something that hadn't

been there at the diner or on their drive to Jim's compound in the woods, or even as they'd suited up a moment ago in the closet.

Fear. Erin finally looked afraid. Perhaps she was sobering up. Perhaps the reality of their situation was finally starting to sink in. The fact that they were approaching a literal point of no return: Jim's basement.

"We don't have to go down there," David said from underneath his helmet. His voice echoed loudly in his ears.

Jim pushed the basement door open. There was no light on down there underground, and certainly no exit.

"This way," he said.

Erin paused for a moment, then followed him down the stairs.

• • •

These damn drunk goggles, David fumed as he wobbled down the steps. There was no banister to hold on to. The floorboards creaked as he descended the first couple stairs, half blind.

"Stay there," Jim ordered.

David didn't protest. He slowed to a stop on the third step. It was hard for him to make much out in the basement below, but there was one thing impossible to miss, even through his obscured view.

The videotapes. The basement was full of videotapes, thousands of tapes stacked in towering piles. There were no shelves. No cases. Just countless blank VHS tapes, one on top of another, piled floor to ceiling.

"Come here," Jim said to Erin. Erin looked back at David near the top of the stairs, and though David couldn't see much, he could tell she was unmistakably frightened now. And yet she continued to do as she was told. She walked slowly into the center of the room, weaving past tapes peppering the ground like land mines.

"Take off your clothes and kneel down in front of the television screen," Jim said. His voice was cold and firm, all business.

The command hung in the air. David knew he should protest, knew he should rip off his helmet, grab Erin, and deck this freak so they could both beeline for the door. But for some reason, he just stood there, his body weighed down by heavy fabric.

“It’s for your own safety,” Jim said.

Erin stood still for a few seconds. She stared ahead at the TV set Jim had ordered her to kneel down in front of—an old analog, smaller than Erin’s Toshiba. The set wasn’t on a stand or anything, so you had to get really low towards the floor to be eye level with it.

Erin slowly removed her shirt and jeans. She undressed in silence. David stared at her through the helmet, squinting at the outline of his best friend’s bare skin.

Erin lowered herself to the floor and knelt down in front of the CRT. Her spine poked visibly out from her back like it was trying to escape her skin. Goose pimples formed around the margins of her bra straps.

Jim turned and walked through his maze of VHS. He knew exactly where he was going. Eventually he stopped in front of one particular pile, then slowly Jenga’d out a VHS from near the bottom of the stack. Without turning around, he called another command to Erin.

“Your underwear, too. And any earrings.”

Erin didn’t move. Her bare knees scraped against the hard cement floor.

“I’m sorry. It’s not safe otherwise. I don’t have to look.”

Jim lowered his gaze to the VHS tape in his hands, the one he’d selected out from his archive.

“I promise everything will make sense after you watch this.” He walked towards Erin, then switched on the TV and the VCR in front of her. He kept his back turned as he waited for Erin to finish undressing.

David remained frozen at the top of the stairs. He didn’t dare move. Didn’t dare speak underneath his tunnel of a helmet. All he felt capable of doing was watching the scene unfold in front of him like an episode of television.

Erin reached her arms around her back and slowly unhooked her bra.

• • •

What happened next happened faster than David could process. As Jim knelt down to load the VHS into the machine, Erin looked at the tape and screamed. Then she jumped up from her spot on the ground, grabbing

Jim’s tinfoil suit to stabilize herself, and knocked him over, kicking him hard as she scrambled back to her feet.

“Let’s go! We need to go!” she shouted.

The violence was enough to rouse David from his paralysis. He ripped the helmet off his head and sucked in a big gulp of stale basement oxygen. Meanwhile, Erin grabbed for her clothes and sprinted towards the stairs. Jim groaned in confusion, rolling around on the cement floor like a toppled ogre. By the time he regained his balance, David and Erin were out the door, then down the hall past those movie posters, and back out into the humid summer night.

Cicadas buzzed. David stripped off his hazmat suit as Erin slipped her shirt back over her head. The two of them didn’t slow down until they were in the car, doors locked, until David’s shaking hand was turning the keys in the ignition and he was peeling out onto the road, leaving a plume of dirt in his wake as Jim limped to the front door. The large man held his own helmet in his arms and watched with a blank expression as the two kids he’d brought home with him hightailed it away into the night.

David drove in tense, arched silence, speeding faster than was safe on roads this bumpy. He kept his gaze fixed on the rearview, terrified that at any moment Jim’s headlights might crane into view. David imagined the guidance counselor catching up with them, running them off the road, and dragging them back to whatever basement hell they had just narrowly escaped. And for once, David’s horror movie fantasies didn’t seem so absurd.

But Jim’s headlights never appeared, and as David’s mom’s Volvo sped from the woods back into Troy’s ghostlike downtown, David’s posture began to slacken in the driver’s seat. His right foot eased a bit on the accelerator.

“What. The. Fuuuuuuuck,” he exhaled. “What the fuck happened back there?”

“I don’t know . . .” Erin said. She sounded far away. She was clearly still processing her own experience down in Jim’s basement. Or maybe she hadn’t started to process yet. Maybe she was still in shock.

“How did you . . .” David asked, then trailed off. “What made you decide to change your mind?”

Erin remained silent. David checked the rearview again, still half expecting to find Jim's Jeep barreling towards them. But there was no one else on the road. Troy was asleep.

"Why didn't you go through with it?" David asked.

"I saw the label," Erin said. "The label of the tape he wanted me to watch."

David looked at his friend in the seat next to him. She hadn't had time to put all her clothes back on, so she was sitting with her jeans draped over her bare legs like a blanket.

"It had my name on it. My full name: Erin Morrison. And a date: February fifth, 1983."

Erin looked at David, fear in her eyes.

"I only ever told him my first name," she said. "I introduced myself as Erin, just like you told me to. And he acted like he didn't know me. But he did. He knew exactly who I was before we even arrived. He had me on his tape."

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7

LATER THAT NIGHT, DAVID and Erin had sex for the first time at a rest stop outside Poughkeepsie. They'd driven down I-87 for over an hour, sitting in silence, both failing to untangle the knot of events that had just gone down in Troy.

David's mom's Volvo needed gas, and he felt reasonably confident at this point that Jim hadn't followed them. So he pulled off the highway and slowed to a stop between a line of trucks near the pump. Then he turned to Erin and asked the question that had been on his mind the past hundred miles.

"What do you think was on that tape?"

Erin looked at him. Her gaze still seemed far away.

"I don't know," she said. "And I don't care. I don't ever want to think about it again."

Her tone made David feel a sudden twinge of guilt. There was a bitterness in Erin's voice, as if somehow she now believed that all of this—not just the events back at Jim's, but the signal on her television, even Public Access Afterworld itself—was all David's fault somehow.

The two of them sat in silence. Erin's gaze stayed far away. And then, just when David was certain she wasn't going to speak again, she whispered under her breath.

"The cinematic universe."

"What?" David asked.

Erin furrowed her brow, as if she was trying to excavate a prayer buried deep in the recesses of her memory.

"It's a poem. Or a nursery rhyme. I think I read it a long time ago, and I just remembered it now . . ." She closed her eyes and conjured the words.

“Alone. Underneath the stars. Lost somewhere in the cinematic universe.”

David sat in the seat next to her, unsure what to say to this. Erin unstrapped her seat belt and moved across the divide. She climbed over the emergency brake onto David’s lap, letting her long-discarded jeans fall beneath the passenger seat.

David didn’t move or blink. He stared up at Erin as she wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and began to straddle him.

They tried to be bodies. Not friends or classmates. Not David or Erin. Just skin on skin. Erin hid her eyes in the arched ridges of David’s shoulders. She moved on top of him and David sat frozen, inert again just like he’d been in Jim’s heavy suit on those basement stairs back in Troy. His erection made him anxious. Erin unzipped David’s jeans and guided his dick inside her. She moved up and down.

“You just stood there,” she whispered. “You didn’t move. You didn’t help. All you did was watch.”

David stayed silent. There was no mistaking it now: Erin was angry at him. She kept rising and falling in his lap, pushing harder, as if the sex was part of her rage. She pressed him into the seat and lifted her shirt up over her head, too. Her bra was still unhooked from when Jim had ordered her to take it off in the basement. Now it dropped below her waist.

David stared up at his best friend, stunned. He knew they shouldn’t be fucking without a condom, but he didn’t dare protest. It felt good to be under someone else’s control. And it felt bad, too.

Erin moved faster and faster. She came in about a minute, and her moans were enough to inspire David’s own climax. He tightened and winced, squeezed his eyes shut as if to hide. And then it was over, and Erin sank down into David’s arms and let her body go slack.

She rested on him for a long time, so long that David began to wonder if she’d fallen asleep in his arms. He felt her twitch. Perhaps a hypnic jerk, or maybe she was crying and didn’t want him to hear.

When she spoke eventually, her voice was calmer, less angry.

“Love and sex,” she said, “don’t come from the same place.”

• • •

A little later, David waited for her in the rest stop lobby under the shuttered awnings of Subway and Sbarro. He stared at one of those crushed penny machines where, for the price of five quarters, you can flatten a design into your pocket change, remake it into a region-specific souvenir.

I can't believe what just happened, David was thinking. *I can't believe I just lost my virginity.* And then he heard Erin scream.

She was in the bathroom, cleaning herself up. Her cries were loud and guttural, shattering the silence of the after-hours rest stop. They came out of nowhere, as if suddenly Erin was being attacked by a wild animal. As if her life was in danger once again.

David sprang into action. He was ready this time. As he sprinted through the double doors into the bathroom, he felt sure it was Jim. The man had caught up with them, had followed David and Erin here to this rest stop off the highway to finish his terrible work.

But inside the bathroom, David discovered that Erin was all alone. She was lying curled up on the tile floor in the fetal position, shaking and crying, her arms clutched around her knees.

"What's wrong?" David asked. He rushed to her side.

"The monster," Erin said. "The monster from the poster. Chimotera."

David looked around, reconfirming that they were all alone. Then he looked Erin's body up and down. She seemed okay, at least physically. There were no visible wounds or cuts of any kind on her skin.

"He was here," Erin said, still crying. "Just now. He attacked me, David. He was trying to kill me." She rocked herself back and forth.

David tried to figure out what to do. He wanted to help his best friend, to comfort her on the floor of the women's bathroom in Poughkeepsie. But he felt utterly out of his depth. They didn't teach this kind of thing in school. What to do when your best friend loses her mind right after the two of you had weird sex for the very first time in a rest stop parking lot.

David wanted to hold Erin. To wrap her up in his arms and tell her that she was going to be okay. But he didn't move. He couldn't bring himself to touch her. He worried that if he did, he might only make things worse.

• • •

David didn’t check the internet that night. It was rare for him not to look at his favorite message boards and websites before bed, but after he and Erin finally made it back to Hartsdale, they’d both been too exhausted and overwhelmed to do anything except collapse on the beanbag in Erin’s basement and drift into unconsciousness. The moment they got home, David turned on the TV like a reflex, and soon the white noise from the static was a lullaby humming them to sleep.

If David had checked the internet, he would have discovered one last surprise the night had to offer him: His UncannyValley message board thread, the one that had been locked weeks earlier by a skeptical mod, had, in an unlikely turn of events, been reopened. It was now bumped back up near the top of page one, where it had been racking up new replies all night.

One of the board’s OG admins, an ex-marine named Emily who was well respected and even kind of feared for her boot camp–style moderation policies, had been watching old Ray “Can You Say Sunshine” Davino videos and heard the weatherman say “Public Access Afterworld” in one of the uploads. Emily had recognized the phrase from somewhere she couldn’t quite place, and her subsequent scavenger hunt had led her back to David’s post. She’d taken the liberty of not only unlocking David’s thread, but posting a long reply, sharing an upload of the Davino video, and throwing her considerable message board weight behind the theory that there was more going on here than mere fiction.

“This is very interesting,” Emily wrote. “Here is everyone’s favorite suicidal weatherman using the exact same phrase 30 years ago. That can’t be a coincidence. Maybe I’m being paranoid (and u all know my feelings about how much we should trust the US govt), but if this vid is real there could be a legit conspiracy that *someone* is trying to suppress. Perhaps this deserves further investigation . . .”

The replies started rolling in. By dawn, David’s previously locked post had become a megathread.

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8

“FIND THE RECEIVER. MAKE it real.”

David woke up at eight A.M. to a faint voice speaking from underneath the static.

“Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real.”

He nudged Erin off his shoulder and sat up, squinting across the basement at the TV.

Erin woke up, too. She looked around the room in confusion and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“There’s something coming through . . .” David said in a whisper. He kept his eyes on the analog set. “I hear something in the static.”

This was a moment he’d been wishing to experience for weeks. David had logged countless hours watching Erin’s TV in hopes of catching a broadcast from Public Access Afterworld. And now, finally, his moment had arrived.

David crawled across the basement carpet, careful to keep his gaze trained on the screen because he didn’t want to scare the transmission away. He reached for a blank VHS tape that Erin had left out on the carpet and then loaded it into the VCR. He pressed record.

“*Find the receiver,*” the voice on the screen kept repeating. “*Make it real.*”

It sounded a little distorted under the fuzz, but David realized he knew whose voice it was. How could he not recognize the voice he found most comforting in the entire world?

David glanced over his shoulder. He could tell by the look in Erin’s eye that she recognized it, too. *That it was her.* Her own voice, speaking from somewhere else, from the other side of her old Toshiba.

“Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real.”

Erin’s voice on the screen kept repeating these words, as if stuck in a trance. Soon, the static began to rearrange itself. To take shape. The two of them watched the television screen as Erin—*another Erin*—appeared, her face now poking through the static, as if pushed through a pinscreen.

They watched in silence. The Erin down in her basement stared at the other version of herself on the television screen across the room. She listened as her analog doppelganger kept repeating those same words over and over again.

“Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real . . .”

The broadcast faded. Erin’s image gradually receded back into static and her voice on the screen grew quieter until it disappeared entirely. The broadcast was swallowed under the waves, and now all was quiet again on the analog airwaves.

David waited a full minute before he pressed the stop button on the VCR. He ejected the tape and weighed it in his hands, as if he couldn’t believe the VHS was his to hold. He’d managed to record it. To capture another broadcast from Public Access Afterworld.

“It’s real,” he said. There was something celebratory in his voice. “It’s really real. There’s no other explanation. What we just saw . . . that was *impossible*.”

Behind him, Erin sat in silence on the beanbag. She didn’t need such confirmation. She’d known for weeks now what David was only just realizing. That all of this was very real, and that it was happening to her.

She watched her best friend as he clutched his new prized VHS recording in his hands. She could still hear the reverberations of that voice from the screen—*her voice*—repeating the same words over and over again like a bad memory she’d somehow inherited from another version of reality.

“Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real.”

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EPISODE TWO

THE RECEIVER

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1

EVERY TV SHOW HAS a hero. *Buffy* had Buffy, *Xena* had Xena, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* had Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.

My TV show has Bethany Peters.

• • •

Tonight, Bethany's working the night shift at GlobalVill.com's Austin "campus." That's the word they use here instead of "office." No one explained the distinction to Bethany when she started, but she suspects it has something to do with the design scheme. It's as if the architects who built this place were told to create a fresh and flashy rebrand of capitalism without losing any of the dehumanizing qualities the economic system is so famous for.

At GlobalVill's Austin "campus," there are pinball machines in the hallways. The staff cafeteria is designed to mimic a Johnny Rockets–style diner from the 1950s (now with kombucha on tap). And on the roof, there's a garden where employees can pick fresh herbs to take home to their families at night. But Bethany isn't an employee, and she doesn't work day shifts, so all that basil and thyme isn't for her. Bethany's just a contractor. By the time she clocks in at ten P.M. each night, all of the real employees have gone home. The door to the rooftop garden is already locked until morning.

Bethany's never worked in tech before. Honestly, this wasn't part of the plan. She's as surprised as anyone to be staying up all night, six nights a week, sitting alone at a giant shared desk in this windowless prison. Sorry, "campus." But a job's a job, and right now, Bethany really needs a job. She's just trying to keep her head down, trying to get paid so she can get out of her current situation and start her life over once again.

You see, Bethany doesn't know yet that she's the hero of my TV show. And if she did know, she'd almost certainly tell me to fuck off and go find someone else for the gig. Because Bethany isn't trying to be anyone's hero. She's a twenty-seven-year-old trans girl playing chicken with the poverty line down in Texas, so right now she's got more modest goals. All she wants—all Bethany Peters has *ever* wanted—is for her life to finally, actually start.

• • •

Here's how she ended up here: One month ago, inspired by a dangerous combination of insomnia and longing, Bethany replied to an online job posting she saw on GlobalVill.com, the website where she'd spent more time than anywhere else in her teenage years.

"We want you!!!" the ad read.

It felt good to be wanted, so Bethany submitted an application. It was a middle-of-the-night whim she didn't actually expect to lead anywhere. She forgot she'd even applied before she put her boyfriend Abel's laptop to sleep for the night.

But the next morning, she found a request waiting in her inbox for a phone interview. And now, a month later, here she is, working in the tech industry, her late-night insomniac's fantasy made real.

Bethany is a *content moderator.* This means it's her job to stay up all night watching an infinitely replenishing queue of videos flagged by GlobalVill.com's proprietary algorithm (or reported by the platform's intrepid user base) for breaking the site's Code of Conduct. Offensive, illegal, disturbing videos that have no place on the internet. It's Bethany's role to watch them all, to assess each one, and, if she finds one that breaks the rules, to press a red button on her admin panel and send the offending video far away where no unsuspecting eyes might stumble across its horrors ever again.

Before Bethany showed up for her first night on the job, no one had actually told her that she'd been hired to do *this.* She suspects now that the omission had been purposeful.

Her new manager Douglas was vague on the phone during her initial interview, had only explained that she would be joining the "Trust and

Integrity” team, that she would be working on “user safety on the platform.”

On that call, Douglas welcomed her into the GlobalVill family with a canned speech she now realizes he probably gave several times a day.

“Everyone deserves a channel of their own,” he said. Bethany was pretty sure she remembered the line from a Super Bowl commercial. “This was the vision our CEO Anthony ‘Fisch’ Fischer had when he and his brother launched GlobalVill.com out of a RadioShack staff closet all the way back in 2007. And since those humble beginnings, GlobalVill has grown into the world’s second-largest user-led streaming community, with offices in over six major cities.”

“Wow,” Bethany said. “I’m really a huge fan of the work you do. It’d be a dream come true to join the GlobalVill team and be a part of your vital mission.”

She felt gross adopting that noxious fake enthusiastic tone that seemed to be the norm for entry-level job interviews, where you’re expected to talk like a Stepford Wife who’s been brainwashed into wanting to be a girlboss. But she’d been practicing her talking points in the mirror all week. Bethany didn’t have any relevant work experience on her résumé, so her only hope was to emphasize her *passion.* It wasn’t even a total lie.

“GlobalVill has really meant so much to me over the years,” she told Douglas. “I had a pretty active channel for over half a decade. A few of my videos had view counts in the mid six figures, and I even met my best friend through your website. If I can get a little personal, coming out as trans can be a really intense process. Having the kind of outlet that GlobalVill.com provided really helped me during that time.”

“That’s awesome to hear, Bethany,” Douglas said. “We always say GlobalVill.com isn’t just a place to upload videos. It’s the town square. It’s your village.” Bethany was pretty sure they’d used that line in the Super Bowl commercial, too.

“Totally,” she said. “I love that.”

“Well, it’s been great talking to you,” Douglas said. “We’re honored that you want to join our family, and we can’t wait to meet you in person soon at our Austin campus.”

Wait, what?

“So does that mean I, um . . . did I get the job?” Bethany asked, genuinely unsure. She had expected an uphill battle followed by a polite form rejection over email three to five days later. She hadn’t prepared for a scenario where she was hired on the spot.

“Yes,” Douglas said. “Pending physical, drug test, all that good stuff. I’ll follow up via email with onboarding paperwork, orientation documents, and your start date. Can’t wait to see you soon!”

And then he hung up. The whole interview was over in under four minutes.

• • •

In retrospect, the phone call’s perfunctory nature should have been a warning sign that this job wasn’t going to be the solution to all of Bethany’s problems. That in fact it wasn’t going to be any better than her previous gig folding T-shirts and shouldering microaggressions at the Gap. That it was going to be just another dead end, or something worse.

On her first night at GlobalVill, Bethany signed in with Rusty the elderly night guard at the front desk. He offered her a sucking candy from a bowl as if on autopilot, and stared at her like she was some strange alien species he’d never experienced before. Then Douglas came down a catwalk staircase designed to look like the entrance to an exclusive nightclub. He chaperoned her up to the second floor, the main workspace, a massive open office plan with dozens of shared desks all already emptied of the company’s daytime employees.

Douglas was dressed in khaki pants and a button-down, his pits subtly stained through his undershirt with Old Spice. He had muttonchops. His belt hung two loops too loose.

“I started here as a content moderator myself,” he told Bethany during their brief onboarding session that evening. “And look at me now. I’m a full *employee.* With healthcare benefits and an office of my own.”

Douglas nodded across the floor so Bethany could see the private office he was so proud of. It looked like one of those old telephone booths where Clark Kent used to transform into Superman, only a lot smaller.

“Mark my words,” Douglas said. “In six months, a year, tops, I won’t even have to work the night shift anymore.”

• • •

During that first evening, Bethany witnessed many unbelievable things she'd never seen before. Thirty-one amateur adult videos (including an X-rated *Simpsons* porn parody where Marge gets railed by a bulky, tattooed Principal Skinner), six uploads of people doing hard drugs for the camera, a cartoon of Spider-Man injecting heroin, four hunting videos featuring high-powered assault rifles and extended close-ups of deer carcasses, one remix of Cher's "Believe" set to a strobe of animated swastikas and real concentration camp photos, an archival video of a suicidal weatherman putting a bullet in his brain on live TV, and last but not least, a poor puppy being blown to bits by a group of giggling frat boys throwing explosives hidden inside tennis balls from behind the camera.

But the fun didn't stop there. There were also the mundane videos that would pop up between every few red buttons in Bethany's feed, the ones that didn't break the GlobalVill.com Code of Conduct but that had landed in her queue nonetheless due either to computer error or good old-fashioned trolling.

These arduous videos, many of them random forty-five-minute-long uploads of literally *nothing* (just glitching TV static and white noise), were the true detritus lying at the bottom of the streaming platform's ocean floor. Disposable clips with low view counts and long runtimes, videos with no discernible reason to even exist. Unfortunately, it was Bethany's job to watch every single one of them all the way through no matter how boring, just in case the video broke a site rule in its last seconds.

It was brainless, arduous work, and Bethany quickly discovered that it did strange things to her perception of time. The randomness of it all kept her in a state of anxiety about what she might be subjected to next. Some videos were ten seconds long, some nearly an hour. One would feature horror after horror, an unrelenting assault on her eyeballs, then the next would be the most mundane shit she'd ever been forced to sit through. It was the not knowing that was the worst part. How the algorithm's roulette wheel transformed her job into an innovative new form of Guantánamo-style torture.

She was used to the soul-suck of a boring retail job, how eight hours could stretch like the elastic in sweatpants until it seemed as though she

would be trapped forever at the Gap. But that had just been mundanity, the purgatory of sneaking a look at your phone every two minutes to discover that only two minutes had passed. Here, where each new video brought either a deluge of inconceivable horrors or mind-numbing boredom, the GlobalVill night shift felt more to Bethany like one of those lab experiments where you're a rat and you get zapped over and over again at random intervals.

• • •

That first night on the job felt like a year.

After Bethany got back the next morning to the North Austin home she shared with her boyfriend Abel, she did some Google research before passing out and found various online articles dating back nearly a decade about the numerous controversies surrounding online content moderation.

It seemed her new job had been a source of debate and online investigative reporting for some time now, not just at GlobalVill, but at streaming platforms and social media companies across the internet. It was a problem without a clear solution, CEOs and press departments lamented. Someone needed to do this work. Jobs like Bethany's were referred to as "blue collar," "the new working class." Meanwhile, experts calling for reform talked about PTSD, about moderators losing their grip on reality until they were bringing guns to work and raving about vast conspiracies they'd discovered in their queues late at night.

Bethany made a promise to herself. She'd quit before she let that happen to her. She'd go back to the Gap. Thirty an hour wasn't worth her sanity.

• • •

She went back to the campus the next night and tried her best to keep in good spirits as she worked her way through her queue. Everyone's gotta start somewhere, she told herself. She'd work her way up the corporate ladder, just like Douglas had suggested. And eventually she'd laugh about the grunt work she'd had to do to get her foot in the door. She needed to suck it up, to keep a good attitude, to gain fluency in the lame corporate lingo that pervaded this place until she fit in, until she was invited into the prestigious club of daytime employees with access to the rooftop garden.

She felt like a jerk for struggling to parrot the doublespeak with a smile. Everyone else seemed to have adopted it effortlessly. There was something almost cultlike in the way Douglas and the other full-time employees here spoke to one another. “Plus one” meant “I agree.” “Let’s put a pin in it” meant “let’s change the subject.” Everything was always “a thriving community of storytellers” this, and “we’re not just a village, we’re your town square” that. It was like somewhere the secret police were watching via hidden camera with a silent alarm ready to sound at the first indication of cynicism.

Slowly Bethany realized the truth: No one meant any of it. Underneath the veneer of positivity that pervaded this place was just regular old disingenuity. It was part of everyone’s job to put on a smile, no matter your spot on the corporate ladder. It was a business strategy, a way to paper over the darkness of the work with animated GIFs and pinball machines while everyone waited for their stock options to vest.

But after midnight, once the campus had cleared out, the veneer began to crack. Looking around at the few other half-asleep content moderators at three A.M. each night, each of them spread out and isolated from one another, clicking through their individual never-ending mixtapes of abjection, Bethany began to understand the emptiness of Douglas’s promise of eventual promotion. All the content moderators around her were burnt out, exhausted, and traumatized. How could they not be? She, like all of them, was disposable, a member of “the new blue collar,” as those online articles had called her. No one would be inviting her up to the roof garden anytime soon. No one even had to look her in the eye each night since her shift didn’t start until the rest of the office had gone home.

The faces of her fellow content moderators changed almost nightly. No one lasted here long enough to climb the corporate ladder. They just watched until they couldn’t watch any more, and then they quit or just stopped showing up.

• • •

A new video loads in Bethany’s queue. A bug-eyed, gaunt face stares at her through the screen. An androgynous AMAB in their early twenties, lanky and malnourished, wearing full-face ghost-white makeup. Black eyeliner, too. They sit low on the ground in what looks like a wooden shack,

or maybe a garage. It’s impossible to tell where in America they’re recording from.

Immediately this person reminds Bethany of herself. Of that younger version she’d once been on this very same platform. Back before her stay in the hospital, and everything that happened to her there.

The stranger on screen speaks into the camera. “Save me,” they say. “Please, come and save me. I’ve done all the challenges, and now I’m ready to go. Can’t you tell? I’m ready to leave this world behind.”

Bethany scrolls down to the user info under the player. The video she’s watching was posted just two days ago. It currently has sixteen views total. The username on the account is JulesPublicAccessAfterworld.

Bethany hears a rumble and plop sound from off camera, like a dumbbell dropping into a metal bucket, or an ice machine malfunctioning. The low-resolution kid on screen readjusts in place, then rolls up the sleeve of their hoodie sweatshirt and holds the soft side of their arm up to the camera.

Their wrist is covered in scars, dozens of thin lines carved into the skin like uncommitted scribbles in a sketchbook. JulesPublicAccessAfterworld fishes a razor blade out from their hoodie pocket. They unwrap it from its paper packaging and then look back up at the camera.

“If you’re watching this, David Sawyer, this is for you.”

Bethany hovers her index finger over the trackpad like a sheriff in an old Western. The moment she sees pixelated blood, she double-clicks that little red button on her admin panel and the video disappears, JulesPublicAccessAfterworld’s ghost-white face along with it. And they’re gone, sent to that place banned videos go after Bethany bans them.

She looks down at the floor. She’s alone again in the massive empty main floor of GlobalVill’s Austin campus. The next video in Bethany’s feed loads on screen.

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2

"YOU HAVE TO TRY not to think of them as people," Kyle told her a few nights later over stolen kombucha.

Kyle was the one person here who had been genuinely friendly to Bethany upon her arrival. In contrast to the rest of the bleary-eyed content moderators, who kept to themselves, Kyle had been almost aggressively welcoming.

Bethany had pegged him immediately: He was lonely. He'd been at the company for nine months (twice as long as any of the other content moderators, as he was quick to brag). And even though he tried to present himself as above the work, it was easy to tell that the job had long since taken its toll. He was twitchy and bitter, overeager to shit-talk about office politics.

From day one, Kyle had said hi to Bethany each night at her desk like they were old friends. He'd invited her multiple times to join him in the staff cafeteria downstairs during their allotted nightly fifteen-minute break. At first, Bethany politely declined his advances. It felt too much like being asked out on a date. And if there was one thing Bethany knew for sure, it was that once she finally managed to shake free of Abel's grip, she was never dating another cis man again.

But after her first week on the job, the nightmares had started at pace, just like those online long reads promised they would. This was not work, it seemed, that one could leave at home. When Kyle came by her desk each night looking to vent, Bethany started to vent back, until pretty soon they had a really nice "disgruntled co-worker rapport" thing going. So now, near the end of week two, when Kyle asked once again if she wanted to join him on her break, Bethany finally acquiesced and followed him downstairs to the staff cafeteria built to look like a cute retro diner.

Kyle poured himself some iced coffee from the tap. “Do you want a glass?” he asked. “There’s kombucha, too. And wasabi peas and a bunch of other snacks if you’re hungry.”

“I don’t think I have kitchen privileges,” Bethany said.

Kyle laughed. “Dude. Douglas doesn’t care. As long as you leave him alone, he pretends not to notice what food you steal. It’d be work for him to write us up, and trust me, that guy is not looking for more work.”

Kyle walked over to the snack table and scooped a handful of sriracha cashews into a mug. “Don’t worry,” he said. “He’s my manager, too. We’ve got like . . . an understanding. Mutual respect. I get through my queue without any yellows, he lets me keep the fermented yeast flowing.” Kyle picked up a glass and poured Bethany some kombucha. “Here, it’s blueberry mint. Try it. I’m pretty sure it costs more than we get paid per hour.”

Bethany took the glass from him, then reluctantly took a sip. He was right. It tasted expensive.

“If you get in trouble, just blame me. I’ll take the fall.” Kyle smiled his best charming smile then motioned for her to join him at a booth in the corner. Just as Bethany suspected, this was starting to feel like a first date.

• • •

Over the next quarter hour, Kyle listened intently as Bethany complained about the toll her queue was taking on her mental health, and about how she hadn’t been warned about the job she’d be doing here before she showed up for her first day.

“That’s how they get you in the door,” Kyle said. “They keep it vague and upbeat on the phone, attract people who are so desperate for a gig they don’t think to ask questions, and then wham: They hit you with the atrocity exhibition.”

“I don’t know how much longer I’ll be here,” Bethany said. “I really need the money, but I’m starting to think it’s not worth it.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.” Kyle weighed a few wasabi peas in his hand. “I’ve seen dozens of content moderators come and go already. My personal theory? They’re burning us up in the furnace downstairs to make wasabi pea dust out of our ashes.” He ate the handful of peas, chewing loudly.

“So how’d you survive so long?” Bethany asked. “How’ve you managed to avoid the furnace?”

Kyle smiled.

“I want to make movies,” he said. “Not shitty GlobalVill videos. Real movies. I took this job to save up for film school, thinking it’d be a good way to make some quick cash. But once I got acquainted with what they wanted me to do here, I realized . . . *it’s the perfect inspiration.* I get a front-row seat to all the darkest shit humanity has to offer. Scorsese wishes he had such access.”

“Yeah, but are you sure it’s healthy?” Bethany asked. “You’ve been doing this job for so long, it’s bound to take a toll.”

“Of course it’s not healthy,” Kyle said. “But I’m a glutton for punishment. Total masochist. I can’t look away. I’m fascinated by the annals of human experience.” He set his glass back down and tapped his fingers on the table, wired on caffeine and sleep deprivation.

“Okay, look,” he said. “Here’s my theory: It’s a septic tank and we’re the custodians. The marketing department talks a big game, right? They go on about ‘we’re not just a village, we’re the town square,’ all that Silicon Valley feel-good bullshit they put on billboards. But like any town square, you put enough people together in one place, pretty soon there’s gonna be a whole lotta waste produced. Some really smelly shit, right? So you’re going to need some public bathrooms. A whole fleet of porta-potties, and a big septic tank underneath the ground to catch it all. That’s where we come in. Eventually, someone’s gonna need to empty out all that waste, right? Get down knee-deep in it so it doesn’t start stinking up the whole place and overflowing. Because the members of our ‘global village,’ they don’t want to think about all the not-so-pretty stuff floating underneath the town square. They just want the bad stuff out of sight, underground. So they pay us to keep it at bay. Moderators. Shit-scrubbers. Thirty dollars an hour. We do it as long as we can, and then we quit and try to wash the stink off ourselves, if we even still can anymore.”

“Jesus,” Bethany said.

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “Like I told you, I’ve thought a lot about it.”

“I should get back,” Bethany told him. “It’s been twenty minutes.”

“Can I ask you something before you go?” Kyle said. “I was wondering, are you transgender?”

Bethany couldn’t help but feel surprised at the directness of the question. She was used to being clocked as trans, had basically developed a sixth sense for knowing when it had happened, but it was rare that somebody would just come out and ask her point-blank.

“Yeah. I am.”

“I thought so. My sister was trans, too.”

Was. The word hung in the air. Kyle picked up his glass and mug and walked the dishes over to the sink.

“I will never talk to my parents again as long as I live,” he said. Bethany sat in silence.

“Hey, let me ask you a favor,” Kyle said. “Don’t let them ground you into pea dust, yeah? Don’t let them make you disappear.”

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3

LATER THAT NIGHT, JulesPublicAccessAfterworld was back in Bethany's queue. It was as if the algorithm knew exactly which videos to feed her to upset her the most.

At first, the hapless content moderator was surprised to see Jules on her screen again. But then she remembered something Kyle had complained about a few nights earlier: that the red button on their little admin panel didn't actually do much to keep particularly stubborn users off the site. Sure, once a user was red-buttoned, they weren't able to upload videos anymore from their account or sign up for a new one with the same email address. But if you've ever used the internet before, you might know that it's actually quite easy to sign up for a new email address. As many as you want, actually.

"Huge news, guys," JulesPublicAccessAfterworld said to the camera, as if they'd never been banned. They were recording once again from the dirt floor of that nondescript shack. They seemed manic tonight, a big smile through their ghostly makeup. "I've been invited to the final level of the game by David Sawyer himself. That means I've got just one more challenge. It's a hard one, but once I complete it, I'll be going there. I'll finally be on my way to Public Access Afterworld . . ."

• • •

Public Access Afterworld.

It was all Jules could ever talk about in their videos.

Bethany was far from an expert, but of course she'd heard of the cult before, even prior to starting her job at GlobalVill.com. And of course Bethany recognized the name of the group's enigmatic founder, David Sawyer. He was famous, a serial killer more notorious than both Teds

combined (Bundy and Kaczynski). David Sawyer: an urban legend who was also real. David Sawyer: the internet's favorite boogeyman.

Most people were at least a little familiar with it all, even those who didn't spend much time online. Over the past fifteen years, David's cult had grown into a minor cultural phenomenon, until it was nearly as unavoidable as the internet itself. Even if parents didn't really understand any of it, they knew enough to warn their kids to stay away from *that part* of the web. To watch out for David Sawyer and his band of radical extremists lurking in the shadows of the deep dark web, ready to snatch you up from your childhood bedroom and drag you into a world of unimaginable horror.

"This last challenge is a big one," Jules told the camera. "I need time to prepare, because there's no going back from this. I need to fully understand just how real this sacrifice is going to be."

Jules smiled at the camera. Bethany tensed. Then, just like last time, Jules rolled up the right sleeve of their hoodie and reached for a fresh razor blade.

"I'm nervous, but I'm excited," they said as they dragged the blade across their arm. "Soon I'm finally going to be leaving this world behind."

• • •

As Bethany watched, she resisted the urge to toggle her mouse over to the red button on her admin panel like last time. She felt too guilty sending this stranger's cry for help away into the abyss once again. Banning Jules's accounts, hiding their videos from public view, it clearly wasn't doing anything. Certainly it wasn't helping.

Over the past two weeks, Bethany had watched countless horrifying, violent acts committed on her laptop screen. But for some reason, Jules's videos upset her most. Bethany was self-aware enough to have a pretty good idea why. Jules, whoever and wherever they were, reminded Bethany of herself. Of the person she might have been if she'd never gotten out of Harlingen, her dead-end hometown down on the Texas-Mexico border. Back there, when she'd been Noah, she too had flirted with self-harm. For her, it had been a means of momentary autonomy. A way to get a rush of control, to escape the town and the body that she was trapped inside, even if just for a moment.

After Jules's upload ended, Bethany let it autoplay again from the start. Then she took out her cellphone and recorded a short camera video of her laptop screen, capturing Jules's self-harm. Bethany stood up from her desk and walked across the GlobalVill floor to Douglas's phone booth of an office. She knocked on the door, cellphone in hand, and heard her manager sit up and grunt. She had probably just woken him up from a nap.

• • •

A few minutes later, Douglas put Bethany's phone back down on his desk and shook his head.

"Self-harm. Yeah, that's in the Code of Conduct. You haven't memorized the Code of Conduct yet?"

"I know the Code of Conduct," Bethany said. "I just—"

"So that's a violation. Self-harm. So you click the red button." Douglas flipped his computer around so Bethany could see his own admin panel. "There's a green button, a yellow button, and a red button." He pointed to each button really slowly with his finger. "If the video violates GlobalVill.com's Code of Conduct, you press the red button."

"Yeah, I know. And I did—"

"You pressed the red button?" Douglas said, sounding impressed, as if he'd underestimated what Bethany was capable of.

"Yeah, I pressed the red button. But—it's not helping. This person, they've been making new accounts every night. I think they need help. Banning them is only making them hurt themself more."

"You don't know that. That's conjecture," Douglas said.

"Did you hear what they said in this latest video?" Bethany asked. "They said, 'There's no going back from this.' 'I can't wait to leave my body.' That's suicidal ideation, if not an outright threat. It's a cry for help, or worse."

"The thing is," Douglas said, "a lot of people on GlobalVill.com have suicidal ideation, but just as many people don't. Listen. The point is, it's not our place to decide who needs mental help. And it's definitely not our place to get it for them. If we tried to do that for every video we saw that made us worried, we'd never get any work done around here. Right?"

“This person needs us,” Bethany said.

“This is above your pay grade. All you have to do is click the red button if the video violates GlobalVill.com’s Code of Conduct, or the green button if the video doesn’t violate GlobalVill.com’s Code of Conduct. That’s all. Well, except I guess there’s also the yellow button if you’re not sure if the video violates GlobalVill.com’s Code of Conduct and you need to bump it up to your manager. You’re allowed to bump it up. But try not to press the yellow button too often unless you really need to, because I’ve got my own work to do, right?”

“But what do we do if somebody is in real, imminent danger? Shouldn’t there be some protocol for that?”

Douglas sighed. His phone buzzed with a text message.

“Bethany,” he said, now adopting the same rehearsed tone he’d used during her phone interview, “here at GlobalVill.com, we understand the mental health challenges of content moderation, and we’re committed to the safety and care of every member of our family.” He picked up his phone and scrolled through his texts. “As your manager, it’s so important to me that you’re healthy and happy here. I want you to know that our human resources department provides free confidential counseling with a mental health professional for all content moderators. I want to encourage you to sign up for a slot in your admin portal and talk about these feelings with them. And of course I want to thank you for all of the vital work you do for our community.”

“I . . .” Bethany said. “I just really think this person needs our help.”

“And you should talk to the therapist about that,” Douglas said. “Not your manager.”

• • •

Back at her desk, Bethany raged. If Douglas wasn’t going to help, she’d need to find a way to help JulesPublicAccessAfterworld herself.

The only problem was she had no idea how to even locate them. There were no hints in Jules’s videos that might help her zero in on who they were or where they lived. Jules never shared a last name, never talked about their real life outside of their obsession with Public Access Afterworld. Whoever they were, they kept their internet presence and their real life separate.

Once Bethany got back to her seat, she googled “JulesPublicAccessAfterworld” like she’d done a few times already. But as always, the search only returned links to GlobalVill.com.

Bethany looked around the office. Douglas had closed his door once again, and the other content moderators stationed around the massive floor were all firmly ensconced inside their own queues.

Bethany clicked a button on her admin panel to enter the backend of GlobalVill’s website. She felt like a hacker as she navigated to Jules’s admin page and scrolled down to the boxes that contained confidential demographic information. Bethany knew she was breaking a rule, that it was almost certainly a fireable offense (if not outright illegal) for a content moderator to look up a user’s private data. But she didn’t care. This particular user needed her help.

She found the text boxes she was looking for:

FULL NAME: **********
LOCATION: **********
IP ADDRESS: **********
EMAIL: **********

But when Bethany tried to click through each link, an automated message appeared in a pop-up window: “Sorry. Your account does not have the privileges necessary to view this information.”

Damn it. Bethany leaned back in her swivel chair. She opened up a new tab on her laptop and kept investigating. If her efforts to locate Jules were all leading to dead ends, at least she could learn more about this obsession they kept talking about in all their videos. Maybe it would help her understand what Jules might be planning . . .

She opened up Google and searched for “Public Access Afterworld.”

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4

OVER HER NEXT SEVERAL shifts, Bethany acquainted herself with everything there was to learn about Public Access Afterworld, its infamous founder David Sawyer, and his many victims.

Since 2009, David had been linked to the disappearances of 156 people. His first victim had met her fate before the cult leader had even graduated from high school: Erin Morrison, David's childhood best friend, had disappeared on September 19, 2009, not two weeks into their senior year. Both David and Erin had been seen by multiple witnesses the night of Erin's disappearance at their high school's homecoming dance. But Erin never returned home that night, and the next week, David showed up to school with bruise marks on his neck indicating a struggle.

Though David had been immediately pegged as the primary suspect in Erin's disappearance, the police claimed they didn't have enough direct evidence to charge him with a crime. Many people in town were convinced there was some kind of local conspiracy to protect David, and the case slowly gained media attention. Eventually the FBI got involved. It would take them five years to officially issue a warrant for David's arrest, and by that time David had already gone into hiding, presumably fleeing the country.

Before absconding to who-knows-where, David had built himself quite the online following. He'd expanded his internet presence in the years after high school, building out his Public Access Afterworld cult's mythology through online uploads and message board posts, creating the basic platform through which his group would continue to carry out its increasingly visible work.

He found his victims through the internet. The thirty-seven men and women (mostly women) whose murders David was officially charged with in 2014 were all people he had met online, then groomed and initiated into

the cult he'd invented. Though no murder weapon or bodies were ever found, travel records gathered by the FBI (and eventually leaked to the press) showed that David had visited every single one of his victims in the days and weeks prior to their disappearances. They'd mostly been loners, queer kids, and introverts, social outcasts longing for escape. The perfect prey for an online cult like David's.

Except Erin Morrison. David's first victim had been different. She'd been a shoo-in for valedictorian, a wunderkind destined for greatness. That is, until David Sawyer got done with her. The two had been close since childhood, but as the many online timelines that Bethany pored over explained, near the end of junior year, David and Erin had entered a romantic relationship. Around this same time, David started posting online about Public Access Afterworld. According to friends and family, Erin had been supportive at first, had gone along with David's fixation. But as David grew more and more obsessive, Erin had pulled away, attempting to extricate herself. Just a week before she disappeared, multiple students witnessed a physical altercation between the two of them in the hallway of their high school. David had shouted at Erin about portals through television screens and interdimensional travel. Erin had shouted back, begging him to please just leave her the fuck alone.

He didn't. A week later, Erin was gone.

"I curse the day my daughter ever met that monster," Mary told *Dateline* in 2015. Bethany watched the upload from the official NBC account while the videos in her actual GlobalVill.com queue played on another unopened tab. "David, if you're out there somewhere watching this," the grieving mother told the camera, "I want you to know: We're going to find you, and you're going to pay for what you've done to my daughter and so many others."

The upload had more than three million views.

• • •

After he became a fugitive from the law, David quickly also became a bona fide celebrity, easily the most internet-famous person on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

True crime documentaries about him had aired on Netflix, HBO, and A&E. Several made-for-TV movies inspired by his crimes were available on Tubi. And a big-budget studio film was rumored to be in the works with Daniel Radcliffe attached to star.

David's mug shot was iconic: the long, wiry beard he'd grown after Erin's disappearance, his cold eyes glaring right at the camera. It was almost as if he'd become the internet's deranged version of a sex symbol. He'd recently been ranked between Jeffrey Dahmer and Charles Manson on *Salon*'s list of the Top Ten Serial Killers of All Time. And if his current online presence was any indication, it seemed that David was proud of this honor. After his escape from justice, David dedicated more and more time to the internet, posting weekly sermons on every major streaming platform that anyone could watch (apparently it wasn't a red button–worthy offense for a wanted fugitive to post content from his bunker in Eastern Europe or wherever).

Over the years, David's supernatural ramblings had coalesced into a sort of fringe religion. He'd self-published PDF manifestos that his followers quoted like scripture and got tattooed on their skin. He'd launched several successful crowdfunding campaigns to keep his cult in business. And according to rumors spread by his followers, he personally oversaw a complex network of secret message boards where new inductees were being recruited every day.

Many of them, like Jules, were dying for the chance to become David Sawyer's latest victim. To meet him, and to have him grant their deepest wish—to finally disappear.

• • •

After several nights of research, Bethany understood enough of the cult's convoluted mythology to make an initial judgment on the whole enterprise: It was just another online pyramid scheme.

According to David Sawyer and his followers, reality as we understood it was just the tip of the interdimensional iceberg. Every TV show and movie, David claimed, every fictional world that had ever been dreamt up then broadcast for others to see, was just as real as this one. And they could all be experienced and lived inside far away, over the rainbow, or as David

liked to put it, “on the other side of the screen.” But here was the kicker: Only certain people had the ability to actually do so. Special people whom the cult referred to as “the crooked.” Public Access Afterworld, the cult’s namesake, was the zone where all this went down. A mysterious, wondrous place that only the most “crooked” among us could access. David’s cult, then, essentially offered participants a crash course in how to become crooked. How to travel to the other side of the screen and live inside your favorite TV shows as if they were real.

It was an alluring promise for lonely bedroom kids lost on the internet. If you were one of the crooked, you no longer had to be isolated and bored, tethered to this disappointing reality. You no longer even needed to be yourself. You could be and do anything you’d ever dreamed of: Visit Hogwarts and kiss Draco Malfoy. Become a Marvel superhero and save the world. Have weird sex with those blue guys from *Avatar.* So then, obviously the relevant question became: How did someone become crooked? How did you gain access to Public Access Afterworld, where all of your most outlandish fan fiction fantasies could be made real?

Easy. All you had to do was join some private message boards, donate to the cult’s crowdfunding campaigns, and most importantly, watch lots and lots of David’s content constantly uploaded to GlobalVill and the other streamers. The more you watched, the more you engaged, the more likely you were to transcend this plane of reality.

It was a great con, one designed to take full advantage of the internet’s unique ability to get people to keep watching and clicking, to keep scrolling in hopes that something someday might finally happen, that you might reach the top of the pyramid, and find big bad David Sawyer waiting for you there.

But for someone like Bethany, who was only interested in all this stuff in order to figure out what Jules might be planning, it made for a frustrating research experience. David’s cult was gamified. Like Scientology, there were different levels of access. Some information was publicly available, but most of it was shrouded in mystery, top secret, only shared with the faithful via a succession of increasingly exclusive, invite-only message boards.

It wasn’t actually hard to access the first private board. Bethany found a link to it in the comments section of one of David’s most popular sermons

on GlobalVill. Anyone could register for an account for the price of an email address.

Bethany signed up. She felt guilty, as if the FBI might be busting down the door and raiding her desk any second now. But no one seemed to care. She received an email confirmation and logged in to the private message board for the first time, then began to research the trove of info David's cult kept hidden behind this very first curtain.

One subforum on the board labeled "EVIDENCE" featured half a dozen threads stickied to the top of the page. Each contained a link to a private, unlisted GlobalVill video. In one video, a housewife with spatulas for hands tried to do the dishes. In another, an elderly woman stared directly into the camera and softly cooed while rubbing the lens with the tips of her fingers. In yet another, a lone basketball idled on the floor of a gymnasium.

Bethany watched each video, scrolled up and down the message board, then clicked through to another subforum, this one titled "CHALLENGE 1."

"ACQUIRE SCREEN SICKNESS," the post at the top of the page read. Bethany clicked in and glanced through the explainer text. Participants were instructed to record themselves watching a series of videos, and then to post the screen recording as evidence they'd actually sat through it all. Once a new participant had done so, the post promised, they'd be granted access to the next level up in the Public Access Afterworld pyramid.

Bethany clicked through to the GlobalVill playlist linked in the post. Each video included was nearly identical, all of them just extended streams of ambient television static between forty-five minutes and an hour in length.

Bethany realized she'd seen these videos before. Many of them had landed in her queue erroneously over the past few weeks. She'd already been subjected to them. Without even realizing it, apparently she'd completed David Sawyer's first challenge. Unfortunately, she hadn't known at the time to record her screen to submit for access to the next tier up.

So she continued her research elsewhere. Bethany searched on GlobalVill.com for "Screen Sickness," and found an explainer video listing the symptoms of the purported illness. Insomnia. Hallucinations. Frequent mood swings. Numbness throughout the body. Déjà vu. The feeling of

drifting from your consciousness. Nightmares. Funny, Bethany thought, it all didn't sound too different from the side effects of her new job.

She closed her laptop and packed up for the night, then drove home in the opposite direction of all those early-morning I-35 commuters, back to North Austin.

• • •

Her boyfriend Abel was still asleep when she got home. She crawled into bed next to him.

"Hey," he said, smiling sleepily. He rolled over and attempted to curl into Bethany's arms. She let him in, then let him drift back to sleep as she stared up at the ceiling and thought about Public Access Afterworld and David Sawyer.

Something was bothering her about the archive she'd pored over all night, a mystery that she couldn't yet untangle. It was about David Sawyer himself. Something that had changed in him around the time of Erin Morrison's disappearance. There seemed to be an almost incomprehensible difference between the David Sawyer that Bethany watched in his early uploads, the goofy, self-effacing nerd who just wanted to geek out about television in case someone was bored enough to listen, and the David Sawyer cult leader who glared dead-eyed from whatever bunker he was stationed inside.

Even though cult leader David was clearly the same person from those early videos, he acted like another soul entirely. His voice was raspy and bitter and emotionless, as if he was trying on purpose to seem as evil and creepy as possible for maximum virality. In his videos, he never directly admitted to the murders he was accused of committing, but he seemed to take pride in his reputation, always stopping just short of openly gloating. David Sawyer had created an aura of violence around everything he did and said. He was fully radicalized. Any trace of humanity was gone. He'd red-buttoned himself, Bethany thought. Sent his soul somewhere very far away, to that place where banned videos go after you ban them.

How did it happen? What had changed in this kid's life to hollow out that sweet, nerdy goofball into his present-day shell?

“It’s real,” David said in one of the many video sermons Bethany watched. “If you don’t believe me yet, play my game. Watch the videos. Let the static communicate with you. Find out if you’re one of the special ones—the crooked—who don’t just watch their favorite TV shows, but get to live inside them.”

Bethany fell asleep. Her nightmares were getting worse.

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5

SHE WAS MARGE SIMPSON and she was getting fucked, her tight green dress pulled up over her belly. A hulking Principal Skinner held her down, palm pressed to her rib cage. He lunged in and out, making her eyeballs roll around in their sockets like marbles.

She moaned loudly, writhing between her bedsheets in Austin, Texas, and the orange sofa in the Simpsons' living room.

From behind the camera, the porn parody director called notes to her about her performance. "Sound raspier. You don't sound enough like Marge. Make your voice raspy like Marge!"

"Fuck," Bethany moaned. She tried to follow orders, to take direction. "Ughhhh," she rasped. Principal Skinner pushed down on her rib cage, burying her into the couch cushion.

"More like Marge," the director called again. "You've got to really believe you're Marge." He was both gentle and commanding, and though Bethany was pinned too deep into the sofa to actually see him, she knew who it was standing behind the camera. Anthony "Fisch" Fischer, the famous CEO of GlobalVill.com.

Principal Skinner plowed deeper. Bethany groaned, and the sound of her own voice pushed her closer to climax. She realized now that she sounded exactly like Marge, without even trying. It wasn't an impression. She *was* Marge. And that turned her on.

The couch cushions swallowed everything. A picture of a sailboat hanging above the couch in the Simpsons' living room toppled down from the wall, bounced off Principal Skinner's back, and landed on the carpet below.

• • •

Bethany woke up, sweat soaking through the sheets. The late September sun had already set out the bedroom window. Abel wasn't home from work yet.

It was Bethany's night off from GlobalVill, and at Abel's request, the two had plans for a date night. Some proper alone time, which Bethany knew meant lying on opposite ends of the couch giving each other foot massages while watching *The Wolves of Birmingham*, that new HBO show about werewolves and racism that Abel was obsessed with.

Bethany felt like a jerk for thinking it, but basically anything—even her queue at GlobalVill.com—sounded more appealing than a domestic night in watching the forty-eighth *Game of Thrones* rip-off she'd been forced to binge-watch. It wasn't that the shows Abel watched bored her. No, they felt almost dangerously entertaining, lulling but in a shallow way, essentially narcotic in their ability to get you just invested enough to never stop watching. Each episode of a show like *The Wolves of Birmingham* was the TV equivalent of plain bread buttered with the thinnest possible layer of spread, just enough to get your mouth salivating for more. These shows Abel loved were perpetual motion machines, expertly designed to string you along, to get you to continue watching, to spend another night on the couch giving a foot rub to your boyfriend until pretty soon hundreds of hours had passed, your life along with it.

Here, then, was the essential problem with Bethany's relationship with Abel. Life together wasn't unlivable or even unpleasant. No. It was perfectly *fine*, the bare minimum for domesticity to continue unabated, to press play on another episode of prestige television and let the weeks, then years pass in shallow satisfaction. Numb and dissociated, always midway through a lifelong binge-watch.

Their relationship needed to end. Bethany had known it for a while but had been avoiding the inevitable. She'd been making casual excuses for her distance, blaming their opposing work schedules and the emotional exhaustion of her new job. Abel was too much of a pushover to do or say anything about it, but she was starting to wonder if he had gleaned the truth. That even though the two of them still lived together, still slept in the same bed and called each other boyfriend and girlfriend, in her mind, at least, their almost decade-long relationship was already over.

• • •

When Bethany had first met Abel, she'd been fresh off the bus from Harlingen, that border town where her parents had raised her up like chattel waiting for the slaughterhouse. She'd figured out enough about herself in her teen years to realize it was probably a matter of life and death to get as far away from that town as possible. Ironically, it had been GlobalVill.com that had helped her to the revelation. It was where she had first seen other queer people, where she heard them talk about their own experiences growing up in a language that felt familiar to her. Soon Bethany realized that the ever-present issues and crises that had defined her adolescence had both a name (transness) and a solution (escape).

She'd ditched Harlingen after her eighteenth birthday, just months after being released from that place where her parents had her committed following her worst ever self-harm incident: that Christian reconditioning center which had advertised itself as a hospital for troubled youth. She didn't tell her mom and dad that she was leaving. The older she'd gotten, the less invested her parents had become in finding a cure for whatever deep wrongness they believed lived inside their "son." Her father was a financial planner, and Bethany sensed he'd come to think of her as his own personal sunk cost.

She packed a bag, wrote a note, and hopped a Greyhound, only calling home several weeks later to tell her parents that she was still alive. They didn't sound too disappointed or surprised, though Bethany recognized the subtle longing in her mom's voice when she said, "You're welcome back anytime."

For those first few months in Austin, life was equal parts exciting and awful. Bethany came out to her best friend Lily (a trans girl she'd met in the comments section on GlobalVill, who had been the one to encourage her to escape to Austin in the first place). She began dressing the way she wanted, even if it felt terrifying at first. And she changed her name from Noah (rest in peace) to Bethany (live forever).

But this period was also one of total precariousness. Now far from the financial security of her parents' home, Bethany found herself verging on a new kind of collapse. Finding a job in Texas as a trans girl was nearly impossible. Bethany lived in constant fear of becoming homeless, of the

moment when Lily finally got tired of letting her crash on the couch, and she would have nowhere else to sleep but the bridge under I-35.

She tried online sex work, because it seemed to be what most other trans girls did for money. But Bethany never completed a single video. She just couldn't look the camera in the eye like that and pretend to be confident. It was the same issue that had led her to shut down her GlobalVill channel a year earlier. She was ashamed to be seen. She knew how others looked at her, how even her own parents now saw her. As repulsive, a freak. As Buffalo Bill, the most embarrassing and grotesque kind of pervert. She could feel it in that same disdainful gaze of strangers every time she walked down the street or asked for a job application at the mall. And she could feel it in the camera's lens, too. She saw herself as they all did in the reflection on the screen. It made her want to hide, far away and out of sight, where no one had to look at her ever again.

• • •

Bethany met Abel at Cherrywood, an Austin coffee shop where, for the price of a small iced tea, she could hide all day from the Texas heat.

Abel had looked at her differently. They'd been making eye contact for a few weeks at the coffeehouse before he approached her and introduced himself, then offered to buy her drink. She'd been wearing a hoodie and jeans with just a little eye shadow. She hadn't shaved in two days, and some early stubble was still peeking through. But Abel saw her immediately as who she was. From the beginning, he had made her feel like a girl, a feeling that at the time Bethany had equated with love. It was a revelation: intimacy with a normal boy who genuinely saw her as the person she wished she could be.

Abel had taken her in, had made her his own personal fixer-upper. He paid for her new wardrobe, for laser hair removal, then electrolysis and FFS. He never asked for anything in return, and he never made Bethany feel like she owed him anything. This was the problem—why it had been so hard to extricate herself from her and Abel's flatlined relationship: Abel was genuinely a really nice guy. Like aggressively so. He ate vegan and read books about socialism. Niceness was kind of his whole personality, and unfortunately for Bethany, it wasn't even an act. Over the entire span of their nine-year relationship, Bethany had never once felt anything

resembling pressure from him. He gave her space and helped her grow. When she decided she wanted a job, he helped her apply to every retailer and coffee shop in North Austin. And then, when during a bad bout of depression she decided to quit the Gap, he supported her.

"I love you. I make enough for both of us. You've been through enough these past few years. Take some time. Find yourself. You deserve it."

And so she did what he said. But the deeper Bethany U-Hauled, the more Abel's generosity started to feel like a crutch. Those first months in Austin before she'd met him had been the most precarious period of her life. But it was also the only time when she'd ever genuinely felt the flicker of a life as *herself*—not somebody else's idea of who she was, but as Bethany, a real person she actually wanted to be.

She still wasn't herself in that way. Her growth, whatever growth she was supposed to have experienced after she transitioned at age eighteen, had been stunted by the safe haven Abel offered. Now she was marooned in a three-bedroom in North Austin, a housewife in training, still nearly as estranged from the real version of herself as she'd been back in Harlingen.

She knew she couldn't talk to Abel about any of this. It wasn't that he wouldn't understand or listen. No, the problem was he would listen too well. And then there would be a tearful five-hour therapy session, an unpacking of their deepest feelings, and they'd cry and say how much they loved each other, and then Bethany would relent, Abel would cook her a nice dinner, and it would be back to a life of foot rubs and binge-watching on the couch together.

No. She needed to escape. A clean break and a clear plan already in place for this next phase of her life. And so she started applying to random jobs online. Eventually she landed one.

• • •

"Gonna hang with Lily tonight. Back after work tmrw," Bethany texted Abel once she was already out of the house on a bus downtown.

She watched him craft his response, those familiar little iPhone ellipses hovering at the bottom of their text thread for a full minute.

"Aww. I thought we were watching Wolves of Birmingham tonight . . ."

“Can we reschedule? Need a night out with friends or I’m going to blow my fucking brains out.”

Another minute passed. Those ellipses lingered at the bottom of Bethany’s phone screen again.

“No worries. I understand,” Abel texted. A second later, he sent three blushing heart emojis. The love language of the sucker.

Bethany tried not to picture Abel alone at home eating quinoa at the kitchen table, sulking like a puppy. She rang the bell for her stop.

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6

BETHANY HADN'T BEEN LYING to Abel. She desperately needed to be drunk. Thankfully, Lily was game tonight.

In the years since Bethany had moved in with Abel, Lily had settled into her own post-transition domestic fantasy. She was married now to a dyke lawyer: Mona, the queen of corporate pride, a 401(k) assimilationist queer whose idea of a wild night was fancy cocktails and *L Word* reruns. Bethany could tell from the way Mona looked at her that she saw Bethany as a remnant of her wife's unhealthy past, a bad habit that Lily hadn't totally shaken yet.

Mona had no reason to be insecure: She was clearly winning her fight for the right to be boring and upper class. She and Lily had grown a baby in a petri dish a year earlier with some of Lily's pre-transition sperm, and Bethany had hardly seen her friend since the home birth.

Thankfully, though, Lily still had a penchant for debauchery. Deep down, most trans girls did. Sure, Lily and Bethany's infamous nights out had grown less frequent since Lily became a mother, but Bethany could still count on her friend in a pinch. Tonight's bender was scheduled for Cheer Up Charlies, an East Austin dive bar with a huge backyard and live music. By nine P.M., Bethany was in a familiar state of pseudo-blackout, that sweet spot where she could still comprehend the broad outlines of what was happening around her, but where the actual details of any interaction were dead on arrival. She mixed half a dozen tequila sodas with some fancy edibles that Lily had brought, then flung her body through the bar like a pinball in a dimly lit machine.

"My life is Chernobyl!" she shouted at Lily from across the dance floor. She fought through the crowd to hug her friend. Then the scene changed suddenly and she was in the backyard, dancing in another sea of strangers. Then back inside, lying in a booth. The strobe from the dance floor was

doing strange things to her stomach. She stumbled to the bathroom and emptied her first six tequila sodas into the sink, then staggered back to the bar to order number seven.

While she waited for her drink to arrive, she noticed a tall, pale guy staring at her from across the bar, his eyes angry but fascinated. Bethany tried not to stare back. She was used to getting clocked. Weird, she thought, when she spied out of the corner of her eye, the guy was a dead ringer for Ray “Can You Say Sunshine” Davino, that suicidal weatherman from her GlobalVill queue. If Bethany hadn’t personally seen Davino shoot himself in the head multiple times over the past two weeks, she would have been sure this was the same guy.

Ghosts. They’d invaded her screens, then her dreams. Now they were frequenting hipster dives in East Austin.

Once her drink arrived, she stumbled back towards the dance floor. She tried to put that creepy weatherman’s stare out of her mind. She had bigger fish to fry. You see, Bethany had a secret mission tonight, one she hadn’t even fully admitted to herself. She wasn’t going back home to Abel, and she sure as shit wasn’t going to the suburbs to crash on Lily’s couch and wake up to a pounding headache and Mona glaring at her mid-breastfeeding.

No. Bethany was going home with a stranger. She was going to have drunken, anonymous sex, then wake up in someone’s bed tomorrow morning without even remembering their name. Then she’d grab some breakfast tacos for the hangover, and once she was sure Abel had left for the day, she’d sneak home to sleep in their bed until her shift started after sunset.

Her mission proved easier than expected. A short-haired butch in a leather tank flirted with her on the dance floor, and then the scene jumped ahead, and the two of them were shoved up against a graffitied stall in the women’s room.

Bethany let the tattooed butch pin her against the wall. She felt tranquilized in a good way. She had just enough motor skills left in her body to keep her dangling feet from dipping into toilet water. She moaned. It wasn’t hard to lose herself when her head was already so foggy.

“I want to make you cum,” the butch said as she pressed into Bethany’s rib cage. Bethany straightened her body out, accepting the challenge. The butch girl worked her way down towards Bethany’s skirt.

Oh fuck, Bethany thought just before the butch girl reached her crotch. Then she watched her hookup's expression drop as the woman discovered the bulge under Bethany's skirt. As she realized that the girl she'd just offered to make cum had a penis straining against the fabric of her panties. The butch recoiled as if she'd been zapped by an electric fence.

"Shit—" Bethany said. "I thought you knew."

"No," the butch told her, and Bethany watched as her hookup's trans-inclusive politics began to battle against her gut-level repulsion.

"It's totally fine," the butch said. "I support, I just . . . I'm not sure it's for me. Or—I've never—"

Bethany was already unlocking the door to the stall, eager for her night to switch scenes again so she could escape whatever teachable moment this lady was about to unleash on the Cheer Up Charlies women's room.

Bethany stumbled back through the bar, looking for Lily between bodies on the dance floor. She glanced back at the bathroom, worried that the butch might be following after her for a post-hookup therapy session on whether having a genital preference was transphobic. But Bethany instead locked eyes again with that tall, pale ghost of a weatherman. His head towered above the crowd on the dance floor. He was staring right at her.

"*The receiver!*" he shouted.

Then he pushed towards her, weaving past gyrating bodies. "*The receiver! The receiver!*"

There was no mistaking it now—he was heading right towards her. Bethany's stomach lurched with fear and tequila as the pale weatherman pushed closer.

"*The receiver!*" he shouted. "*Make it real! Make it real!*"

And then Bethany was sprinting for the exit, genuinely afraid. She rushed out the door into the dry heat of the Texas night, pushing past cigarette smokers out on the curb. She ducked into a nearby alleyway to hide, crouching behind a random car. Her guts churned, and then tequila, soda, and the last remnants of Abel's trademark tofu scramble splattered against tires and pavement.

• • •

That undead weatherman hadn't followed her outside, but Bethany wasn't about to go back into a club full of ghosts, dance music, and "trans-inclusive in the streets, TERF in the sheets" dykes.

She bought herself a roll of Tums and a big bottle of water from the CVS, averting her gaze to avoid her balance on the ATM screen. Then she walked southwest towards the Bat Bridge that separated downtown Austin from the city's south side.

"Headed home, love uuu," Bethany texted Lily as she approached the tents under the highway, those same encampments she'd once feared were going to be her eventual resting place during her first year in Austin.

They were still here. The mayor hadn't found a way to red-button the city's homeless population yet, to send those tents and the people inside them away amidst the city's ongoing gentrification.

She found an empty spot near one of the bridge's corner arches. She slumped down, swallowed a handful of Tums, and curled up in the fetal position. She listened to cars passing above her on I-35. They sounded like waves—clean, lulling, hypnotic. In just a few hours, Bethany knew, those same roads would be clogged with Teslas driven by impatient morning commuters headed downtown to their jobs. Back to their kombucha on tap and rooftop gardens with fresh basil.

Bethany closed her eyes and imagined that she was invisible down here underneath the highway where no one could ever find her again. She thought about JulesPublicAccessAfterworld, and about how even though she herself had transitioned years ago, she still understood Jules's desire to disappear. At least there was a breeze tonight. At least it wasn't raining. At least those cars above her were waves, crashing against the shore and then receding back into the ocean as if the ocean was a body and she was part of it, too. Sleep overtook Bethany, and for the first time since she'd started her job at GlobalVill.com, she didn't have any nightmares.

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7

NOT THIRTY MINUTES INTO her shift the next evening, Jules was back in Bethany's feed, sitting on the floor of that anonymous shed, staring bug-eyed into the camera.

"I'm finally ready," they said. "If this doesn't get me into Public Access Afterworld, nothing will."

They held up a miniature plastic Dixie cup, waxy, with Disney princesses on it. They tilted the cup to the camera to show off the twenty or thirty little white pills rattling around inside.

"I'll see you in the video store," Jules said, then they swallowed the whole cup down in one gulp. They stared at the screen for a few seconds, looking blank. And then they switched their camera off.

The whole video was less than forty-five seconds long. Once it ended, it started again, playing on a loop from the beginning because Bethany hadn't clicked any button on her admin panel.

Green. Yellow. Red.

Bethany's heart raced. She scrolled down the page to check the upload time stamp. Jules's video had been posted just one hour earlier. It had been reported and sent right to her in what had to be record time. Enough time, perhaps, *to do something.*

Bethany looked around the office. Kyle and the rest of the content moderators clicked through their queues, sleepy and bored, oblivious to the emergency situation developing at Bethany's desk.

Suicide. Bethany had seen this coming. From the first time she saw one of Jules's videos, she had known it was all heading here.

It struck her suddenly in that moment how easy it would be to do nothing at all. To click one of the little buttons on her admin panel and send this final upload into the netherworld, JulesPublicAccessAfterworld along with

it. She wouldn’t even be breaking any rules. She’d read the Code of Conduct enough times now that she was pretty sure Jules’s latest video was perfectly legal to stay on the site, a green button in waiting. So they’d drunk some pills from a Dixie cup. Great. Was that explicitly forbidden in the GlobalVill Code of Conduct?

Bethany felt stuck between panic and indifference. She’d spent weeks now getting paid to watch horror after horror. Violence had become mundane to her. It felt both real and unreal. She knew Jules, whoever they were, really existed somewhere. That they were broadcasting from an actual shed that Bethany could find in real life if she had just been able to track down an address. But to her, the place was also unreal, still only accessible through her laptop screen, pixelated and two-dimensional. Drained of reality and, by extension, consequence. This person had nothing to do with her. There was almost no chance Bethany knew anyone who knew anyone who had ever even met JulesPublicAccessAfterworld. She didn’t know their real name, wouldn’t even know how to search for a news story tomorrow about their death. In a way, Bethany now realized, they were colleagues. Just two people playing out their roles in the larger GlobalVill ecosystem. Jules had entered Bethany’s life through a video feed, because it was Bethany’s job to watch that video feed, and that was how they were exiting it now, too. Quietly, through a screen.

Jules’s suicide video had started over again, playing on Bethany’s laptop for the fourth time straight. Bethany stared at Jules’s face, at the blank anticipation in their eyes. She considered clicking the green button. She thought about how easy and consequencefree it would be to force Jules out of her mind and then head downstairs to the cafeteria for a glass of kombucha.

But Bethany Peters is my TV show’s hero, so of course she didn’t do that.

• • •

Bethany knocks loudly on Douglas’s office door, her laptop in hand. She lets herself inside and finds Douglas watching clips of Joe Rogan on his phone.

“Hey,” he says without glancing up.

“I need to talk to you about a video in my feed. I think it might be an emergency.”

Douglas puts his phone down. He doesn’t respond.

“It’s them,” Bethany says as she sets her laptop down on his desk and plays him the video. “The same person I told you about earlier. They’re attempting suicide, just like I was worried about. It’s happening right now.”

Bethany watches Douglas watch the video. On the screen, Jules shows off their Disney princess Dixie cup for the camera and downs their pills on loop for the seventh or eighth time.

Douglas watches. After the video ends and starts over again, he looks at Bethany and shakes his head.

“I don’t know . . .” he says.

“You don’t know?”

He’s quiet for a few seconds.

“Tic Tacs,” he says eventually. “It’s probably Tic Tacs.”

“Tic Tacs . . .”

“I’ve seen this before.” He’s trying to make himself sound more confident. “It’s a prank kids do. They chug Tic Tacs and pretend they’re swallowing pills. It’s a goof. ‘The Tic Tac Challenge,’ I think it’s called.”

“I don’t think this person is doing any ‘Tic Tac Challenge,’” Bethany says.

Douglas is silent. Bethany catches a brief accidental flicker of concern behind his eyes. As if he too is trying to determine whether Jules’s video is real or a hoax.

“I think it’s Tic Tacs,” he says finally.

“It’s not Tic Tacs,” Bethany tells him.

“How do you know? Besides, it’s not our job to . . . We’re not video analysis people, Bethany. This isn’t video analysis class. We don’t get paid to offer our interpretation of every video we see. We get paid to say whether it violates the GlobalVill.com Code of Conduct. That’s it.”

“*This person is going to die.* They’re dying right now. We need to call the police. We need to get help.”

“That’s not our job,” Douglas says. He looks back down at Bethany’s laptop. He toggles on her trackpad over to her admin panel, then taps the yellow button.

“There you go,” he says. “It’s a yellow. You bumped it up. It’s my problem now.”

He closes her laptop and hands the device back to her.

“Try not to fixate on this. Get a snack, take a break, clear your head, and get back to work. You’ve been falling behind in your queue the last few nights.”

• • •

Bethany walks back across the office floor, the tense hum in her head building like water approaching a boil. She puts her laptop down on her desk but doesn’t sit.

She stands in the middle of the massive open space, looking around. Kyle glances up from his queue and smiles at her, then glances back down at his work, oblivious.

The world closes around Bethany. She feels an increased pressure pulsing inside her skull. Static on a screen. She tries to think. What should she do?

“No,” she says out loud. Then she rushes right back across the floor and once again pushes her way into Douglas’s office, this time without knocking.

He’s sitting at his desk watching Jules’s video in his feed, staring at the screen as though he too can’t stop himself from being worried about that stranger in that shed somewhere far away. He looks up at Bethany to find her forcing her way towards his desk. Before he can speak, she lunges.

“Give me that,” she growls, then grabs Douglas’s company laptop, ripping it out from its little magnetized power cord.

“Hey!” Douglas shouts.

But Bethany’s already out the door, rushing with the laptop across the GlobalVill main floor like a running back chasing a first down.

“Give that back to me!” Douglas yells again as Bethany races for the catwalk. He stumbles out from his office, chasing after her. “Give that back to me right now!” His voice echoes across the cavernous space.

Kyle stands up at his desk. The other content moderators look up from their work, too. Headphones lower.

Bethany hurtles down the stairs, rushing towards the kitchen. Douglas chases after her.

“You’re fired!” he shouts. “Clean out your personal belongings and leave the premises immediately because you’re very fucking fired!!”

• • •

Bethany locks herself in the women’s room, bolts the door shut behind her, and catches her breath. Rusty the elderly night watchman is inside mopping the floor. Douglas pounds on the door, trying to force his way in.

“Give me back my laptop!” he shouts.

Rusty looks scared. He drops his mop to the ground and puts his hands in the air as if he’s being held hostage. Bethany ignores him. She crouches on the tiled floor and works quickly, clicking through to the backend of Douglas’s admin panel, then to Jules’s user page, where she can finally access the information her own clearance level had kept hidden from her:

> FULL NAME: Julian Estrada
>
> LOCATION: 460 Arrowhead Drive, Lubbock, Texas 79401

Texas. The thought *I knew it* briefly crosses Bethany’s mind. Even though she’s never seen outside the four walls of that shed where Jules broadcasts from, she sensed a frustrated isolation reminiscent of her own experiences growing up in the Lone Star State.

“Come out of there right now!” Douglas shouts again. He bashes his body against the door like he’s trying to cave it in. Then, presumably realizing that if he does manage to break down the door he’ll be damaging company property, Douglas goes back to just knocking loudly. “Let’s de-escalate the situation, all right? Open the door and let’s have a one-to-one. Let’s have a team check-in.”

Bethany ignores him. She grabs her phone out from her pocket and dials 911. Rusty cowers against the wall, afraid to move.

Before the dispatcher can say more than two words on the other side of the line, Bethany speaks. “Hi, I need the Lubbock Police Department. It’s

an emergency.”

“Hey!” Douglas shouts again, listening from the other side of the doorway. “Don’t do that! Hang up that call!”

“Lubbock Police Department, is this an emergency?”

“Yeah. Yes. Hi . . . 460 Arrowhead Drive, Julian Estrada.” Bethany reads the info off Douglas’s laptop screen. “They’re attempting suicide right now at that address. They took pills. Dozens of them.”

“How many people?”

“Just one,” Bethany says.

“But you said ‘they,’” the dispatcher responds.

“They. He. Whatever. You just need to send help because I don’t think they have long.”

“Are you there with them now, sir?”

“No. I—I’m watching. It doesn’t matter. You need to get there right now,” Bethany repeats.

“We’re sending a car. That’s the Turbo Putt on Arrowhead Drive?” the man on the other end of the line asks.

Bethany’s body relaxes just a little bit.

“Sir, is that correct? The Turbo Putt on Arrowhead Drive?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Bethany says. “Just get there.”

“We need you to stay on the line until we arrive. Can you tell me your—”

Bethany hangs up. She lets her body go slack and her cellphone drop to the bathroom floor. Douglas continues pounding on the door, but lighter than before, as if he too understands it’s over.

Rusty the night guard leans against the bathroom wall, unsure about whether or not he’s still a hostage. He slowly reaches for his mop, keeping his hands out where Bethany can see them. Then he walks past her, unlocks the bathroom door, and heads back down the hall to his desk in the lobby.

Bethany catches her breath, sitting hunched over Douglas’s laptop.

“Come on,” Douglas says as he steps into the women’s room. He picks the laptop up off the ground. “You’re in trouble.” He sounds more tired than upset. This is going to be *a whole thing* for him to deal with now.

• • •

Later that night, Kyle and the rest of the content moderators watched as Bethany cleaned out her desk. Then Douglas escorted her down the catwalk with a hand on her back, leading her out to her car in the parking lot, watching as she drove away, as she left the night shift behind for the very last time.

Before Bethany even made it to I-35, her cellphone rang. The caller ID read, “Maybe: GlobalVill HR.” She let it go to voicemail. For better or worse, she was done with that place now, and in no rush to deal with whatever fallout might follow in the wake of her actions.

She had done it. That was what mattered. She had done her job. Not the one she was hired to do, but the one she promised herself to do once she realized JulesPublicAccessAfterworld needed her help. She’d done her best to save the stranger’s life. Perhaps she’d never know if it made a difference, but she’d tried her best. She’d crossed the barrier between screen and real life. The police would have to take it from here.

Maybe now she could get some rest. Sure, she had six hundred dollars in her bank account. Sure, she had nowhere to sleep tonight except a home she’d been trying to escape, but those were problems for another night. Right now, she was too exhausted to care.

Traffic was bad. It was Friday, just past midnight, and it seemed like all of Austin was returning from their nights out downtown. Bethany’s phone buzzed again as she inched closer to home. The caller ID again read, “Maybe: GlobalVill HR.” She ignored the call, letting it go to voicemail.

She sat in traffic, crawling slowly towards bed. It was the first time in weeks she’d been on the same side of the highway as a traffic jam. The night shift had gotten her used to cruising back and forth in the opposite direction of everyone else’s rush hour. It felt kind of refreshing to be on tempo with the rest of humanity for once.

Her cell buzzed for a third time. This time she just shut the phone off entirely.

They could keep calling all they wanted. They could fire her, fire her twice just for kicks. They could sue her for the six hundred dollars in her bank account or Clockwork Orange her eyes open and drive her insane with more fucked-up internet videos, but right now they couldn’t stop her from

getting home and getting a good night's sleep. She pulled off the highway then drove the last few blocks back towards that house that wasn't her home, but would have to do for a little while longer.

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8

ABEL WAS STILL AWAKE when Bethany got inside. He was lying on the couch reading *Debt: The First 5000 Years* by David Graeber. He closed the tome and sat up, surprised to see Bethany home before dawn.

“I quit,” she said. She dropped Abel’s car keys into a coffee tin by the front door.

“Whoa,” Abel said, then put his book down on the table. He stood up.

“That job wasn’t healthy. I’ll go back to the Gap. Or I don’t know . . . I’ll figure something out. I just needed to get out of that place.”

“That makes sense,” Abel said. “I’m really glad you’re prioritizing your mental health.”

He looked down at the carpet. Bethany could tell he had something he wanted to say but was too nervous to say it.

“Hey,” she said, walking over and giving him a hug. “I know there was something you wanted to talk about, and I know I’ve been sorta avoiding you, but can it wait a little bit longer? I feel like I need to sleep for four days straight before I can process anything.”

Abel bit his lip. He looked around. “Actually,” he said, voice quivering, “I talked about it in therapy and it’s really important for me to say this right now . . .”

Bethany felt a surge of panic, realizing that Abel was probably about to break up with her. Then she felt a subsequent surge of relief. If he *did* break up with her right now, he’d probably feel guilty enough to let her stay in the house for a while to give her time to get back on her feet. That would kind of be the best possible situation, honestly.

Abel reached his hands into his pockets. He looked Bethany in the eye.

“Bethany,” he said. “Things have been really bad between us lately. I think we both know it.”

He paused, and Bethany nodded, trying to look extra guilty.

“I love you so much,” he said. “You mean more to me than anyone else in the world. But you haven’t been treating me well, and you haven’t been treating yourself well either.”

“I know,” Bethany said.

“It’s been horrible to see you so unhealthy. I just . . . I love you so much. I want to take care of you. To me, that’s the most important thing.”

Abel withdrew a little box out from his left pocket. He got down on his knees.

“Bethany . . .” he said. Terror shot through Bethany’s body. Static pulsed across her skull. “I know things have been hard lately. But it’s only made this more clear to me: You’re the person I want to spend my life with. I know I can make you happy.” Abel opened the little box, revealing a diamond inside. “It’s my mother’s,” he said. “She was so happy when I told her I was going to give it to you. Or, I suppose, *offer* it to you, if you’ll have me.”

Bethany stood over him, the fuzz in her brain turned up extra loud.

“You’re not breaking up with me?” she asked.

“No,” Abel said, then laughed. There were tears in his eyes. “I’m asking you to spend the rest of your life with me. Bethany Peters, I want to take care of you. Tonight, tomorrow, for our entire lives. Bethany. Will you marry me?”

“I . . .” Bethany muttered. “I need to . . . I just need to . . .” Then she ran for the front door, grabbing Abel’s car keys back out from the coffee tin she’d just dropped them in, leaving her would-be fiancé on the carpet, ring in hand.

• • •

Within minutes, she was back on I-35, back speeding against traffic, headed past downtown Austin, past the exit she’d always take for GlobalVill HQ, past the Bat Bridge and city limits, driving . . . somewhere else.

Away from this city. Away from the Lone Star State.

Her phone was turned off, but she could psychically feel it accumulating voicemails. Whatever. Let them call. “Maybe: GlobalVill HR,” Douglas, and the rest of the ghouls at that place, and Abel, too, for that matter. She didn’t want to think about any of them right now. She just wanted to run, to get out of this city as fast as possible.

Bethany had thought that this shiny new tech job was going to be the key to her independence. The beginning of a new era. Freedom, finally. Now she realized how absurd the plan had always been. Because really there was no such thing as freedom. Not for people like her. There was just this same cycle, stuck on a loop. Prison and escape.

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EPISODE THREE

PINK EYE

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1

THERE WAS A TUNNEL underneath hole eighteen.

Once you were done putting your way across all eighteen holes at the Turbo Putt, Lubbock's premier mini golf course and family fun center, once you navigated past all the sand traps and the rusty lumberjack with the big plastic legs, once you sank your final shot into hole eighteen at the end of the course, your golf ball got gobbled up into an underground tunnel.

It was like a waterslide for golf balls, a recycling system to carry each ball through the earth and back to its starting point in the dilapidated main office shed where Jules Estrada lived and worked. The tunnel was initially built to stop customers from sneaking off with free golf balls in their pockets, but for Jules, it existed to be a giant pain in their ass. Because all day long, they'd be sitting in their chair by the metal grate, trying to space out and forget who and where they were, and then suddenly they'd be jarred back to reality by a horrible clanking sound as yet another golf ball completed its trip, dropping from the chipped plastic tube into the big bucket on the floor.

The sound was one of the most annoying parts of Jules's job. Second, perhaps, only to the customers. Today, for instance, this pretty blond girl whom Jules immediately recognized from high school was here at ten A.M. sharp, right after opening, knocking on the big metal grate and asking Jules not just for any golf ball, but for a *pink* golf ball specifically. Can you believe that? This bitch used to be part of the popular group. She'd always teased Jules for blowing bubbles with their mouth in math class. Called Jules "the Aquarium." It gave them a mental just to think about.

"Thanks," the girl said as Jules handed her the hot pink golf ball. "I gotta putt in style, you know?"

Jules wanted to be like, "Don't even pretend to be nice to me, cunt." But they were working. This was their job. So they just handed the girl a

scorecard and a putter, too, and said, “Have a nice day.” Then they settled into their swivel chair to stew in bad memories and wait for the loud, jarring clank of that stupid pink golf ball finishing its ride through the underground tube.

One time, the tunnel under hole eighteen got clogged. Apparently the pipes needed cleaning or something, some WD-40 to lube them up, and the golf balls started piling up underground, until that bucket in the office shed was nearly empty. Jules had to call their manager and tell him they were out of golf balls, that they all had bottlenecked underground like a traffic jam. And the crazy part was there was no way to get down there to unlodge it all except to dig up the ground between hole eighteen and the Turbo Putt office shed.

So Jules’s manager called in the construction team from his McMansion in Dallas. Those guys brought a big tractor down to the Turbo Putt and no one could golf for a week and a half as they dug up the course and worked on repairs. Jules got PTO. It was pretty cool, honestly. Shout-out to the golf balls for Jules’s paid vacation.

For a bit during that whole situation, Jules had gotten nervous that one of the construction guys was going to notice that they didn’t just work here at the Turbo Putt—that they slept and lived here, too—and then narc to their boss back in Dallas that they’d transformed the main office shed into their own personal studio-apartment-slash-wake-and-bake-den. But actually those construction guys were pretty chill. More than most people in Lubbock. They dug up the golf balls, fixed the underground tunnel, and left Jules alone so Jules could get stoned and make their GlobalVill videos in peace.

• • •

Tonight after closing, Jules was going to record their first TV show. Okay, not an actual TV show, but a “Pink Eye TV show.”

They were super excited about it. After two-plus years, they’d finally made it all the way to the final challenge in David Sawyer’s Public Access Afterworld game. When they completed the previous challenge, the one with the pills, they thought they were done. But it turned out there was one

more secret forum with one final challenge, like a new world you only unlock in a video game after the final boss battle.

It was called Pink Eye TV. According to this final message board, everyone who was truly destined for Public Access Afterworld had a psychic connection to at least one specific TV show, even if they'd never actually watched it in real life. Even if it didn't exist yet. "Narrate an episode of the TV show stuck in your brain, then upload your video," the post read.

Jules had to admit, this final challenge was kind of a letdown. They'd expected something more crazy and death-defying, like a post ordering them to walk a tightrope ten stories above the ground, or to slash a cop's tires or stab a municipal employee in the leg and run away before getting caught. Something crazy like that. But narrating a TV show? It felt kind of lame.

At the same time, it made perfect sense. David Sawyer was obsessed with TV. And besides, Jules had put enough time into this whole Public Access Afterworld situation that they'd basically do anything David said to finally complete his game. They wanted so badly to be one of those special "crooked" people he was always going on about, the ones who could travel beyond the screen and enter alternate realities.

When Jules started playing the Public Access Afterworld game two years ago, they weren't sure at first if they believed any of it. They'd just signed up because it seemed like a creepy, fun thing to do late at night. But over the years, they'd grown obsessive, and at this point they'd seen more than enough evidence on David's various forums to convince them that what he was talking about was real. Jules had even interacted with people online who had eventually disappeared—other participants who had given them advice on how to complete another challenge or contract Screen Sickness (which, despite their best efforts, they never experienced the symptoms of themself). Those people had been nice to Jules. And then, one day, they were gone from the world. Jules had read the news articles to prove it. They were off to Public Access Afterworld, and now, finally, Jules had a real chance to join them. So if they needed to make David Sawyer a fake Pink Eye TV show to finally seal the deal, they'd make David Sawyer the best fake Pink Eye TV show he'd ever seen.

The only problem was Jules had a wicked bad case of writer's block. What did they know about making a TV show? The only thing they could think to make it about was *themself,* and who would want to watch that show? It'd be boring as hell. So they'd agonized all week trying to come up with a cool concept, and then, finally, last night, inspiration had struck. They realized they had the perfect idea right here, literally under their feet: *that tunnel beneath hole eighteen.*

It would be called *Golf Ball Revolution*. In Jules's fake TV show, there would be one red-colored golf ball who got so sick of getting smacked around the course every single day that they made a secret plan with the other golf balls in the bucket to lodge themselves in the underground tubing system and refuse to come out. Then, when the construction workers arrived to dig up the ground, the golf balls would launch their attack, starting the titular Golf Ball Revolution. By the end of episode one, they'd take over the entire course, making the humans who used to hit them with clubs all day into their own *human golf balls.* Let's see how all those assholes liked getting bashed around. Let's see how they liked being stuffed into an underground tube.

• • •

That girl from high school finished hole eighteen and walked back over to the open window in the main office. Her pink golf ball plopped back into its bucket.

"I'm going to play another round, if that's cool," she said, smiling a little too long at Jules, almost like she was flirting.

"Of course it's cool. You don't have to ask," Jules said. They weren't sure why this girl was trying so hard to be nice to them. "Just pay me five dollars."

The girl fished money from her wallet.

"You want the same pink ball?"

"Definitely," the girl said. Jules grabbed the stupid pink ball out of the bucket and handed it back to her. And then the blond girl walked back to hole number one and started the course over again. Jules snuck glances at her every few holes. Once they even caught the girl looking back at them.

Wait. Was she actually flirting? Because that's what it felt like. What the fuck did a girl like that want with Jules Estrada?

• • •

It was Sunday, so the course was busy all afternoon. Jules sold golf balls to a dad and two little boys wearing matching yellow NASCAR tracksuits. The boys stared at Jules's ghost makeup like they were looking at Medusa. "You think I'm the freak?" Jules wanted to say. "Look in a mirror. Your dad is turning you into a highway billboard."

There was a youth pastor on hole four. This sex pest came to the Turbo Putt every single week, each time with one of his young male parishioners. He was the most obvious closet case Jules had ever witnessed. It made them want to vomit. Figure your shit out, buddy. There was a mom and daughter on hole one. And a Latina babysitter chaperoning three white kids across the little bridge over the chlorine water trap on hole thirteen. And of course, still, all afternoon there was that blond girl who used to call Jules "Aquarium" just because they blew bubbles with their mouth in math class. The girl stole another glance at Jules, putting her ball back towards the tunnel underneath hole eighteen.

• • •

It was 4:16 P.M. Almost time for Jules's afternoon edible.

Over the two years they'd worked here at the Turbo Putt, they'd invented a bunch of routines to help them get through the day. Most of these routines were drug related, if they were being honest, though a few were about fast food instead.

Jules knew their drug regimen wasn't the most healthy habit in the world, but for them, these specific routines were a way to avoid becoming a *real* addict. If they had set times of the day when they let themself get high, they could keep an eye on their intake, keep it in check. So they had an edible and a bump of K in the morning, another edible in the afternoon (at 4:20, of course, lol), and then a joint, a line, and two pills after close to celebrate the end of another day at the Turbo Putt.

The moment the clock on their cellphone switched to 4:20, they snuck across the shed and moved the mini fridge out of the way to get to that

secret shelf where they kept their most prized possessions. Then they unwrapped and ate their afternoon edible before anyone on the course had time to notice they were gone. They walked back to the metal grate window where they served customers their golf balls, sat down in their chair, and waited for the warm tingle of being stoned to spread through them and make it easier to forget who they were.

They put on the album they were obsessed with this month, the one about the girl who has a CD inserted into her skull to make her into a new version of herself. Their edible kicked in. They started to feel excited about recording their Pink Eye TV show tonight for David Sawyer.

“I love this song.”

Jules glanced up from their reverie and discovered that blond girl from high school back at the window. “Really?” Jules said. They were skeptical. They assumed the girl was bullshitting, just trying to make conversation.

“Magdalena Bay rules,” she said. And Jules was like *WTF . . . this bitch listens to Magdalena Bay?*

“Let me do one more game?” the blond girl asked, and this time when Jules handed her back her pink golf ball, the girl let her fingers brush against Jules’s hand for an extra second too long before she took the ball and returned to hole number one.

Jules looked at the girl a little differently after that. There was something subtly edgy about her, actually. A little alt. She dressed femme, but she carried herself with a toughness that Jules related to. Like she felt out of place in Lubbock, too. Maybe this girl from high school really was flirting with them. There was a first time for everything, after all.

The longer Jules stared at the girl that afternoon, the more they started to second-guess themself about where they knew her from. Maybe it was the edible, but Jules started to wonder: Did this girl actually go to their high school? Now they weren’t so sure. But there was definitely something familiar about her, even if Jules couldn’t quite place it.

The blond girl finished hole eighteen for the third time that day, returned her golf club to the main office, smiled one more time at Jules, then left the Turbo Putt and Jules’s life, probably forever.

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Once the sun set and the Texas heat loosened its grip, Jules did their nightly rounds, cleaning up the ice cream wrappers and water bottles left littered on the course, locking the shed for the night, stripping their clothes off, and washing their body in the shower stall behind the batting cages.

After they got back to the shed, they heard some rattling outside, and for a second they thought those football players from the high school were shooting BBs at them again. These varsity fuckers had woken Jules up three separate nights this past summer, because apparently they had nothing better to do than shoot pellets at the Turbo Putt and run away shouting “FAGGOT!” and “FREAK!” as they jumped in their pickup and tore into the night.

Jules had recently bought a pistol from Walmart for the next time those football fucks tried to visit. They kept their gun on the shelf behind the mini fridge with all their other most prized possessions, next to their laptop and their camera and their drugs. One night soon, those kids would be back, and this time Jules was going to catch them before they got away.

Tonight they grabbed their gun at the first sound of stirring, but when they ran outside to investigate, it turned out to just be a raccoon rifling through the trash. No jocks in sight. Jules shooed the squirrel away and went back inside the shed. And then inspiration struck. They had a great idea. The quarterbacks were going to be part of their TV show.

They felt like something had been missing from episode one, and now they knew exactly what it was. A cold open. The first scene of their series. At the beginning of the first episode, the football kids would come to the golf course to cause trouble, and the golf balls would launch a sneak attack. They’d catch the quarterback, pin him down while the other football kids ran for their lives. And then the golf balls would launch themselves one by one right up the quarterback’s asshole, tearing from his rectum up into his guts, then straight through his body to his eye sockets, hollowing him out and then raining down to the course below through the jock’s various holes: eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, golf balls pouring out of him like quarters from a lucky slot machine.

It was going to be awesome. What a badass way to start a TV show. They couldn’t wait to record it. It was exactly the kind of thing David Sawyer would love.

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Jules walked across the highway to McDonald's like they did every Sunday night and got a Big Mac and small fries. Back in the shed they grabbed a Coca-Cola and a Klondike from the mini fridge, smoked their nightly joint under the lumberjack's crotch, then ate their dinner while they watched GlobalVill videos on their laptop. They snorted a little ketamine, took two Adderalls, and reapplied their trademark ghost-white makeup.

They were ready now. Enough putting it off. It was time to make their first-ever Pink Eye TV episode. They dug their laptop and their camera out from the secret shelf behind the mini fridge, then set everything up and tried to get into a creative zone.

They suddenly felt anxious, which happened sometimes before they made a new video. Stage fright. What if their TV show wasn't what David was looking for? What if, after all these years, all these challenges, David Sawyer didn't choose them? What if Jules wasn't one of the special people who got to ascend from internet challenges to alternate realities? What if they were going to be stuck in Lubbock forever?

They took an extra bump of ketamine to cool their nerves. They'd been planning this video all week. They were ready. They sat in their usual spot on the floor, and they pressed record.

"You're watching Pink Eye TV, and this is the first episode of the TV show stuck in my head," they said, just like the instructions on David Sawyer's secret forum had told them to do. And then they launched into their story about the Golf Ball Revolution.

They got lost in it. It felt good, better and more enthralling than any of the drugs they'd taken all day. Once they were done telling it to themself, they sat awhile on the ground, listening to crickets and SUVs out on the service road, thinking more about their fake TV show, *Golf Ball Revolution*. It was really awesome, actually. They got excited on the floor thinking about the plots of future episodes, how the golf balls would take over all of Texas by the end of season one. And then once the afterglow and the ketamine began to wear off, they worked up the courage to press play and watch their episode back to see how it had all turned out. By the end of the cold open, their happy buzz was gone and they realized the truth: Their fake TV show totally sucked.

Evil golf balls. What the fuck were they even thinking? That was some *Toy Story* bullshit. They felt embarrassed, even more so when they imagined David Sawyer himself watching their incoherent, childish story from his top secret lair wherever in the world he was hidden.

They decided not to post it. They had felt so sure when they recorded that video that it was brilliant. But now they decided that they needed to start all over again with a totally different TV show idea. This was their one chance, and they couldn't blow it. Plus their window for success was going to be short. Given their luck these past few months, they knew once they did post their video on GlobalVill.com, it would probably get taken down in a matter of hours.

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Jules passed out. They slept through the night and the morning too, only waking up once they heard banging on the rafters outside the shed.

They checked their phone. *Oh shit*. It was one P.M. They were supposed to have opened up the Turbo Putt a full hour ago. They assumed some pissed redneck was outside ready to yell at them and get them in trouble. But when they opened the shed window, they were surprised to instead find that same blond girl from yesterday, the one they were now pretty sure they didn't actually know from high school.

"Sorry, I overslept," Jules said as they rubbed sleep from their eyes.

"It's cool," the girl said. Jules decided that this girl was pretty chill, actually. Friendly. Just like that, Jules had a crush.

"You're back for another round?" they asked, trying their best to flirt even though they had no idea how to. They fetched the girl her pink golf ball from the bucket.

"Yeah . . . what else is there to do in Lubbock?" the girl said, rolling her eyes at Jules like they were co-conspirators. And suddenly, Jules realized where they knew this girl from. They didn't know her from high school at all. They knew her from the internet. From her old videos on GlobalVill.com back when the girl had been younger and a boy. The girl extended her hand out across the shed window, offering it to Jules.

"Hey," she said. "I'm Bethany Peters."

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2

WHAT THE HELL WAS Bethany doing here?

She played four games of mini golf in a row that second afternoon at the Turbo Putt, spending a little longer at the window after each game making small talk with JulesPublicAccessAfterworld, standing outside that infamous wooden shed she knew so well from Jules's videos.

What the hell was she doing here?

When Bethany made the decision to come to Lubbock, she told herself it was for closure, just to check from a safe distance and make sure Jules Estrada was still alive, still breathing after that night a month earlier when Bethany witnessed their suicide attempt in the GlobalVill queue and called the cops to intervene.

Since then, Bethany had driven herself all over the left half of the country with no real destination in mind. Denver, Oklahoma City, Oakland. She told herself she was shopping for a new town to start fresh in, avoiding Abel's worried texts until she had a clear plan of escape figured out. But none of those cities had felt quite right.

Really, she never gave any of them much of a chance: She stopped in each town for a few days, drained her bank account on a motel room and DoorDash, and spent most of her free time worrying about Jules.

Her plan was to just stop briefly in Lubbock on her way back to Austin. But when Bethany arrived at that address she'd read off her manager's laptop screen a month earlier and saw Jules Estrada there, in the flesh, working behind the counter of a dilapidated mini golf course, she hadn't been able to resist introducing herself. She'd been fantasizing all month about this person. About befriending Jules, helping them find a path out of their dead-end hometown and out of suicidal ideation, too, just like Bethany's own friend Lily had once done for her.

Bethany could tell Jules thought she was flirting with them. And honestly maybe she was. Bethany just felt so relieved to finally meet this person for real whom she'd spent so much time worrying about through a screen.

God. Obviously this wasn't healthy. Bethany had enough self-awareness left to know that. *So what the hell was she doing here?*

If Bethany was being honest, she hadn't been feeling like herself lately at all. Not since GlobalVill. Not since she'd left Austin. Which was to be expected, I guess, when you've blown up your life, stolen your boyfriend's car the night he proposed, and then headed out on an indefinite road trip without a destination.

But it was more than just her circumstances. Bethany felt *wrong*, outside herself most days now. She felt detached from her own brain and unable to think clearly, her mind cobwebbed and distant, nestled under a bed of fuzz like the static in one of David Sawyer's Public Access Afterworld broadcasts.

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After Bethany's fourth game of mini golf that day, Jules asked her the same question Bethany had been asking herself all morning.

"What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?"

"Yeah," Jules said. "In Lubbock." They looked over Bethany's shoulder, past the Turbo Putt out towards the service road where gas stations and drive-thrus stretched towards city limits. "Trans girls who listen to hyperpop don't usually play four games of mini golf in a row at the Turbo Putt. Sorry, is that weird to say?"

"No," Bethany said. "It's fine." She thought for a moment. "I'm visiting my parents." Then she made up a story on the fly about how her mom and dad had retired down here to Lubbock, how her father was recovering from his second heart attack, so Bethany had taken a leave of absence from her job in Austin to help look after him. Her story, like all the best lies, had a few elements of truth to it. Her dad really was two heart attacks deep, but Bethany strategically edited out the part where he was actually hundreds of miles away, back in Harlingen. Instead she told Jules that spending all day at home with her parents had quickly become unbearable. That she needed a

break, and there were no good movies playing at the multiplex, so she'd settled on the Turbo Putt.

She lied surprisingly well. She could tell Jules found her story endearing, excited to meet another person like themself who didn't want to be stuck in this town. Then Bethany changed the subject to what she actually wanted to talk about.

"I hadn't expected to find someone like you down here though," she said. "This can't be a very good place to be a trans girl."

"Oh," Jules said. "I'm not trans. I just wear makeup and goth shit."

They blinked several times, clearly uncomfortable. Bethany worried that she'd pushed too far too fast.

"I thought I might be trans or whatever for a little while back in high school," Jules said. "But it's not so simple for me, you know? It's not like there's one solution for all the fucked-up things wrong with my life."

"Totally," Bethany said. She tried to sound nonchalant. She suspected it would be unproductive to push harder.

"Hey," Jules said, "I was actually wondering. Do you want to get dinner tonight? I totally understand if you're busy with your parents and stuff. But maybe we could keep hanging out. I could take you to my favorite restaurant in town if you wanted, my treat."

"Sure," Bethany said.

"Really?" Jules asked.

"Yeah. I want to keep talking to you."

"Awesome," Jules said. "I want to keep talking to you, too. It's this roast beef place called Arby's, right across the highway. You're going to love it."

"Like *Arby's* Arby's?"

"Yeah," Jules said. "Have you heard of it?"

• • •

Bethany considered sticking around at the Turbo Putt until dinnertime, but she'd been slacking on work since arriving in Lubbock. So she said goodbye for now to Jules and drove herself back to the Starlight Motel. Once there, she returned to her GlobalVill queue on her company laptop.

That’s right: Bethany was no longer fired from GlobalVill.com. She was, in an unlikely turn of events, very much *unfired*. After that night when Jules tried to kill themself, GlobalVill’s HR department had left six messages for Bethany before she’d even escaped Austin city limits. In the voicemails, the human resources lady Shailene begged Bethany to call her back immediately. Bethany avoided the calls. She assumed her former employers were in the process of filing a lawsuit against her for leaking private user data, and she didn’t want to incriminate herself by talking to them directly. But soon HR’s messages had grown explicitly apologetic. They assured her over voicemail that she was not in any trouble, but that they needed to talk to her as soon as possible.

When she finally called them back, the HR lady told her that her manager Douglas didn’t actually have any authority to fire her, so she technically still had her job if she wanted it. Then Shailene apologized for like five minutes straight for the way Bethany had been treated. She told Bethany that by calling the police, she’d actually displayed exactly the kind of tenacity during a crisis that exemplified GlobalVill.com’s core tenets. That user safety was deeply important to everyone at the company. That no less than CEO Anthony “Fisch” Fischer himself wanted to apologize to her personally. And then Shailene asked—nay, begged—Bethany to return to work.

There had been a lawyer on the line, but it wasn’t until Bethany called Kyle later from a McDonald’s parking lot near the Texas-Louisiana border that she understood why GlobalVill’s HR department felt so strongly all of a sudden about her staying on. They were scared she might talk to the press.

“There’s a new long read in the works at *Vulture*,” Kyle said. “Word on the street is they’re basically terrified you’re gonna tattle, tell the whole world how they tried to stop you from saving a suicidal kid’s life. How hilarious is that?”

“Maybe I should just tell them to fuck off,” Bethany said. “Honestly, I felt kind of relieved to be done with that place.”

“You could probably take them for a ride if you wanted,” Kyle said. “Ask for a raise. They’re scared of you now.” He laughed. He sounded bitter. “Douglas is so pissed. He keeps telling people that if he was in charge, you would be fucked. That he’s making it his personal mission *to keep an eye on you*.”

“Oh yeah?” Bethany said. She stared out at the rotten marshland beyond Mickey Dee’s. “Well, lucky him. He’s gonna see all the beauty America has to offer.”

And so Bethany’s former employers became her current employers once again. The next day, they express mailed her company laptop, doubled her pay, and had her sign like ten NDAs to make sure she wouldn’t talk to the press, now or ever. And then she was back to work, albeit remotely.

Surprisingly, the job now felt like something of a balm to her. Bethany’s life on the road had been utter precarity for a month now, an unending psychic free fall. But those videos in her queue, they always stayed the same. Hentai and torture porn, edgelords and stay-at-home skinheads, all the beheading videos you could ever hope to see. The extremities of her queue were predictable. They’d become a way to take her mind off the more oblique horror she’d made of her own life.

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After she left the Turbo Putt, Bethany spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on top of her motel covers, curtains drawn, clicking red and green through her queue (never yellow—she didn’t want a reason to have to interact with Douglas). As she worked, she tried not to think about that question Jules had asked back at the Turbo Putt that she still couldn’t answer herself. What the hell was she doing here in Lubbock?

She knew it was irresponsible to play savior to this West Texas stranger. That instead she should be heading back to Austin to pick up the pieces of her own life. But something had felt so right about talking to Jules these past two days. In some abstract way, it had felt like coming home. Like maybe if Bethany could help this person out of their rut, she could escape her own as well.

By five P.M., Bethany felt burnt out on her queue, so she decided to try to take a nap before dinner. Her insomnia had grown worse during her month on the road. Most nights now she could only sleep two to three hours straight. So she’d gotten in the habit of stealing extra shut-eye during the daytime. Today, though, after trying and failing to drift off for about fifteen minutes, Bethany gave up on unconsciousness and did what she always did

these days whenever she was feeling restless and lonely on the road: She called Kyle.

He picked up after the second ring. He too sounded groggy.

“Did I wake you?”

“No,” Kyle said, then reconsidered the lie. “Actually, yeah. I’m home after a night shift. A really, really long night shift.”

“What’d you see?” Bethany asked. She stretched out on the motel mattress.

“There was this video game stream someone uploaded,” Kyle said. “A bunch of players ganged up on this one girl and raped her in the video game. Their avatars were just bumping up and glitching against this girl’s little princess avatar, and you could hear them laughing and shouting over the audio feed. ‘We’re fucking you! This is a gang bang! We’re raping you right now!’”

“Christ,” Bethany said.

“And this girl in the game, she must have been eleven, twelve years old, max. And she was just screaming the whole time. ‘Stop it! Stop it! You’re raping me!’ It was just a video game. Just a character on the screen, but she sounded so terrified. Like it was really happening to her. And that’s not even the worst part.” Kyle was speaking faster now. “The worst part was I had to green-button it. It wasn’t actually against any site rules. It was just a video game, so it wasn’t really rape. It’s still on the site. A million views and counting. The comments are all ‘this is hilarious!’ and ‘yeah, rape that bitch.’ It makes me want to die.”

“Don’t die,” Bethany said.

“Yeah, okay,” Kyle said. “I guess I just used to think I could watch anything, you know? That I could do this job forever. And now I’m feeling . . . I just don’t feel like myself anymore. I don’t know who I am most nights.”

“Let’s start a club,” Bethany said. She was getting sleepy.

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “We’ll start a club.”

Bethany closed her eyes. “I think I’m gonna try to nap.”

“Call me later if you want,” Kyle told her. “I’ll be in the GlobalVill diner, sipping iced coffee, watching virtual rape and losing my mind.”

Bethany rolled over on her side. The phone receiver now balanced between her ear and the pillow, no hands necessary.

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night, Bethany.”

Kyle hung up. Bethany lay in bed listening to the dial tone hum. Eventually she drifted off.

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When Bethany did manage to fall asleep these days, she usually dreamt about static. Plain gray static, like from an old television.

At first, the static had been merely a supporting player in her nightmares, an avant-garde interlude between reruns of various horrors from her GlobalVill queue. But over her last few weeks on the road, the static had gradually swallowed up the rest of Bethany’s dream realm. Now the blare of fuzz and white noise was basically all that was left in her head. She could almost hear it speaking to her through her dreams, like a distant signal through an old receiver.

Don’t think, it commanded. *Just give in and let us take control.*

Bethany was still there in her dreams too, but just barely. These days she was a distant voyeur to her own subconscious, eavesdropping through a window outside as the static hummed against the walls of her frontal lobe, stretching like a hand through latex.

It felt warm. A blanket. A loss of control. Sort of like how Jules Estrada must have felt after they chugged that Disney princess Dixie cup, before the cops showed up to save their life.

Bethany woke up around dusk. Her whole body was tingling, just like always.

She showered, turning the motel water up as hot as it could go in hopes it might burn some of the static’s fuzzy numbness off her skin. Then she got dressed and drove across town to meet Jules Estrada for dinner at Arby’s.

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3

THEY WERE CLEARLY HIGH.

Bethany sat and watched Jules eat, watched them wipe excess Cheez Whiz off their chin, then lick the remains from their fingers. Jules was both fidgety and vacant tonight, the way addicts tend to get after a fix that only partially sates their appetite. The Arby's was overlit in that sad, specific way fast-food spots off the highway can get after dark. Traffic lights blinked through the window, oscillating red, yellow, and green, the colors of Bethany's admin panel.

She tried to think of a question to ask Jules. What would Bethany herself have needed to hear back in Harlingen? What could somebody have said to crack her from her shell, to tear her from that cycle of dissociation and self-harm that defined her life back before transition?

She already knew that Jules wasn't ready to talk about trans stuff, that they would just get defensive the moment Bethany brought up gender. So maybe it was best to keep the conversation focused on what they could both agree on—how much Lubbock sucked. Yeah. That seemed like a plan. Step one: Help Jules Estrada escape their hometown.

Jules licked the last remnants of processed cheese from their fingertips. They looked Bethany in the eye. And before Bethany could ask her perfect first question, Jules spoke.

"I need your help."

"What?" Bethany asked. "You need my help?"

"Yeah. With my new video." Jules crumpled up their paper sandwich wrapper and let it roll on the table. "Okay," they said. "This is going to sound weird, but *I actually know who you are*."

Bethany felt a sudden rush of terror. Did Jules somehow know what she was actually doing here in Lubbock?

“Back in high school,” they said, “I watched your GlobalVill videos. You still looked like a boy then, but I recognized you anyway. They were really good. Your videos, I mean.”

“Oh,” Bethany said. “That’s . . . wow.” She tried to hide her nerves by taking a sip of fountain soda. “That’s so embarrassing.”

“Naw,” Jules said. “It’s not embarrassing. Your videos were cool. Fucked-up and hardcore and so depressing. I make videos too, but mine aren’t anywhere near as popular as yours.”

“Can I tell you the truth?” Bethany said. She sensed an opening to steer their conversation somewhere productive.

“For sure.”

“I have really complicated feelings about all the videos I made back then,” Bethany said. “In hindsight, I think they were coping mechanisms. I was living in a town that made me ashamed of who I really was, and I was doing fucked-up stuff online because the internet was a safe place to blow off steam. I think it was all a way to distract myself from the changes I needed to make in my real life.”

“Oh,” Jules said. “That sucks you went through that. I’m really sorry.”

“Thanks,” Bethany said. She tried to make eye contact, but Jules was too high to meet her gaze.

“Anyways,” they said. “Since your videos were so popular, I thought you might know some tricks to help me improve mine.”

“Oh. I’m not sure—”

“Come on,” Jules said. They stood up to leave. “I’ll roll us a joint and show you.”

Bethany tried to protest, but Jules was already walking towards the exit. So Bethany grabbed Jules’s wrapper off the table and tossed it in the trash as she followed them towards the Arby’s exit.

• • •

Back at the Turbo Putt, Jules dug their laptop and weed stash out from the secret shelf behind the mini fridge. Bethany spied over Jules’s shoulder, catching a fleeting glimpse of their drug arsenal, as well as their small black handgun from Walmart.

Then Jules moved the mini fridge back into place and sat down next to Bethany. They started rolling their joint.

“I can’t believe I get to show a genuine internet star my videos,” they said. They licked their rolling papers closed and offered the joint to Bethany.

“You can have the first hit since you’re the guest.”

“Oh,” Bethany said. “Thanks.” She took the joint from Jules and put it in between her lips. Jules took out their lighter, trying to be chivalrous.

“Here,” they said. “I got you.” They lit the joint for Bethany and watched her take a short, polite toke. Bethany coughed a little, then passed the joint back to Jules.

“Okay, you have to be honest with me,” Jules said as they opened up their laptop. “You have to tell me what you really think of this video, because I’m worried it’s lame and I really need your help improving things.”

They toggled to a saved file on their laptop screen as they smoked their joint down to the nub in a series of quick, eager drags. They pressed play, and then the two sat in silence as Bethany watched a new video by JulesPublicAccessAfterworld, this one still unreleased.

“You’re watching Pink Eye TV, and this is the first episode of the TV show stuck in my head,” the Jules on screen said. They were sitting in the exact spot Bethany was in right now.

And then for the next ten minutes, they narrated a story for the camera. As best as Bethany could tell, Jules’s “episode” was about an evil golf ball who leads a violent revolt against the patrons of a mini golf course, much like the one where Jules actually worked. But it was hard to glean the details through Jules’s stream-of-consciousness style of storytelling. If they were high right now (and they definitely were), the Jules in the video was at least three times more fucked up. They weren’t speaking in sentences, not really. Instead, they narrated their fake TV show mostly through sound effects and exclamations. Perhaps there were coherent scenes of their imaginary TV show playing out inside their brain, but all that managed to escape their drug-addled lips in reality were fragments like “Bam!” and “He’s fucking dead!” and “Now the golf balls became his testicles!”

Bethany didn’t say anything. She tried to keep any trace of judgment off her face as she watched the video because she knew it wouldn’t be helpful. And then, once the video was over, Jules looked at her like it was report card day.

“Did you like it?” they asked. “This video is so important, and I’m worried it sucks.” They closed their laptop screen. “Do you think it sucks? You think it sucks, right?”

“No . . .” Bethany said. “It doesn’t suck . . . you’re a really good storyteller.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Bethany lied. “It was great.”

“Did you get that the golf balls popped out of the quarterback’s eyes and replaced his eyes with golf balls?”

“Yeah,” Bethany said. “I did get that.”

“Okay, good,” Jules said as they straightened out on the floor. They were excited and proud. They got to work rolling a fresh joint.

“So do you have any tips on how I can make it better?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I, um . . .”

Jules licked their joint closed. “You can take the first hit again,” they said.

Bethany waved it away. “No. I’m okay.” Jules nodded.

“Come on,” they encouraged, as they lit the joint for themself. “Don’t be shy. I need your notes.”

“I guess . . .” Bethany said. “I don’t know if I’m familiar enough with your goals to give you a real opinion. What are you trying to express in this video?”

“Oh,” Jules told her. “It’s Pink Eye TV.”

“Pink Eye TV . . .” Bethany said. “Yeah, I don’t know what that is.”

“That makes sense,” Jules said. “Because it’s top secret.”

Jules looked around the shed. It seemed as though they were afraid someone might be listening in. Then they leaned in close to Bethany and spoke in a near whisper. “Have you ever heard of Public Access Afterworld?”

Bethany ruffled up her forehead and played dumb. “I think so . . .” she said. “Isn’t that a cult? Like David Sawyer and all that?”

“*It’s not a cult,*” Jules snapped back. “It’s an online community that investigates real supernatural events. I’ve been a participant for over two years now, and I’m almost all the way to the highest level of access.”

“Whoa,” Bethany said.

“You can’t tell anyone about this stuff,” Jules said. “It’s so secret that no one on the internet even knows it exists.”

“Okay,” Bethany said. “I won’t.”

“Anyways, this video is like the final exam. It determines whether you’re one of the ‘crooked’ ones. The people David Sawyer helps leave this dimension behind to travel to Public Access Afterworld. You’re supposed to narrate a special TV show that’s stuck inside your head, and I need to make mine as good as possible so I get picked. I’ve worked really, really hard to get to this point.”

“Okay,” Bethany said. “I think I understand. It’s like a test?”

“Yeah. The very last one. I thought the one before this was the last, but it turns out there was one more they don’t tell you about until after you post your fake suicide video.”

Bethany felt the static in her head flare back up. “Fake suicide video?” she asked.

“Yeah, isn’t that crazy? That was supposed to be the final test: swallow a bunch of Tic Tacs and pretend they’re pills and that you’re killing yourself. That’s what the post said—to be really convincing that you’re actually killing yourself, so much so that you start to believe it yourself. That’s kind of the whole point of the Public Access Afterworld game, to get over the illusion that you’re stuck inside your own body.”

“So you . . .” Bethany repeated. “You faked a suicide?”

“Yeah, ha. Fucked up, right?” Jules dropped their joint into a plastic cup they were using as an ashtray. “And I guess I did a really good job, ’cause I almost got arrested for it. I’m pretty sure it was these kids from the local high school who’ve been fucking with me, shooting BBs at my shed, reporting my videos and getting them taken down from the internet. I guess they called the cops on me, and no joke, those pigs showed up here at like midnight that same night I posted my video, and interrogated me until I

showed them the fucking Tic Tacs I used to fake it all. I almost lost my job. I would've been fucked if they searched this place and found my drug stash."

"Oh my god," Bethany said.

"Yeah," Jules told her. "So what do you think? I'm worried my Pink Eye TV show sucks and I need to start over with a new idea. Do you have any suggestions on how I can make it better?"

Bethany stared at Jules. "Can I be honest with you?" she asked.

"Of course," Jules said. "That's what I need you to do."

"All this stuff you're talking about . . . I know we just met, but as your friend, I have to say that honestly it sounds really intense. Maybe even unsafe. Isn't David Sawyer a murderer?"

Jules laughed. "That's just rumors. That's just what the mainstream media wants you to think, because they're in on the conspiracy too."

"Yeah, but . . . alternate universes and other dimensions. You don't actually believe that stuff, do you?"

Jules picked up their lighter. They flicked it on and off a few times.

"Yeah, I do," they said. "And you would too if you'd seen some of the evidence I have."

"No, that makes sense," Bethany said. "I just think . . . there are healthier ways to deal with your problems, right? Being stuck in a place like this, working a shitty job at a mini golf course. It's kind of like what I was talking about with my own—"

"You know what you're doing right now?" Jules interrupted. "Mansplaining," they said, then they laughed and reached for their rolling papers to roll yet another joint. "You don't know anything about Public Access Afterworld, so who are you to tell me if it's real or not?"

"You're right," Bethany said. "I'm sorry." She'd pushed too hard, too quickly. She'd been thrown by Jules's fake suicide bombshell, and she'd gotten sloppy.

"Anyways," Jules said. They packed their third joint of the evening. "This is all extra rich coming from you. Because you might think the stuff I believe in is dumb and fake, but you're sitting right there across from me and acting like you're actually a girl."

They laughed. Their hands were shaking. Some of the weed fell from their papers onto the shed floor.

“I’m sorry,” Bethany said. “I didn’t mean to offend you. Really.”

Jules licked the joint closed and grabbed for their lighter. This time, they didn’t offer Bethany the first hit.

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4

THE TWO OF THEM sat in silence after that, until eventually Jules calmed down and asked Bethany if she wanted to see more of their videos. “You can’t watch them online anymore thanks to those fuckers at GlobalVill,” they said. Bethany made an excuse about it being late at night. She left the Turbo Putt, still feeling a little stoned.

As Bethany hustled out of the shed towards her car, she could tell that Jules already felt bad, that they were kicking themself about the mean thing they’d said earlier. They knew Bethany was hurt, and they clearly feared they’d blown their chance to make a friend.

Really, though, Bethany was upset about something else entirely. *It had been all pretend.* Jules’s suicide attempt had been a fake, just like Douglas, of all people, had insisted back in Austin. That meant Bethany’s actions since that final night at GlobalVill had been based on a false assumption. Or worse, even: By calling the cops on Jules, Bethany had inadvertently almost ruined this stranger’s life.

She’d been driving from city to city for a month now, fixated on some random kid, telling herself that despite everything, she had helped them. That Jules had been in real, urgent danger that night, and that Bethany had been the only one who had noticed. That if it hadn’t been for her, Jules wouldn’t have survived. Now Bethany knew all of it wasn’t true. Which meant there was no good reason for her to even be here in Lubbock.

Bethany weaved Abel’s Subaru around the circular bends of an overpass back towards the Starlight Motel. She felt humiliated and frustrated, like the butt of a cosmic joke.

Bzzzzz. There was the static again. Her head flared with it. She felt tingly and numb. And then, for some reason, she felt angry at Jules Estrada. She knew she wasn’t thinking straight, but somehow it felt as though Jules had betrayed her.

“No,” Bethany said out loud as she pulled her car into the motel parking lot. Jules was in trouble. They had been in real, actual trouble that night back at GlobalVill when they chugged a cup of Tic Tacs, and they were still in trouble right now. What Bethany had done that night, what she was still trying to do to help this stranger, it mattered. It had to. The static buzzed through her brain. She felt half awake, cloudy with righteous indignation.

Then Bethany saw herself from the outside: a trans girl sitting alone in a parking lot in a car she’d basically stolen. No one in the world knew where she was. If someone murdered her tonight and dragged her body out behind the motel, it would probably be weeks before anyone cared enough to go looking for her. She was utterly alone in the world.

Then she thought about the mall. When Bethany was young, she loved to play with a particular machine in the food court. If you fed this machine a quarter, it lit up and rolled your coin on its side through a series of chutes and ladders, intersecting tubes, and flashing lights. Then eventually your coin dropped into a shallow pool of blue liquid at the bottom of the tank. The machine’s lights would shut back off, and your quarter would rest with all the other quarters at the bottom of that machine forever, or until whichever company was turning an easy profit on the parents of Harlingen came by to empty out the spare change. Tonight in that motel parking lot, Bethany pictured herself as one of those quarters at the bottom of the machine. She’d been a regular person once. A kid in the mall with her parents. But now she’d traveled all the way down the tubes of the machine until she was just a coin stuck at the bottom, in a pool of dishwasher fluid–colored chlorine.

The static flared in her brain, and now Bethany wondered if someone else somewhere had been watching her free-fall this past month like she herself used to watch those quarters in the mall food court. At least then her descent might have served a purpose. Become someone’s entertainment, even if fleeting.

She missed Jules. Before the night’s bad ending, it had been the first time in weeks she’d felt any sort of clear purpose in this world, like her life was anything other than over.

• • •

Back inside her room, Bethany tried to figure out how to get rid of the static humming in her brain. If she went to bed this flush with it, she knew her dreams would be bad.

She decided to take Kyle up on his offer for a late-night chat. She dialed his cellphone. It went straight to voicemail. She thought about leaving a message, but decided against it. Their friendship had grown intimate over the last month, but it wasn't yet at the "I'm in crisis and need to talk right now" phase. So she hung up and scrolled the internet. She pulled up her voicemail messages, which were basically all from Abel. It had been a month, and she still had his car out on indefinite loan. Bethany had texted him early in her road trip to let him know she'd return it when she was ready, and since then he'd been leaving her passive-aggressive messages each night, his tone stuck in an awkward middle zone between "aggravated loan shark" and "codependent ex who just wants you back."

She played the messages now to try to get her mind off Jules.

"Heyyyy, Beth, thinking of you this morning. Hope you're doing okay, and just wanted to check in to see if you had a sense of when you'd be back —"

"Hi, Bethany. It's Abel, loving you and thinking of you this morning on my drive to work. I've been using a rental, but—"

"Heyyyyyy—Abel again. Just voice memo-ing to say I love you and miss you and understand that you need time and space. But it'd be really great to get a sense of when—"

She listened to five seconds of each message, then deleted them.

Bethany stretched out on the bed. The mattress below felt like rib meat. She knew it would be bad to fall asleep in a state like this, so in her desperation, she did something she hardly ever did anymore these days. She called her mother.

Bethany loved her mom. She really did. But talking to her wasn't easy. Unlike her father, who was just a classic homophobe, her mom had tried her best to understand what Bethany was going through when she came out. Sure, her mom's best hadn't been anything spectacular. Their conversations had been short and strained for years now. But at least the woman had tried.

After three rings, Bethany's call went to voicemail. She tried to sound normal in her message, to hide the panicked loneliness from her voice.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Bethany. Just calling to say hi because it’s been a minute and I miss you. Love you.”

She hung up and immediately regretted not being more truthful on the call. Why hadn’t she asked her mom for help? Ego, mostly. She wanted to believe that her mother would be able to decipher the desperation in her voice despite her own best efforts to hide it.

Now with no one else to call, Bethany lay on top of the motel covers. She thought about her childhood bedroom. She hadn’t been in Harlingen for years, not since Thanksgiving 2019 when she put herself through the psychic gauntlet of introducing her mom and dad to Abel and then sitting them all down in the living room to tell them point-blank she was planning to live as a girl from now on.

She had no idea if her childhood bedroom still existed. She’d avoided another trip down to Harlingen for long enough now that she couldn’t reasonably hold it against her parents if they’d decided to convert her old room into an office. But in her fantasies, it was still there waiting for her, untouched by time’s pesky habit of making everything that once made you feel safe disappear.

She tossed her phone on the bed and turned on the motel TV. She flipped channels, hoping that something on the screen might dull the hiss in her brain so she could finally get a peaceful night’s sleep. She lingered on HBO and watched a rerun of the newest episode of *The Wolves of Birmingham*, that prestige show about werewolves that Abel was always trying to get her to watch with him. In this episode, Tullycraft, heir-in-waiting to Clan Lycra, defied his father’s order to abandon Aries, the last living human in postapocalyptic “Second America.”

“A filthy Homo sapiens is not worth all-out war with vampires!” the king shouted at his insolent son from atop the throne. Tullycraft stormed out of the throne room, breaking from his father’s rule. By two scenes later, he’d revoked his birthright, setting out via horseback to save Aries from the clutches of Clan Lestat, the vampires who ruled over Mississippi.

Bethany had missed a few episodes, so she couldn’t follow the plot. She imagined Abel hundreds of miles away, up late tonight watching the same episode, worrying about her. She considered finally calling, admitting defeat, and telling him she was ready to come home. But she fought the

urge. She knew this too was a trap, one that would just extend her identity crisis rather than solve it.

Her head felt like peppermint. She closed her eyes and thought about Jules Estrada on the floor of the Turbo Putt recording their fake TV show about murderous golf balls. *Pink Eye TV.* She imagined all the other kids like Jules out there excited to reach the final secret level of David Sawyer's Public Access Afterworld recruitment game. Narrating fake TV episodes to the camera, hoping that it might finally take them somewhere far away, to a world where they might actually feel alive.

What kind of story would Bethany tell? What show would she narrate on Pink Eye TV? Would it be violent and rambling, like Jules's fake show, or lulling and addictive, a binge-worthy *Game of Thrones* rip-off like the ones Abel loved so much? She drifted off to sleep before she could answer her own question.

• • •

In her dreams, she was a teenager again. Young, half-transitioned. Not quite Noah, but not Bethany either.

In the dream, she was being dragged from her childhood bedroom by a group of men. She kicked and screamed, cried in that vigorous, wailing way she used to cry back in childhood, before puberty robbed her of the ability to produce tears.

"It's okay," her mother said as the men carried her out of the house. "They just want to help you remember your name."

And then Bethany was in a phone booth at GlobalVill's Austin campus, but it was also somehow her room back at the hospital after lights-out. The set of her brand new Pink Eye TV show.

There were people outside her cell watching her, floating up and down the halls. The same people who had just ripped her out of bed and brought her here. She could see them through the bars on her window. They were shaped like men, but they weren't men at all. They didn't have faces or bodies or flesh. They were made of static.

• • •

Bethany woke up vibrating in her motel bed.

The Wolves of Birmingham had ended, and now she could hear a Jason Statham action movie on the flat-screen across the room. She sat up and opened her eyes, and for a second, she thought she must still be dreaming. That this had to be a false awakening. Because what she saw in front of her was impossible.

She was no longer alone in the room. One of the static men from her dream was here with her now, standing at the edge of her bed, staring right at her.

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5

I'M DREAMING, Bethany told herself. *I'm still asleep.*

She was too afraid to move, too scared to pinch her arm and wake herself up. So she just lay still, frozen, trying to will herself out of this moment she was sure must be a nightmare, a false awakening.

A moment ago, she'd been in some dream realm cross section of the GlobalVill campus and her memory of that hospital she'd been confined in as a teenager, squarely in the domain of the unconscious. But here she was now, awake and staring at a life-sized static man at the edge of her bed.

It made no sign of movement or emotion. It had no eyes or mouth. And yet Bethany sensed it was staring right at her, just as aware of her presence in her motel bed as she was of it. She worried that, like an animal, it might attack if she moved even an inch.

Wake up, Bethany told herself. *Wake up. Wake up.* She squeezed her eyes closed, clenching her mind like a fist. But when she opened her eyes again, she was still right there, still face-to-face with the glowing man made of static floating at the edge of her bed.

This wasn't a dream. She was awake, fully lucid. She knew her name, the date. She could recite the alphabet frontwards and backwards. There was no waking up from this.

The static man began to float closer to her, and its body passed like a ghost through the far end of the mattress. Bethany ripped her legs out from under the blanket. Whatever this thing was, she didn't want it touching her. She grabbed her cellphone and her tote bag haphazardly off the nightstand and jumped out of bed. She was getting the fuck out of here.

She ran for the motel door, not looking back to see if the static was following after her. Then she was dashing through the parking lot and

turning her key in the ignition of Abel's Subaru, peeling out of there at forty miles an hour.

Once she was on the road, she had time to consider what the hell was happening. She wondered once more whether she might still be dreaming. She shook her head, screamed, and pinched herself. But it didn't work. She was definitely awake. So what the hell was going on? It was like the static fuzz that had been stuck in her brain recently had suddenly found a way out of her head into the real world.

It was a hallucination. It had to be. Which meant that Bethany was crazy. Not just a self-destructive trans girl on a monthlong bender. She was literally, *clinically* crazy, the kind of crazy that speeds away in the middle of the night from monsters floating at the foot of her bed.

The roads were empty. Bethany maneuvered onto an overpass, her tires screeching. Abel's Subaru whipped like a go-kart around the curves. She was going at least thirty over the speed limit, but she didn't care. She needed to get far away from the Starlight Motel as quickly as possible.

Then she glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that the man made of static was sitting right in her backseat. Bethany screamed. Her tires skidded and she lost control of the vehicle. Abel's Subaru careened over the overpass's slim shoulder, slamming hard directly into a brick wall.

• • •

Pain. Sharp and quick, a six-pronged needle jabbing into her neck and shoulders. The airbag deployed, and Bethany choked as it swallowed her up. Her vision switched slides like a malfunctioning projector, becoming color and shade.

Abel's car was wrecked, flattened against the railing. Smoke poured out from the hood in dark and generous plumes. Was her car about to blow, like cars always tended to do after they crashed in Jason Statham action movies? Bethany's head throbbed. She glanced again in the rearview mirror and saw the static man still sitting there, watching her calmly from the backseat. She wasn't sure if she had the strength to move, but she decided she didn't have a choice.

She winced in pain as she reached for the car door. Her arm felt broken, weak like raw pizza dough, but she managed to open the door and roll

herself out of the smoking vehicle. She landed on the overpass, then looked back at the car. The static man sat unmoving in the back, its head now tilted down to watch her.

Bethany picked herself up and ran limping away from the wreck. She didn't need Abel's Subaru. The static man in the backseat could have it. All she wanted was to get out of this situation alive. To get to morning, to a safe, sunlit zone where men made of static couldn't follow her.

She was a half mile up the road, hurrying down the interstate on foot, when she finally saw another vehicle. A truck approaching from the opposite direction. The driver slowed to stop at the sight of Bethany limping like unfinished roadkill down the middle of the highway. He rolled his window down and stared out at her.

"Is . . . is that your car back there?" he asked, eyeing the wreckage of Abel's Subaru behind her.

Bethany didn't bother looking back.

"No," she said. And technically she wasn't even lying. She continued limping on the highway, headed downtown.

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6

SHE WENT BACK TO the Turbo Putt. She didn't know where else to go.

She'd wandered the same ten blocks of downtown Lubbock for most of the morning, feeling unusually glad to be a trans woman in a sea of businessmen. Sure, she stood out like a raw onion in a bag of trail mix, but she was just relieved to be surrounded by people—real people—to see the sun in the sky, to bask in the return to normalcy its rising implied.

But by nine A.M., the sun too had become her enemy. Bethany hadn't had time to grab shoes in her frenzied retreat from the Starlight Motel, so now she was walking the streets of downtown Lubbock barefoot. The higher the sun got in the sky, the more it baked the pavement, until it felt like she was out for an aimless morning stroll across hot coals. Bethany was banged up pretty bad from the car accident, and between her injuries, her transness, and her lack of shoes, she knew she looked utterly deranged to everyone she passed. She started to worry about cops, about having to explain who she was and why she didn't have shoes on to an unsympathetic police officer. Perhaps she was a pessimist, but she suspected Lubbock's finest wouldn't believe her when she told them about the man made of static in her motel room.

She had nowhere to go. She didn't dare return to the Starlight. What if that *thing* was still there waiting for her? So she called an Uber and delivered herself to the only place in hundreds of miles where she felt even remotely safe: Lubbock's premier miniature golf course and family fun center.

• • •

Twenty minutes later, Bethany staggered across the Turbo Putt's imitation Astroturf. She ignored the stares of the few players out on the

course this sunny Tuesday afternoon. She headed for the main office, then nodded at Jules Estrada through the open metal grate.

“I had a rough night,” she said. She leaned her bruised body down against the countertop.

Jules blinked a bunch of times and looked Bethany up and down. “Do you . . . um . . . do you want to play mini golf?”

“Actually I was hoping I could just crash in there with you for a while,” Bethany said.

“Oh.” Jules looked around and thought for a second. “Yeah. Totally.” They opened the door to the shed around the back. Bethany staggered in, then collapsed onto the twin mattress in the corner.

“Do you want a Klondike?” Jules asked.

• • •

Over the next several hours, Bethany discovered that Jules Estrada was a surprisingly gracious host. They gave Bethany lots of space, letting her drift in and out of sleep on the mattress while they went about their usual Tuesday routine, but checking in every so often to offer Bethany more complimentary treats from the Turbo Putt snack bar. They played hyperpop music on their laptop for a little while, but without Bethany even needing to say anything, they sensed it was giving her a headache and put on headphones. They served customers when customers came to the metal grate window, but tried to do so quietly, tiptoeing through the shack as lightly as possible so as not to disturb their houseguest.

For Bethany that afternoon, sleep never lasted too long. Every time she drifted off, it seemed a moment later another golf ball would come crashing down from that pipe in the ceiling and land with a thud in the big bucket on the ground. Bethany remembered the sound from Jules’s videos, and it was no less jarring in person. She tensed back to consciousness each time she heard it. Which was actually a good thing. She worried if she slept too hard, the static in her brain might conjure itself back to reality.

“Hey,” Jules said around sunset. “I wanted to mention. I’m sorry about what I said to you last night.” Bethany sat up in bed. She winced at the pain in her shoulder. “Sometimes I get kind of mean when I feel unsafe. A lot of

people have done fucked-up stuff to me ever since I was a little kid. I think I've got PTSD or whatever."

"It's okay," Bethany said. She tried to move her shoulder in small circles without it hurting.

"Anyways," Jules told her, "it's cool if you don't believe in Public Access Afterworld. It's definitely real, but I understand that not everyone is going to believe me about that."

Bethany nodded.

"I'm happy you're here," Jules said. "You can stay as long as you want."

• • •

Around seven P.M., Bethany felt well enough to get up and walk around the shed. She hoped it might distract her from the static she could feel forming again in her brain. Jules was clipping pictures from an old issue of *Alternative Press* into a pile by the window.

"I've been cutting out the pictures I like the last couple weeks," they said. "I keep telling myself I'm gonna hang them up on the walls someday so this place isn't so depressing."

"Why not now?" Bethany said. Then, without asking permission, she began scooping up the pictures Jules had clipped one by one and scotch-taping them across the shed's inner walls. The paper was thin and flimsy, delicate like origami. Bethany focused on the simple task. It seemed to calm the static in her brain.

"That looks great," Jules said.

Soon Bethany got into a groove. She made sure each photograph Jules clipped of forgotten nu-metal bands got hung straight and even on the wall. Jules occasionally offered Bethany some terse instructions. "That one higher," or "More space between those two." But mostly they left Bethany to her work.

"I'm gonna get Taco Bell for dinner. Do you want some?" Jules asked as they locked up the big metal grate for the night.

"Yeah," Bethany said. "I'm starving." She got out her wallet and offered Jules some crumpled bills, but Jules waved it away.

“My treat,” they said. Then they put on their ghost makeup and grabbed their wallet from that secret shelf behind the mini fridge. Before they left to walk across the highway, they paused at the door and studied Bethany as she hung one more picture on the wall.

“Was it your parents that hurt you?” they asked. Bethany turned around. “You don’t have to say, but I get it. My mom got pretty violent sometimes, too.”

Bethany stayed silent.

“Fuck all parents forever,” Jules said. Then they left to get tacos.

• • •

At first, Bethany felt fine being alone. She went on clipping photographs, trying not to think about anything but the work in front of her. But just a few minutes after Jules left, Bethany realized that the fear was returning to her, and that the static buzzing in her brain was growing louder and stronger.

Soon she was terrified that she might be on the verge of another hallucinatory episode, if not a full schizophrenic break. Bethany sat down on the mattress. She tried to distract herself back to sanity. She scrolled on her phone and discovered that while she’d been busy all day at the Turbo Putt, she’d received a bunch of new voicemails and text messages from Abel. It seemed that the Lubbock Police Department had called him about his wrecked and abandoned Subaru.

“I’m fine,” Bethany texted. “Sorry about the car.” Then she put his alerts on mute.

Bethany had also received a voicemail from her older sister Tracy, which was strange because she hadn’t talked to Tracy in at least a year. “Hey, Beth,” Tracy said. “Mom told me you called in the middle of the night, and I just wanted to check in to make sure everything was okay. Give me a call back when you get this so we can talk.”

Her sister’s voice made Bethany’s headache flare. The two had been close a long time ago, back when Tracy had been the rebellious older sister Bethany secretly wished she could be. But adulthood had smoothed down Tracy’s edges. She’d stayed close to the border. She’d married a cop.

Bethany deleted her sister's voicemail, then tapped her finger against the phone screen just to feel the sensation of touch. The static continued to flood her brain. She needed to keep herself busy, to stay grounded in reality.

She tried calling Kyle again, but just like last night, his phone went straight to voicemail. His mailbox was full now, so she sent him a text.

"You alive?" she wrote. She meant it as a joke, but after a few seconds she started to wonder if the question wasn't a fair one. They'd been talking every day since Bethany left Austin, sometimes two or three times. So where was he all of a sudden? The last time they'd spoken, Kyle had sounded so rattled by the videos in his queue. Perhaps he'd finally had enough, had suffered his own mental break while Bethany was out here in Lubbock seeing static men in motel rooms. Or perhaps Douglas and the other higher-ups at GlobalVill had finally done just as Kyle always feared and ground him into wasabi pea dust. Bethany tried calling him one more time, and once again his phone went straight to voicemail. Now she had nothing to do except sit on the cot in Jules's shed and worry about the fuzz in her brain. She considered stealing some of the drugs Jules had stashed away on their shelf behind the mini fridge, but she feared drugs would only spiral her closer to psychosis. Then she remembered the little handgun back there. She walked across the shed, moved the mini fridge out of the way, and picked it up slowly. She'd never understood the appeal of firearms before tonight, had always grouped them in with all of the other Freudian cries for help her dad and the other men of Harlingen considered hobbies. But now, alone here in the dark, she felt comforted by the weapon. It soothed her to hold it, even though she was pretty sure it wouldn't do much good in a struggle against a man made of static.

She returned to the twin mattress on the floor. She clutched her fist tight around the gun and sat huddled against the corner wall of the shed, where no one could possibly sneak up behind her. She waited for Jules to return with dinner.

• • •

Later, after the two of them ate together on the mattress, Jules asked Bethany if she wanted to spend the night.

“I’ve only got this one bed, but you could share it if you wanted.” Jules looked at Bethany, then quickly looked away. “Don’t worry,” they said. “We don’t have to, like, *do anything*. It can just be a sleepover.” They looked down at the ground, totally embarrassed.

Bethany put a hand on their shoulder and nodded. Then, without a word, she lay on the bed, flat on her back. She stared up at the ceiling and kept her eyes open. She felt so tired. She didn’t want to fall asleep, but she knew she’d have to eventually. And probably safer to do it here with someone else nearby than alone back at the Starlight Motel.

“This is going to sound crazy,” she told Jules as she let her eyes close. “But I’m kind of worried when I fall asleep . . . something might happen.”

“Oh. No,” Jules said. “I would never do something like that. I promise. I’m not that kind of person.”

“No,” Bethany said. She could already feel sleep overtaking her. “What I mean is, if you see any static people crawl out of my head in the middle of the night, you need to wake me up immediately.”

“Static people?”

Bethany let herself drift off. It felt so easy.

“Have you been seeing static people?” Jules asked.

“Static people aren’t real,” Bethany said, already half asleep.

“That’s a symptom,” Jules said. They sounded excited. They lay down on the mattress next to Bethany. “Have you been having nightmares?” they asked. “Has your body been feeling numb? Have you seen the *video store*?”

Bethany was drifiting away. “I don’t have Screen Sickness, JulesPublicAccessAfterworld,” she said. “Because Screen Sickness isn’t real.”

• • •

When Bethany woke up later, her head was clear and she was alone on the mattress. She sat up quickly, afraid that she was about to be greeted by another static man. But instead she saw Jules by the metal grate window, holding Bethany’s cellphone in their hand.

“What is this?” Jules asked. “How did you get this?” They held out the phone so Bethany could see the screen.

She blinked a few times, readjusting to consciousness. And then she realized what Jules was talking about. They'd opened up Bethany's photo library and found the camera video Bethany had recorded of her laptop screen at GlobalVill. The one of Jules cutting their wrists that Bethany had recorded to prove to Douglas that Jules needed help, back when Jules had still been just a stranger on her laptop screen.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Jules asked. "How do you have a video of me on your phone from a month ago?"

Bethany was wide-awake now. She moved backwards towards the corner wall.

"Jules—"

"Are you working with them? Those football kids who've been reporting my videos? Has this all been some kind of prank?"

"No," Bethany said. "Let me explain."

But Jules was furious. They grabbed Bethany's bag from the floor and hurled it at the mattress. Then they threw Bethany's phone at her, too. Bethany ducked as it slammed against the wall, knocking down one of the magazine clippings she'd hung just hours earlier. Her phone screen shattered, then bounced down onto the bed next to her.

"Listen," Bethany said. "I—I'm sorry I lied to you. I work at GlobalVill.com. Your videos showed up in my queue, and I—"

"You work at GlobalVill.com?" Jules repeated. "What the *fuck*?"

"I just—I was worried about you. I'm not really here visiting my parents. I came because I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Look at you. *You're the one who's not okay.*"

"I'm sorry. Jules, just let me explain. I—"

"Get out of here right fucking now!" Jules shouted. They had tears in their eyes.

"Jules, please. I really need your help. I think I'm in trouble."

"Go!" Jules reached into the big bucket on the floor and started hurling golf balls at Bethany as hard as they could. Bethany winced as each little ball pelted her, leaving fresh bruises on her skin. She jumped from the

mattress and grabbed her stuff while trying to shield herself from the onslaught. She fled out into the night.

“Don’t ever come back!” Jules shouted. Bethany rushed across the course. “I’ve got a gun and I’m not afraid to use it!”

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7

"OKAY. LET ME GET this straight. You're saying you woke up and there was a man in the room with you?"

"Yeah," Bethany told the guy at reception at the Starlight. "A man made of static."

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't offer refunds for stuff like that."

"Fine," Bethany said. "Sure. I don't need a refund." She put her hands in her pockets and leaned across the desk. "Look. My laptop and all my stuff is still back in the room. Will you come with me to get it? I don't feel safe going in there alone."

The man across the desk looked at her like she was crazy. Bethany suspected she probably was.

• • •

Later, at the bus depot, Bethany realized she'd accidentally stolen Jules Estrada's handgun. She'd put it in her bag before Jules returned from Taco Bell, and then had forgotten all about it in the clamor that followed. She reached inside her tote bag and felt comforted to wrap her fingers around its metal grip. She felt bad for stealing the gun, but relieved to still have it here with her.

Bethany still had no idea whether she was crazy or whether something genuinely supernatural was happening to her. There in the waiting room at the bus depot, she decided that ultimately it didn't matter. Who cared whether she was heading towards some mystical alternate universe or regular old schizophrenia? Bethany was in big trouble either way.

She clutched the borrowed gun inside her bag and stared up at the big bus schedule on the wall. She tried to make a decision about where to go next.

Back to Austin? Across state lines into New Mexico? Every option felt like a dead end.

She missed her childhood bedroom, missed being a helpless little kid in somebody else's care. She wished there was a bus straight to Harlingen, straight to her parents' house, where she could close the door to her room and hide away from all the misery that had descended over her life. Not just her recent troubles with static men and online content moderation. Everything since adulthood. Since transition.

She took out her cellphone and called her mom again. It rang four times, and just when Bethany assumed it would go to voicemail, her mother picked up.

"Hi, honey," she said. "What time is it?" Bethany had clearly woken her.

"Hi, Mom," Bethany said. "I'm sorry. It's late. I just wanted to call because . . . well, we haven't talked in a while, and, um . . ."

She realized she sounded panicked. It made her feel embarrassed and defensive. She didn't want to admit defeat, didn't want her mom to see her as a failure.

A young couple stole glances at Bethany from across the depot. The woman nursed a newborn baby.

"Noah," Bethany's mom said. "Sorry, *Bethany.* Honey, are you okay?"

Bethany stammered out a response. "I just . . . I, um . . . I guess I've been really missing you and Dad. And things aren't going so well out here right now. So I was wondering . . . maybe I could come back home for a little while?"

She paused and held her breath. She'd said it. Admitted failure, copped to helplessness. She'd finally just come out and admitted that she was still a child in need of her mother's care.

"Oh, honey," her mom said. Then she didn't say anything for a little while.

"I'm sorry," Bethany said. "I just . . . I think I really need to come back home."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Bethany heard her mom cover the phone receiver with her hand, then heard her parents talking,

whispering to each other in bed. After about thirty seconds, her mom returned to the phone.

“Honey, I’m sorry. It’s not a very good time. Daddy’s health issues, and the renovations with the house . . .”

“Mom . . .” Bethany said.

“I’m sorry, honey. You know we love seeing you. We love you very much. It’s just not a good time.”

The ticker on the depot wall that listed the bus schedule reset itself, the letters and numbers flitting about into their latest combinations.

“Maybe you and Abel can visit for Christmas,” her mom said. “Let’s check in about it in a few months?”

“Okay,” Bethany said. “I understand.”

“We love you very much,” her mom said. “Don’t worry, honey. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Bethany hung up the phone. She sat a while longer in the bus depot clutching Jules’s handgun inside her tote bag. Eventually the sun began to rise out the window. Bethany studied the names on the ticker, all those towns and cities she could try to escape to next. Perhaps if she stared long enough, she’d discover an option on the board that wasn’t another dead end.

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8

THAT SAME DAY, JULES Estrada opened up the Turbo Putt just like they always did, cleaning up the trash left out on the course overnight, unlocking the big metal grate, then settling into the sweaty little stool where they'd be spending the next ten hours.

Last night had sucked. Jules was still totally confused about it all. Who had Bethany been? Why had she been *here*? None of it made sense to them, but it left a vague feeling of hurt and betrayal in their stomach that lingered all morning. They took double their usual edible, hoping that it might numb the feeling.

By twelve-fifteen, customers started to arrive. Jules handed out golf balls and scorecards and putters. They sold ice cream and Snickers. They eavesdropped on the same old skeevy pastors and dumb NASCAR dads.

Each time Jules sensed a new customer approaching the window, they half expected it to be Bethany. By the afternoon, they realized that they kind of missed her. Sure, they were still pissed and confused, but deep down they wanted Bethany to show back up today so they could work things out.

They'd gotten so angry last night. They'd shouted at her, told her to never come back. But now, faced with that exact possibility, of life just continuing on like it always had at the Turbo Putt before Bethany arrived, Jules now realized they'd be devastated to never see their new friend again. Bethany had been a brick smashing through the window of their boring-ass life. When she'd been around these past couple days, it was as if all of a sudden Jules had entered an epic adventure. Become a character in a TV show.

But now, just as abruptly as Bethany had showed up, she was gone. And Jules realized in hindsight that probably they were more like a guest star who disappeared after just one episode. Bethany's show would go on wherever she went next, and meanwhile Jules would stay stuck here with

nothing to look forward to except a lifetime of slinging golf balls and Klondikes.

The afternoon wore on. The sun beat down against the wooden roof of the shed. Now Jules bargained with the universe: *Just bring her back. Let me keep being a part of Bethany's story for a little while longer.* Jules didn't care anymore what Bethany's true intentions were. If she was a good guy or a bad guy. Because if Jules had a choice between having Bethany in their life and life being exciting versus never seeing Bethany again and everything going back to the way it was, Jules knew which option they'd choose.

As the sun set, they gave up hope. Bethany wasn't coming back. Her visit had been a fleeting, momentary blip. Now everything was back to boring old reality.

They thought about recording another video that evening, giving their Pink Eye TV show one more try, or just dragging a razor across their skin for the camera like they used to do when they felt this way. But they couldn't muster the energy. They'd been trying for years to be worthy of Public Access Afterworld, and Bethany had waltzed into town and infected herself with Screen Sickness without even meaning to. They felt ashamed.

• • •

After dusk, Jules closed up the grate then walked across the highway to get their usual Wednesday dinner from Wendy's. They ate alone in their shed, playing the events of the last few days back in their head, knowing already that it was a story they'd be telling themself for the rest of their life. And then they heard a sudden banging sound. Someone was knocking on the big metal grate outside the shed.

"Hello?" they called. "Bethany?" But there was no answer from the other side of the window. And when Jules unlocked the grate and squinted out into the darkness of the mini golf course, there was no one in sight.

"*Hello?*" they shouted again into the night.

Someone had definitely been out there. Someone who wanted them to hear. Jules realized it was probably those football kids from the high school, back to fuck with them again. Well, they picked the wrong night, Jules

thought to themself. They were in a rotten mood, and those kids were about to get what they'd had coming to them for a long time.

Jules rushed for the shelf behind the mini fridge to grab their gun, and as they searched for it, that rattling sound outside started up again, louder than before, echoing in all directions. It sounded awful, like a dentist office drill, like those football kids were pelting every inch of the shed with rocks, scraping all four walls with shovels. Most of the pictures Bethany had taped up on the wall the night before came tumbling down with the chaos. Panic coursed through Jules's body. This was finally, really happening. They were under attack.

Jules dug through their drug stash and computer stuff, searching desperately for their handgun. They'd bought it from Walmart for exactly this moment. But now it was nowhere to be found.

Jules felt confusion, but only for a moment. And then the door to the shed came off its hinges and two men in ski masks rushed inside.

Jules took off running in the opposite direction, towards the big metal grate window.

The men in ski masks rushed forward, knocking over the big bucket on the floor, sending golf balls spilling everywhere. But Jules was already up on the stool by the grate, crawling out the window. They felt the men in ski masks grab at their feet and try to pull them back through. Jules screamed and struggled, but it was no use. They were overpowered. Their body slammed down to the floor, smashing into a sea of golf balls. They kicked and screamed as the men held them down, as they dragged Jules back across the shed and out into the night.

They pinned Jules down on the imitation Astroturf of hole eighteen, right near the green, right in front of that hole that led underground. Jules kept fighting and struggling. They were clearly overpowered, but they refused to admit defeat. They didn't want to give those football fucks the satisfaction. Then a third guy in a ski mask emerged from the darkness. He stepped onto the green and walked slowly towards the two other men pinning Jules down.

Jules kept struggling as this third man knelt in front of them. He slowly removed his ski mask, and Jules's eyes went wide as they realized that in fact it hadn't been the football kids at all who'd abducted them. They stared

up at a face they'd seen many times before. But never like this. Never in person.

"I heard a rumor you've been looking for me," David Sawyer told them, and Jules Estrada stopped struggling.

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EPISODE FOUR

CHICAGO

LOS ALAMOS,
NEW MEXICO

July 1945

THAT FOURTH OF JULY, the officers brought a traveling picture show to the camp to boost morale among the scientists and their families. Everyone at Los Alamos knew the war would soon be ending. After years in the New Mexico desert, the residents of this temporary town would be going home, though they still didn't know exactly when.

All holiday long, while the husbands worked in the lab up on the hill, the camp's women and children eavesdropped on the dark-skinned workers as they nailed arches into the ground, set up folding chairs in organized rows, smoothed out the dry white cloth of the movie screen so it could ripple in the sandy gusts of the afternoon.

The boss in charge of the traveling picture company was the only white man in the outfit, a skinny, theatrical fellow with a black top hat. He supervised his workers from outside the Los Alamos town hall, sipping lemonade and enjoying gossip. The wives told him about how just two years earlier the town hall itself had been unloaded from trucks, built from scratch above the desert floor. Now, too, for one night only, there was a cinema.

Once the sun began to set against the horizon, all of the scientists left work early (most nights they stayed well past dusk). They made their way down in a procession to join their families for the evening's festivities.

Children played tag, chasing one another around the square, ducking underneath folding chairs. They carried sparklers, a tribute to the absent fireworks the war had stolen for yet another year.

One army man, a bald fellow named Wilson, worked the grill, taking great pleasure in the muscle memory of flipping burgers and dogs. Nearby, General Albert Klein, a politician with a well-decorated vest, held court, making small talk with a gaggle of scientists he was proud to consider his underlings. This according to a 1942 decree signed by no less than United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself, as General Klein was always quick to mention.

"Entertainment is in short supply these days," the general told the group gathered that night. "This company is in high demand, higher than ever.

We're lucky to have them. The pictures, they say: the only war-proof business."

"Don't forget the science business," said Elizabeth, the most popular wife on the base.

"Yes, yes, of course," General Klein said. "But honestly, we deserve this. We're certainly working hard enough, wouldn't you say?"

"It's been years since I've seen a picture," said Dr. Elliot Fischer, a taciturn man whose striking good looks made him stand out from the group. It had been a joke back at school. How he more resembled Humphrey Bogart than a scientist. How unfair it was that God had gifted him both brains and beauty, unlike his nebbishy colleagues, who had so clearly received a deficit of the latter.

Elliot reached his arm around his wife. Willa tensed at his touch, and Elliot sensed her discomfort like a shift in the weather.

"So what are we watching tonight, General?" asked another scientist. Willa Fischer's mind drifted. She glanced past the playing children, past the workers sitting in the dirt by the town hall eating dinner off paper towels (bread and ketchup, no burgers). Then she spotted who she was looking for: the camp's newest recruits, the two of them already in their seats, ready for the evening's movie. That elderly scientist with a face like a lemon and his daughter, a young woman whose manner of dress was unlike anyone else's in the camp.

General Klein smiled. "Let's just say I hope you don't scare easily," he warned the group.

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Once everyone took their seats, Dr. Oppenheimer himself made a rare public appearance to introduce the evening's festivities. Though Willa had been in Los Alamos for over eighteen months, she'd only seen the famous man twice. Oppenheimer was not one for social functions. He spent all of his time in the lab up on the hill or in meetings with Washington.

"On behalf of all of us at Los Alamos, I hope you'll join me in officially wishing our nation a very happy birthday," he said tonight from the podium. "I believe this will be the last Fourth we spend here, separated still from so many loved ones." The town applauded. Willa thought, as she always did, of

Joseph, her eldest, overseas in France. She imagined where he might be right then, drifting to sleep on an army cot or trampling with his men across some foreign beach. Or god forbid, nowhere, lying in a temporary grave, waiting to be shipped back home. Willa felt her husband tense once more at her own tensing. She reached over to the seat next to her and put her arm around little Marty, the youngest of her two. Like many of the children at the base, Marty was dressed tonight in a little suit, a dollop of pomade smoothing down his hair.

"And lastly," Dr. Oppenheimer said from the stage, "I want to offer a special welcome to the newest members of our community: Dr. Randolph Horowitz, and his daughter Rachel." Willa looked again at the new arrivals. "Dr. Horowitz joins us from Cambridge, Massachusetts," Dr. Oppenheimer said. "He'll be helping see our projects here through to their final stages."

Everyone clapped politely. Willa glanced at her husband, then joined him in weary applause. This was a community eager to disband, not to still be welcoming new arrivals.

"And now," Dr. Oppenheimer said, "I hope you're ready for a night at the movies."

The owner of the traveling cinema flipped a switch on his prized possession: a sputtering 35mm projector, powered by extension cords stretching all the way to the town hall. The machine whistled awake, then after a moment of wheezing began to cast its glow down the center aisle. Pockmarks and scratches hit the screen. For a few of the youngest children, who had been at the base most of their lives, this was their first-ever movie.

A pre-film newsreel began.

"Hitler dead by his own hands! Japanese commander Ushijima the same!" Willa studied the black-and-white footage of soldiers on screen. She knew it would be an absurd coincidence to catch a glimpse of Joseph in the newsreel, but how could she stop herself from scouring each frame?

The narrator spoke with the enthusiasm of a door-to-door salesman. "Let's think now of the day soon when we can welcome our heroes back home," he said. Everyone in the audience applauded. Then it was time for the evening's feature presentation, a monster movie called *Chimotera!*

In the film, a handsome young scientist grew obsessed with his work on animal DNA, and despite the protests of his young fiancée's wealthy father, began concocting elaborate experiments that birthed mutant creatures: a dog

fused with a rat, a frog sprouting wings. Ultimately, the scientist's hubris was his downfall. After an accident in the lab, the man's own body was contaminated, causing him to transform into the titular monster: Chimotera, a half-bat, half-human hybrid.

"Oh, Wilhelm!" his fiancée cried near the end of the movie as an angry mob descended on his laboratory, setting it aflame. "You should never have meddled with forces so unnatural." The woman stared heartbroken and terrified at the bloodthirsty creature before her, the monster who was once her groom-to-be.

"Unnatural? *Unnatural?*" Lon Chaney, Jr., bellowed from beneath his Chimotera prosthetics. "There is no such thing. There is only life. Endless life. And I've never felt more alive!" The monster growled with lust and wrapped his claws around his fiancée's neck. He drained the life from her in a tight embrace. Then the film cut to a mournful flashback of the two lovers long ago as students enjoying a picnic by the Charles River in Cambridge.

Strings swelled and the film cut back to the present day. Chimotera crumbled to the ground, succumbing to the flames swallowing his lab. Before meeting his final demise, the monster reached his arms into the air and howled a thespian's roar. A big bold title card declared, "THE END."

The picture was repulsive. Willa watched aghast for the length of it. It had been violent and sacrilegious, not to mention beyond disrespectful to show this particular mad scientist tale here at Los Alamos. She hoped whoever had overseen its programming would be reprimanded.

But after the final frame faded out and the traveling picture show man with the top hat switched his 35mm projector off, the rest of the crowd applauded rapturously. Willa felt stunned. It was as if everyone else had just witnessed something harmless and fun. Her husband and son clapped along with everyone else. Had they not just seen the same film?

"Splendid," General Klein said later, hosting an impromptu gathering of his regular acolytes. "I'm not sure I've ever seen something quite so horrible."

Willa turned away. She crossed her arms and watched the workers pack the cinema screen away, loading it back onto their trucks for its next destination.

• • •

Later, as Willa tucked little Marty into bed, her son couldn't stop raving about the picture.

"Chimotera's a killer!" he beamed. "Did you see the way he murdered those people from the village? He tore them to bits."

"Chimotera isn't real, honey," Willa said. "It was just a movie, so no one really died. And if they had, it would have been a great tragedy, not something to celebrate."

"I bet Chimotera is still alive," Marty said.

Willa knew the boy was unlikely to sleep all night. "No," she said. "Chimotera the monster is dead. You saw it with your own eyes."

"Yeah, but I bet he's gonna come back and kill more peasants from town," Marty said.

"You should go to sleep. You have school in the morning." Willa kissed his forehead. "I love you, my beach blanket," she said.

Marty closed his eyes. He didn't respond.

• • •

"He was too young to see that film," Willa said to her husband as she settled into bed a few minutes later. "You should tell the men in charge that it was a horrid choice."

"Yes," Elliot said, choosing not to look up from his night's reading.

He bookmarked his Agatha Christie and set it down on the nightstand, then turned off the lamp on his side of the bed to let his wife know there would be no more talking tonight.

Willa reached for the lamp on her own bedside table. "That new scientist, Dr. Horowitz," she said. "The elderly one. He's Jewish, yes?"

"Sure looks like it. Not that one more makes a difference. The lab is already crawling with them."

Willa chuckled.

"What I mean is," Elliot said, "they tend to be very skilled at the sciences."

"Yes," Willa responded. She flipped the light switch off and went to bed.

• • •

The next morning, the usual procession of scientists marched from the camp's residential quarters up to the laboratory on the hill. They walked in silence. The holiday had been a special occasion—usually the men didn't fraternize. Their work was too important, too solemn for idle chatter.

A big wooden sign at the entrance to the camp read a reminder of this vow:

WHAT YOU SEE HERE

WHAT YOU DO HERE

WHAT YOU HEAR HERE

WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE

—Let It Stay Here—

The message was accompanied by a cute drawing of three monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouth, respectively, with their hands. The children of Los Alamos loved the sign and could often be found playing near it.

Elliot was late to leave that morning. Willa cooked him an egg as he rushed around their temporary home getting dressed. She fed Marty his morning cereal, then went to fetch Elliot his briefcase so he could be quick out the door. As she picked it up, something fell out from the front pocket. Willa typically made it a point to avoid spying on her husband's work (she, like everyone at the base, heeded the message of the sign with the monkeys). Elliot's work was top secret, and she wished to keep it that way. But as she leaned down to pick up the fallen object, she couldn't help catching a glimpse of what had tumbled out. She'd never seen anything like the device before. It was thin and rectangular, slim, shaped like a book without any pages. It was made of plastic, with a screen built into the front. It reminded Willa of the new television models she'd seen pictured in magazines, but if they'd been shrunk down and liberated from their wiring. As Willa picked up the device, she realized it weighed almost nothing. It felt alien in her hands, like something from a futuristic science fiction movie.

She tucked the contraption back in its pouch and tried to forget about it. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't meant for her eyes, or for civilians at all. And besides, she'd only seen it by accident. The best thing to do would be to

pretend it had never happened. She brought her husband his briefcase, then went to grab him his breakfast so he could be off to work.

She'd left the egg on the stove too long, and it had burned through the pan. Elliot didn't have time to wait for her to cook him another one, so breakfast was ruined. Willa cursed her own carelessness as she saw her husband out the door.

• • •

She walked Marty to the schoolhouse. Once they were close, he escaped her grasp to run to his schoolmates. The children all began to talk about the previous night's movie. Willa felt a pang of jealousy watching her son ignore her. He was just a child, she reminded herself. She shouldn't be jealous of a child. She left for her morning shopping at the general store.

During her early days at Los Alamos, rations had been delivered to each household. But last year, with no real sense of how temporary this community might turn out to be, the camp's architects had built a general store near the town square. Now the understimulated women had a place to gather for gossip. But despite her best efforts, Willa had never found a way to easily integrate herself into the social circles that would form each morning near the produce section. She had never been much for socializing. Even as a child, she'd mostly kept to herself.

She was lonely at Los Alamos with Elliot so busy, so at first of course she had tried to join in and interject her own opinions. But each time she spoke, her words came out differently than the other women's effortless chatter, forced and nervous and always met with troubled silence. So now she kept to herself, preferring to eavesdrop as an invisible spectator on the chatter while doing her shopping.

That morning, Elizabeth, the most popular wife in camp, was deep into her morning gossip when Willa arrived.

". . . like she thinks it's a brothel rather than a military base," she said. Willa's ears perked up. She realized Elizabeth was talking about Rachel, the girl who'd arrived at camp with her father the day before.

"Keep an eye on your husbands, ladies," said Mary, a woman who dressed each morning in fur. "The little vixen is clearly on the hunt."

The group chuckled. Willa smiled at the joke, too. She pretended to shop. She gathered up her items and paid Alan, the store clerk.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fischer,” he said as he calculated her total.

“Frightening movie last night, yes, Alan?” Willa said. She glanced over his shoulder at the day’s unopened mail stacked on the counter behind the register.

“Yes, Mrs. Fischer,” Alan replied.

“Any mail for me today?”

“No, ma’am.” His answer was practiced and quick. Willa asked him this same question every day, and every day, he gave her the same response.

• • •

Back home, Willa spent the last hour of the morning putting away her groceries. She found herself fixating on that egg she had overcooked and burnt into the frying pan. The pan was stained, and Willa feared it might be ruined for good. She avoided checking it for several minutes, but when she finally did confront the mess in the sink, she found it was just as she feared. No matter how hard she scrubbed, those last little chars of egg wouldn’t wash away. She reminded herself not to fixate.

One evening, years earlier, Elliot had returned from work to find her humming the same church hymn over and over again, scrubbing the morning dishes so hard that her cuticles had started to bleed. He’d sent her to analysis, and though no official diagnosis had followed, she’d learned from the incident to fear her obsessive tendencies. She made a promise to herself and Elliot after that not to let her nervousness get the best of her again.

So today she gave up on the pan, leaving the final bits of scrubbing for another morning. She tried to think of what to do next to occupy her time. And then she remembered the new arrivals to camp.

She packed a little picnic basket of oranges, then headed across the residential area. She found the house that Dr. Horowitz had just moved into, walked up the porch, and knocked on the door. His daughter Rachel answered. The young woman seemed surprised to find Willa standing on her doorstep with a picnic basket in her hand.

“Hello, there. I’m Willa. Dr. Fischer’s wife. Marty’s mother,” Willa said.

“Hi,” Rachel said. She was still in pajamas. “I’m Rachel.”

“I hope you’re having a nice morning,” Willa said. “And, well, I just thought you might be lonely here on your first full day on the base. I remember mine. And I wanted to personally welcome you to Los Alamos.” Rachel looked a little confused. “A housewarming gift,” Willa said, thrusting the picnic basket into Rachel’s arms. “It’s mandarins.”

Rachel looked into the basket at the half dozen little oranges that Willa had selected for her.

“It’s not much, I know,” Willa said. “I’d have brought a bottle of rum for celebration, but it’s impossible to get any decent liquor here. Not that that stops my husband and the other men on the base. They’ll drink ethyl alcohol on a Tuesday night, stolen straight from the lab, I’ll assure you.”

Willa laughed. Rachel stared at her.

“Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“Oh,” Willa said. “Yes. Sure.” She followed the girl inside.

• • •

“I don’t have much to offer you,” Rachel told Willa as she ushered her through the undecorated kitchen. “We just moved in.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” Willa said. “We can eat my mandarins.”

Rachel smiled like Willa had just told a joke. It made Willa feel self-conscious. Had she said something awkward or strange?

Rachel set the picnic basket down on the kitchen counter and tossed Willa one of the fruits from inside. Willa fumbled it into her lap like a fly ball. “Do you and your father enjoy Boston?” Willa asked as she began to peel the skin.

“Cambridge,” Rachel said.

“I’m sorry?”

“We live in Cambridge. MIT is in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Just over the river from Boston.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry for the mistake,” Willa said. She skinned her mandarin. She couldn’t get a good grip on the peel, so now she was going inch by inch, letting tiny little pieces fall into a pile on the table.

“Cambridge is quiet,” Rachel said. “I hate it, to tell you honestly. But no matter. As long as the war really does end by the fall, I’ll be going to school

in New York City."

"New York City," Willa said. "Lovely. My husband Elliot and I have visited Manhattan with our little one. It's majestic." Rachel grinned as though Willa had just told another joke. She sat down at the table and smirked.

"What?" Willa asked.

"*Manhattan,*" Rachel said. "You said *Manhattan.*"

Willa was lost. What was the young woman trying to imply?

"Your husband," Rachel said. "Does he tell you what he's working on here?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Does your husband tell you what he's working on all day in that lab up on the hill?"

"Oh no. Lord, no. And I wouldn't think to ask."

"I hear they're close to something big," Rachel said. "With Manhattan. That's the name of the project. And hey—they better be. The sooner we can all get out of here, the better, right?"

Willa tore off the last little bit of her orange peel.

"I'm thankful to be here," she said.

"You're thankful to be here?" Rachel almost laughed out loud.

Willa nodded. "Many women, I'm sure you've read, are building munitions in the factories, working long hours."

"Sure," Rachel said. Now Willa began ripping her mandarin up, separating it into individual slices and then placing each slice on the table in a perfect half circle. She couldn't keep her hands still today.

"At least we're not overseas in the trenches," Rachel said. "Getting our heads blown off on the beach."

"My son is on that beach, actually," Willa said.

"Oh—"

"The older of my boys."

"Oh, gosh. I'm really sorry," Rachel said. "That was a horribly insensitive thing to say. I'm an idiot."

“No. No. It’s fine,” Willa said, then spoke the words she’d practiced for whenever Joseph came up in conversation. “You just want to know that he’s okay.”

“Of course,” Rachel said, sensing something disingenuous in the way this strange woman spoke about almost everything.

• • •

After dark, the scientists and officials made their way back down the hill, returning home to their families at the hour when fatigue overpowered the urgency of their work. Most nights Elliot arrived home far past dinnertime, so he ate separately from the rest of the family. Willa would cook for the three of them while Marty practiced his songs on the little piano in the living room. Then mother and son would eat together, Willa encouraging the child to make small talk with her while he twisted around in his chair, eager to get upstairs to his toys and picture books.

Then at eight P.M. each night, Willa would put little Marty to bed, read him an excerpt from *Max and Cheese,* Joseph’s favorite book from back when her oldest son was still a child. Marty would half listen as he drifted off. Then Willa would retire to her knitting, keeping her hands busy while she awaited Elliot’s return, his dinner left out, warming indefinitely in the oven. Eventually Elliot would arrive, drop his briefcase in the corner by the door, and eat in silence while Willa tended to the dishes. He’d shower and dress for sleep, read a chapter in his mystery novel, then flip off the light switch and begin to snore.

Elliot always slept like a rock. He was exhausted from his work. Most nights Willa would lie awake next to him for some time, trying to calm whatever anxieties were keeping her awake. Some nights when her insomnia was especially bad, she would count the ticking sounds the second hand made on the clock on the wall, marking each set of sixty as yet another minute she’d failed to calm herself to slumber. That evening, Willa counted thirty-two sets total before she finally gave up on sleep and succumbed to the preoccupation keeping her awake: that strange device she’d accidentally glimpsed that morning from her husband’s briefcase. She knew it was wrong, treasonous even, to want to learn more about it. But for whatever reason, her curiosity was too great tonight. Perhaps it was Rachel, and the ease with which she had spoken about her knowledge of the camp’s many

secrets. Regardless, the curiosity had dominated Willa's thoughts all afternoon and evening. And now, in the darkness of everyone else's slumber, it had risen to the fore.

She couldn't stop herself. Willa slipped out of bed, then tiptoed across the dark bedroom and down the creaking staircase. She walked towards the front door and dug into the small pocket of her husband's leather briefcase. She found the device easily, withdrew it like contraband.

She balanced it in her hand, weighing the device's lightness as she had done earlier. She flipped it over and studied the back, running her fingers over some tiny little buttons on the side of the machine that she hadn't noticed that morning. She'd never seen anything like this before, whatever it was. It reminded her of a futuristic update of the famous stone tablets Moses carried down from Mount Sinai.

Willa crept across the living room and sat in an armchair by the fireplace. She stared at the device's flat little screen, then brushed her fingers over the buttons on the side. She worked up the courage to press one, pretending even to herself that it was an accident. And then, as she had secretly hoped would happen, the device powered to life and a light shined up at her from the thin screen.

White movement fizzed. A deluge of tiny specks all humming in place, constantly changing but retaining their larger structure. The sight was accompanied by a shrill, consistent hissing. The sound was quiet, thankfully not loud enough to wake anyone else in the house.

Willa considered pressing the side button again in hopes that it might turn the device back off. She considered walking across the living room and slipping the thing back into Elliot's briefcase. She knew she should return to bed and pretend this midnight dalliance had never occurred. But her curiosity had brought her this far. So she kept watching.

Soon she heard a faint voice speaking through the white fuzz.

"*So you want to write for television . . .*" Willa recognized the voice. It was the same man who had narrated last night's wartime newsreel, the one that played before that dreadful horror picture, *Chimotera!*

"*Television!*" the narrator exclaimed. "*An exciting new medium, soon to be in every home across this great country.*" The sound of his voice grew louder, poking through the noise. As the narrator spoke, the white fuzz on the tablet screen evolved into grainy black-and-white videos that to Willa's

continued astonishment were somehow playing without the aid of any wiring.

The screen now broadcast footage of an empty office, papers strewn across desks, flattened under the weight of typewriters. Then it showed a new television set in a storefront window, ready for purchase. "*But who will create the new worlds that will beam into all those living rooms?*" the PSA narrator asked. "*Television never sleeps. It transmits twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all around us. There are so many new worlds to create. Where will they all come from?*"

The image on screen changed once again. Now it played a montage of well-manicured front lawns, the kind of peaceful community Willa and every other wife in camp longed to return to once the war ended. "*To answer this question, we'll need to travel all the way to sunny California, right past the gates of Tinsel Town, directly into—*"

A sudden gust of wind flung sand against the window. Willa pressed the button on the side of the device quickly, powering it back off. She rushed across the room and slipped the thing back into her husband's briefcase.

She stood there, feeling ashamed of her unexpected capacity for subterfuge. This was so unlike her.

She went back upstairs and got back into bed. Thankfully, Elliot was still snoring.

• • •

On weekends, Willa washed her family's laundry in the communal soap trough behind the residential area, then hung each piece of clothing out to dry on the clotheslines behind the cabins.

A few mornings after her dalliance with the strange device in her husband's briefcase, Willa saw Elliot out the door, then set to work on her washing. The desert winds were vicious, just like the night before. Each piece of wardrobe Willa hung on the line whipped back in her face, pelting her with sand and fabric. It was a struggle to keep each garment from falling. The work was so consuming that Willa failed to notice Rachel's approach. The girl carried a hamper of her own filled with sundresses and skirts still wrinkled after the long trip from Cambridge.

"Good morning," Rachel said.

Willa glanced over from the clothesline to find Rachel dressed in her sleep clothes, just like the day before. Willa could never imagine wearing fabric so flimsy outside the house, least of all on a morning as windy as today. It made Willa angry. Somehow, even if she couldn't quite explain why, she blamed Rachel for her late-night experience with Elliot's work device.

"Oh. Hello," Willa said.

Rachel bent down and set to work, slowly running her dirty clothes through the rinsing trough. "Saturday morning," she said. "The weekend."

"Yes, indeed," Willa said. "Not that it makes much difference here—our men work seven days a week."

"Yeah, but we can still enjoy ourselves, right?" Rachel laughed like it was a joke. Her pajama shirt blew in the wind, giving Willa an accidental glimpse of the girl's bare breasts. Willa turned away.

"Any jazz clubs worth visiting here on the base?" Rachel asked with a wry smile.

Willa looked confused as she pinned her son's pajamas up to dry.

"I'm joking."

"Oh," Willa said. "I see."

"But honestly, I don't know what to do all day in this place. Do you have any plans? Is there anything to do around here for recreation?"

"Well, not really, if I'm being perfectly honest," Willa said. "On Sundays, there's—" She cut herself off mid-sentence.

"What?" Rachel asked.

"Nothing. Just . . . we attend a small church service with a few of the other families. But I assumed you . . ."

"You assumed I was Jewish?"

"Well . . . yes. Because of your last name, Horowitz. But I didn't mean to __"

"I'm not Jewish," Rachel said. She dug into her hamper and withdrew a bra to wash through the trough. Willa pinned up her favorite dress, the yellow floral one she always used to wear to the beach in the summer. It whipped in the wind, refusing to stay on the clothesline.

"Well, technically, sure. I was born a Jew," Rachel said. "But I don't practice. I don't relate to any of that stuff. It feels made for another age, you

know? Doesn't have much relevance to this world right now. All of *this* . . ." She motioned to the lab up on the hill. "My father, though," Rachel said as she dragged her bra back and forth through the soap. "Talk about Old Testament. He likes to say that what we're doing here, 'iz a great abomination to God.'" Rachel laughed at her impersonation of her father's thick German accent.

"Your father believes that?" Willa asked.

"Don't you?" Rachel said, glancing up from her work. Her bare breasts were showing once again, peeking out from between the loose collar of her sleep shirt. Willa pretended not to notice.

"Of course not," she said. "An abomination to God? How could that be?"

Rachel walked over to a fresh clothesline. Willa felt relieved.

"It's not natural," Rachel told her. "What they're working on up there. I know you said you try not to pay attention to it, but you have to know enough about what's being built up on that hill to know that much: It's not natural."

Willa shook her head.

"Have you read a paper?" Willa said. "Heard any news at all about what has been going on in Europe these past years? What those men in Germany have been doing to *your own people*?"

Rachel smirked at Willa's clear anger, as if she took pleasure in scandalizing her laundry partner.

"The war's almost over," Rachel said. "Everyone knows it. We won."

"Yes. One hopes," Willa said. "But even a few months ago, were you so certain? That the world our children would grow up in would be a safe one? That they'd be afforded the chance to grow up at all?"

"I don't want children," Rachel said.

"I suppose you tell me this to scandalize me," Willa said. "I suppose you expect me to find it shocking."

"Do you?" Rachel asked. She grinned again, as if in on yet another joke Willa couldn't hope to understand.

Willa didn't answer the girl's question.

"Do you wish to marry?" she asked Rachel instead.

“I do not,” Rachel told her. She smiled, then knelt down to return to her washing.

• • •

“I must tell the story with the septic,” General Klein laughed. It was Tuesday night, and Willa had spent all day in the kitchen mixing supplies to bake cookies.

Elliot and his team had worked straight through the weekend, and in an effort to boost morale, General Klein had suggested a small gathering. Elliot volunteered his home, and so Willa worked all day to have the place ready for an evening of poker, cigarettes, and ethyl alcohol cut with ice cubes to rein in the sting.

“Please don’t,” Elliot said to his boss.

“Oh, don’t be so sensitive, Fischer,” General Klein said. “You come off as stalwart as ever in this story, and you know it, too!” Then the general launched into his tale, regaling the men at the poker table with a story about the time the lab’s septic tank burst during their first month at the base. While General Klein spoke, Willa tried not to eavesdrop. She transferred each cookie fresh out of the oven from parchment to plate.

“. . . and so there’s Elliot, standing at the foot of the hill like a seasick sailor determined to face the storm,” General Klein said. “We were on the verge of a mudslide. But not just dirt. No, no—if only! It was *shit.* Feces. Our own shit, overflowing from the ground, approaching the hill like an avalanche. I swear it . . . the mess was headed towards the slope that leads straight down to the town below!”

“Oh Lord,” one of the men at the table said. “Please stop. I’m going to be sick.”

Willa tried her best not to interrupt as she carried her plate of cookies into the living room. She didn’t want to intrude on the gathering, but she was anxious to serve the men while the cookies were still melted and hot from the oven. As she entered the room, she stole a glance at Dr. Randolph Horowitz, Rachel’s father, who was seated at the table with a big stack of poker chips in front of him. Willa studied the old man’s face. She felt more curious than ever about this fellow who, if Rachel was to be believed,

considered the work he did here at the base to be an abomination. His expression was taciturn. The Jew betrayed nothing.

“Because remember,” General Klein continued. “These were the dawning days of Los Alamos, before many families had arrived. And before any Negroes or low-ranking army men either. No custodians, just a small group of top scientists and five-star generals living together alone in the wild desert.” General Klein lifted his hands into the air, letting a few poker chips drop onto the table. Then he wrapped his left arm around Elliot and patted his underling on the back, playing up the theatrics of his story. “So what does my good man here do? Dr. Elliot Fischer, world-renowned physicist, most handsome scientist to ever grace our hallowed halls? It turns out that before he was a man of science, Elliot here was just another lad trying to make a dollar during the Depression. And through his, let’s say, *unglamorous* work in those years, Dr. Fischer had grown quite familiar with septic systems . . .”

Elliot blushed. The general continued.

“So he jumps to action. He grabs the one mop we had in the lab, and as many buckets as he could locate, and he cleans up the whole mess before the shit has a chance to avalanche down to our new little town in the desert. A few of the other men joined in eventually, but I tell you Elliot led the charge like it was his birthright.” General Klein patted Elliot on the back, and Willa could feel her husband’s humiliation like it was her own. Such was the bond between husband and wife.

“A hero, we can all agree,” General Klein laughed. “But he didn’t smell so good for the next few weeks after that!” Elliot forced himself to chuckle along at the punchline with all the other men around the table. All except Dr. Horowitz, who just sat there as stoic as ever.

“It’s not the image I’d like to be remembered by. But I’m glad I could provide amusement to the general,” Elliot said, cheeks red, not glancing up from his dwindling stack of poker chips.

“Oh, amusement indeed. And a pungent aroma that lasted for weeks!” General Klein announced to another round of laughter from his men.

“Fold,” Elliot said, pushing his cards into the center pile.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Dr. Horowitz asked in his thick German accent, looking suddenly at Willa in the archway between kitchen and living room. Her plate of chocolate chip cookies still cooled in her hands.

He was the first to notice her there. No one else had even realized Willa had entered the room. But now all eyes around the table were on her, and Willa felt suddenly like a ballerina in a music box.

“Oh. Yes. I apologize. I didn’t want to interrupt.” Willa took a small step into the room. “I baked cookies,” she said. She set the plate down on the piano top near the table. “Does anyone want one?”

“We’re playing, honey. We can help ourselves,” Elliot told her bitterly.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

She hurried out of the room and back into the kitchen. As she departed, she felt Dr. Horowitz’s eyes studying her like a specimen.

• • •

All night long, terrible dreams rocked Willa in and out of consciousness, dreams she could hardly remember but that she knew starred Dr. Horowitz and his daughter. Then, sometime in the dead of the four A.M. hour, Willa felt the two of them—father and daughter both—lift her up out of bed and carry her down the stairs towards the device in her husband’s briefcase.

She got comfortable in her favorite armchair, clicked the button to power on the small screen, then settled into the cushions as that glow of white fuzz covered her once again.

“*Where do the ideas for television shows come from?*” the narrator asked, as if no time had passed since Willa last watched the device’s broadcasts. She had resisted another late-night rendezvous with the object for as long as she could, but she was back inside of it now. It had been waiting for her. “*In our modern age, we’d like to think the ideas for our best stories come from the brains of high-paid writers in Hollywood. And in a certain sense, that’s true. But just as the conscious mind is controlled by a subconscious it can neither see nor perceive, so too do our stories originate from somewhere very far away. Somewhere deep down below . . .*”

The white fuzz on the screen transformed just as it had the previous night into a moving image, this time broadcasting footage of an automobile manufacturing plant. Fresh car parts tumbled off a conveyor belt. “*Yes, just like a car needs gasoline, there is a hidden fuel that powers the engines of all we broadcast,*” the narrator said. “*A fuel that comes from somewhere else, somewhere very far away . . .*”

Now the car parts were being assembled by mechanics in a grease-soaked garage. Wrenches and tires and screws squeezed tight, constructing each isolated node into the greater assemblage. The image on the screen changed once more, and now the car was in its final form in the showroom of a dealership. What had once been a heap of stray parts was now shining bright and complete, ready for a Sunday drive.

"In the olden times, Moses spoke to a burning bush. He climbed Mount Sinai so that God could hand him the Ten Commandments. But these days, we don't get our best ideas from a burning bush, or from the top of any mountain. We get them from a place deep underneath our own reality. From a place called Public Access Afterworld . . ."

A smiling businessman shook hands with a salesman. And then the image changed again, and the businessman was driving out of the lot with a brand new car.

• • •

Once or twice a century, if the century is an interesting one, there will be a day that serves as a dividing line between the end of one era and the start of another. The sort of day that, by nightfall, has utterly changed the face of reality—not just in hindsight, but for all those living through it in the moment. Forget concepts like history or modernity. This sort of day betrays such notions. A day like this is a slap in the face, an assault. It carries the same vertigo feeling that follows an earthquake, as if the world has been knocked off its well-balanced axis, possibly forever.

A day like the one I'm describing doesn't happen very often, and it *never* happens by chance. It's planned decades in advance, envisioned and debated and meticulously orchestrated by rooms of great men. Even a relatively minor such day, like the one seventy years after the Trinity test, when David Sawyer and Erin Morrison witnessed the end of analog television and the beginning of the digital era, was planned for years in committee meetings, lobbied for in Congress, announced well in advance via coordinated nationwide press release.

To make a significant mark on the whole entire world is no simple task. No happenstance. It requires bureaucracy. A knack for organizing.

The men of Los Alamos woke up on Monday, July 16, 1945, knowing that this would be such a day. About two dozen scientists and a few government

officials left Los Alamos before sunrise, goggled and safety geared. They loaded into buggies and drove far out past the boundaries of the civilized world, deep into the New Mexico desert, to a facility built into the sand where they could watch the world's first nuclear test from a safe distance.

When the sky lit up at 5:29 A.M. and the first atom bomb ripped a tear through reality, those men watched with a feeling that historians would later attempt to memorialize with words like *pride* or *awe* or even *horror*. But really what those men felt out there that morning in the predawn was something beyond any of these words, a feeling so specialized, felt by so few in human history, that we've never even bothered to give it a name. It's a feeling that God knows well. Perhaps he knows the name for it.

Much would be written about those men who built the bomb in the years after the Manhattan Project concluded. Men of science, the narrative would canonize. Good men who slowly realized what level of power might be possible for human beings to tap into, and then set out to make it real. How Dr. Oppenheimer and Einstein alike would eventually die haunted by their role in history, the Pandora's box they pried open through will, great intellect, and no small amount of government funding.

"Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," Dr. Oppenheimer famously declared the morning of that first detonation. I wonder if he imagined his future biography as he spoke those words. I wonder if he practiced them in the mirror as if he was preparing for a press conference.

Such hat tips to solemnity make nice pull quotes, but that morning in the desert there was no time for actual reflection. The light that blinded the sky was too bright, and that small group of scientists watching from behind their protective goggles could feel the broad magnitude of all they had accomplished, even if they couldn't yet imagine the exact way those waves would ripple outwards across remaining history. But they knew this moment would be re-created, would *re-create,* would be written about and feared and bowed down to for centuries to come. That all of reality would reorganize itself around their achievement.

Elliot Fischer wasn't in attendance that morning at the Trinity test. He was back at Los Alamos, hard at work in his lab. He knew all about what his colleagues were doing out in the desert that morning. But he was still busy with his own work, his own impending opportunity to experience that

feeling only God knows the name of. His moment to rip a tear across history was still four days away.

Their project had been called Manhattan. His was Chicago.

• • •

Willa was changing, succumbing to whatever spell had overtaken her.

She was irritable and nervous all the time now. She bit at her fingernails and cuticles, drawing blood at every opportunity. She felt nausea at the slightest provocation. At the way Marty would laugh with the kids each morning outside his schoolhouse, as if they were laughing at her. At the condescending disdain she could sense from the other women at camp, and from Alan at the general store as he batted away her daily inquiries about mail.

She felt like a mosquito engorged with blood, overdue to be popped. She felt on the precipice of something terrible. Of *doing* something terrible. But she didn't want to hurt anyone, so she held the anxiety inside herself. She didn't want to cause more pain to the people she loved, but she could feel herself getting worse, turning bad.

She prayed for health.

She couldn't stop watching the videos each night on Elliot's tablet device. The static on the screen called to her from her restless half sleep, beckoning her forward as if she was under its spell. She could almost hear it whispering to her, telling her not to think, to let it take control. *You are the thing below,* it seemed to say from inside her own head. *You don't belong here. You never have.*

The narrator of those otherworldly PSA videos offered her clues to some oblique puzzle whose full picture was still far out of sight. She knew it was unhealthy, this late-night espionage. She knew her obsession was contributing to her emotional state. That her nighttime viewing couldn't be good for her. Yet she longed all day to descend the staircase towards the tablet. And then in the dead hours between when Elliot would click off his lamp light and when he would rise with the dawn, the itch to watch more would become irresistible. Willa always gave in, no matter how many times she promised herself that tonight would be different.

• • •

At least in daylight she found it easier to curb her self-destructive impulses. Since their conversation at the clotheslines a week earlier, Willa had resolved to limit her exposure to that petulant Jewess who seemed dead set on getting a rise out of her. Now when Willa saw Rachel around camp, she would offer only the briefest of nods and then excuse herself to some other chore. She could sense her coldness bothered Rachel, and Willa couldn't help feeling elation at the girl's frustration. Rachel had chosen Willa as her sparring partner, but Willa had withdrawn from the ring.

The morning after the Trinity test, Rachel caught up with her on her way to the general store.

"So now you know, I suppose," Rachel said. Willa kept walking. "I wanted to tell you more, but my father forbade it. Cat's out of the bag, though. The whole world knows now what they built."

Willa clutched her shopping pouch, picked up her pace. "I don't wish to participate in this conversation," she said. "It's treasonous."

Rachel laughed. "Wow. Somebody's in a bad mood."

"You're not a good influence," Willa said without looking at her. "On yourself as much as anyone. You should hear how the women in the general store talk about you. About your choice of dress, about the morals you're displaying right now with such talk."

Rachel stopped walking. She seemed surprised at the aggression in Willa's voice. Willa continued ahead. She kept her gaze fixed on the general store so Rachel couldn't see the small grin on her face. It felt good to put the young woman in her place.

"You're one to talk!" Rachel called after her. "You should hear how people speak about you. I didn't realize it when I first got here, but apparently it's common knowledge around here that you're some kind of lunatic!"

Willa kept walking.

"Hey!" Rachel shouted at her again. "Don't believe me? Why don't you ask your husband what he's still working on up there in that lab on the hill?"

• • •

That morning the general store was as celebratory as Christmas. Nearly every wife in Los Alamos was huddled in excited chatter, beaming with

secondhand pride at what their husbands had pulled off. It was certain now: The war would be ending. They would all be going home soon.

Willa was still fuming from her confrontation with Rachel. She felt in no mood for celebration, and quickly grew annoyed at how difficult it was to shop with the store so crowded with idlers. She weaved between neighbors to get to each item on her shopping list, her body language letting everyone know not to stand in her way.

Then, as she unpacked her groceries at the front counter, Alan the store clerk hesitated while tallying her items.

"You've got mail this morning, ma'am," he said. He handed her a sealed U.S. Army envelope.

Willa immediately understood the import of the letter. That it could only carry word about her son. She had grown so used to the paucity of information on Joseph that she felt briefly stunned. Then a rush of nausea overtook her. She tore the envelope open and quickly withdrew the single-page document inside.

The other women chatting in the store couldn't help but take notice. Willa had made such a commotion even just opening up the envelope that it was impossible to miss. As Willa unfolded the letter and read its contents, a hush fell over the shop. Everyone watched as Willa screamed, as the letter dropped from her hands to the floor and she collapsed too, crumbling with the paper into a heap of tears.

The other women in the shop all glanced at one another, unsure what to do. Elizabeth took charge. She walked slowly across the store and put her hand on Willa's back.

"Honey," she said. "Honey, what is it? What's wrong?"

Willa could hardly speak through her tears. "My son . . ." she said.

Elizabeth's expression softened. She leaned down to pick up the fallen letter. She read through the first few sentences, dreading what she might discover. "Mom and Dad—I'm coming home!! I found out today that my unit is being discharged from . . ."

"He's coming home," Willa whimpered from her spot on the floor. She was still crying. Elizabeth lowered the letter to her side. She glanced over at the other wives, then laughed nervously.

“Oh my gosh,” she said. “I thought it contained bad news.” She helped Willa back up to her feet. Willa tried to stop crying. Elizabeth hugged her, laughing with relief at the misunderstanding.

“The way you were crying,” she said, “I thought he had died. My gosh. You gave me such a scare.”

• • •

Elliot was elated by the news. He earmarked his Agatha Christie, then stretched out under the covers.

“We’ll be a family again,” he said. He flipped off the light switch on his side of the bed.

“Yes,” Willa told him. “It’s wonderful.”

She knew Elliot could sense that she didn’t quite mean it. But she still couldn’t make her voice believe the words. She felt like crying once again.

Elliot didn’t say anything more. He just got under the covers and closed his eyes. Willa sat in silence, awake against the bed frame.

“I feel like Chimotera,” she said eventually.

“Will you shut your light off, please?” Elliot asked.

Willa did as she was told.

• • •

“There are other worlds,” the narrator spoke. Willa stared down at the tablet in her hands.

“*The worlds we transmit across our screens. The worlds of our stories. These worlds are just as real as our own world. They house the horrors that we must protect ourselves from.*” Willa’s whole body tingled. Her brain hummed like it was just another part of the broadcast she was watching.

“*Who will moderate for us?*” the narrator asked. “*Who will keep our darker worlds at bay? Those worlds that might bleed into our own, that threaten to overwhelm us completely?*

“*Who’s the only person who can scream ‘fire’ in a crowded movie theater without anybody leaving or even feeling afraid?*”

The narrator paused, then answered his own riddle.

"*The person on the screen*," he said.

• • •

Willa picked herself up from the armchair. She tiptoed across the living room towards the front door. She lit a lantern and quietly saw herself out into the desert night. She walked without guilt or hesitation, as if possessed, her body pulling her forward.

Slowly, she ascended the steps of the long stone path up to the big, windowless laboratory on the hill. She'd never actually been inside during all her time here at Los Alamos. The closer she got, the louder it hummed, like a massive swarm of insects buzzing against the night.

There would be guards stationed at the front entrance. Willa was sure of it. So she slipped around the side of the building, feeling her way across the perimeter, hoping her lantern light might reveal an open window or back door she could slip inside. To her mild astonishment, she found exactly what she was looking for: a big metal service door closed but unlocked.

The lab hummed even louder on the inside, utterly rife with electricity. Willa walked down a darkened corridor, unable to tell the pulsing in her brain from the pulsing of the space. She ascended to the cavernous main floor. It was easily the biggest room Willa had ever been inside. It felt vaster somehow than the night, than even the endless desert that surrounded Los Alamos. There were no lights on in the building, yet the massive room was illuminated with an overpowering glow. It took Willa a moment to realize the light was coming from beneath her feet.

She looked down and was greeted by the most awe-inspiring sight she'd ever beheld, something so surreal it rendered even the tablet device from her husband's briefcase utterly mundane by comparison. The ground beneath her was clear, as if she was standing on a thick layer of see-through plastic. She could gaze below, far underneath the laboratory floor, underneath all of Los Alamos. Way down there, a tunnel had been erected, the sediment and dirt and sand all hollowed away to create a pathway leading farther and farther down, as if towards the earth's core.

She squinted and saw a million discrete little lights dancing in the abyss. Jolts of electricity pulsing and conducting, colliding against a cylindrical plastic outer wall built about half a mile under the lab. Willa stared down at the storm raging below. She watched the sparks hum together, buzzing and

dancing, a sea of fireflies that never turned off. It looked like that fuzzing glow from her husband's device, just blown up gigantic, to impossible proportions.

She stared down beneath her feet for quite some time, allowing the electricity in her brain to commune with the currents under the ground. It was beautiful, the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She knew this monolith of static, whatever it was, had called her here tonight. It was the epicenter of the glow. The mother of everything that had ever glowed.

• • •

Footsteps approached. Willa shook herself out of her trance. She ducked underneath a desk in a dark corner and listened as a night guard walked through the lab, making his rounds. She could tell by his unhurried nature that he had no suspicion someone else might be in here with him. Willa held her breath and shut her eyes. She tried to be invisible.

After a few minutes, the guard left down a hallway and Willa reemerged. Now she searched the massive space, looking for her husband's workstation among the hundreds of desks. Eventually her lantern cast light over a framed photo of herself, Elliot, Marty, and Joseph. Her whole family, back before the war.

This was her husband's desk, and it was overstuffed with paperwork. As Willa thumbed through the loose file folders, she discovered that every one was labeled in handwritten marker with the word "CHICAGO." She set her lantern down on the table and got to work, devouring the contents of her husband's secret project.

In the pages she saw swastikas and Nazi regalia. Clipped photographs from German propaganda films. Articles about fascist rallies in Germany and America. Blurry photographs of malnourished men, women, and children, their heads shaven and their arms tattooed. Open graves overflowing not with soldiers but with bodies so starved and shrunken it was hard to tell the children from their parents.

In another folder, Willa found a stack of data reports, long scrawls of numbers and letters that read like code. Then more pictures. Pictures of television sets, car dealerships, electronic contraptions of all shapes and sizes. She saw the blueprints for the tablet device she'd found in her husband's briefcase, and the schematics for that massive glowing structure

beneath her very feet right now. According to the blueprints, it was called a “Conductor.”

Willa reached the last folder in the pile and slowed at its contents. What she saw inside was familiar to her, but not in the same way everything else on her husband’s desk had been. Now she was looking through a collection of her own family photos. Pictures of herself, of her entire life. She thumbed through sepia-toned memories of vacations and holidays. Of Marty as an infant. Joseph, too. Willa was in every picture. The pictures dated back a very long time, since long before she’d even met Elliot, all the way back to her childhood.

There were printouts of doctors’ reports. Results from physicals she’d taken, blood tests from when she was pregnant. Handwritten notes from her analysts about her various episodes. Her name was written at the top of each document. “Willa Fischer,” it said. “Subject.”

Here on her husband’s desk was a record of Willa’s entire life, studied and cataloged. It confirmed a suspicion that Willa had harbored since her conversation with Rachel earlier that day. She was the experiment. She had always been the experiment.

• • •

Her friend was awake. Once Willa descended the lab on the hill, lantern in hand, she discovered Rachel sitting out on the stoop of her front porch.

When Willa saw her, it was as though some invisible cleansing immediately occurred. Suddenly there was no anger or spite between them, no game of provocateur and prude. Just two women, alone and awake before dawn in the middle of the desert.

“You couldn’t sleep either, huh?” Rachel called into the darkness.

“No,” Willa said. She approached the doorstep.

“So I guess this means you’re talking to me again?” Rachel asked. She sounded hurt.

“My entire life,” Willa said, “I’ve just been someone else’s experiment.”

She felt like she might cry, but no tears came. Rachel stared at her, and neither one needed to say anything because they both knew there was no use denying it anymore. They stood together in the hum of the night, enjoying that rare electricity that had chosen them to pass between.

• • •

“I’m not a good person,” Willa said. She sat with Rachel a little later in the dirt of the town square, her lantern wedged between their legs. “I have terrible, evil thoughts. My youngest . . . Marty, I’m not sure we like each other. I don’t think I’ve ever really felt a mother’s love for him. And my older boy, Joseph. I know in my heart I love him, yet every day I imagine his death. I fantasize about all the awful ways he might be killed in battle.”

The horizon had just started to betray the barest hint of blue behind them.

“And I wanted it to happen,” Willa said. “I wanted my son to die. I wanted my boy to just hurry up and come home in a coffin. How is that possible for a mother to feel? I’m a monster.”

Willa looked at Rachel. “Now you know what a monster I am,” she said.

“You’re not a monster,” Rachel told her. “You’re a salmon flapping on the plank of some schooner. They’ve reeled you in.”

Rachel looked around to make sure they were still alone. And then she leaned over the lantern light and spoke more quietly.

“Listen to me, Willa. You need to get out of here. You need to escape this place. *Right now.* I don’t know everything, but my father—he tells me things. Like the splitting of the atom. I knew about that before I ever came to this place. And I know it’s not the only experiment they’ve been working on up there in that lab on the hill. They call it Chicago. It’s something bigger. Even bigger than the bomb. This one, my father says, is easier to keep quiet, to keep from ever spilling out into the newspapers. Listen to me, Willa, because it involves you. My father told me. He admitted it all. He says that some of the scientists—some of his colleagues eager to rise in their ranks—they’ve made personal sacrifices for this project. For Chicago. Their own families, the *crooked* ones, like you and me, the ones who don’t fit in easily here, they want to use us as test subjects, as guinea pigs. He told me they tried to convince him to offer me up as well, his own daughter. He refused, but he was the exception to the rule. Not everyone on this base had such scruples. Some made promises, inked and classified but legally binding, signed by the office of the president himself.”

Willa sat in silence. “Do you understand?” Rachel asked her. “After the war ends, your husband is going to be very generously compensated for what he’s done to you. And the war will end. *Soon.*”

• • •

Willa felt no surprise listening to Rachel's words, no shock or fear, just the same numb buzzing in her head and body she'd been feeling since she discovered her husband's device. She let her weight go as Rachel finished speaking, let her forehead slump down to rest on the girl's shoulder. The two sat in the early dawn light, alone in the center of the constructed village. Willa knew she should heed Rachel's warning. That she should get as far away from this place as possible, stand up and run. But she was tired. And it felt so warm to rest against the body of this girl who somehow not only understood Willa's wrongness, but felt affection for her because of it.

Without any reason left not to, Willa kissed her friend. Their lips met, and Willa enjoyed the feeling of giving in. It was like sinking. She could tell Rachel enjoyed it too.

But then Willa saw the girl's eyes go wide, and they both realized they were no longer alone. General Klein slowed as he approached the square, stunned at the sight of two women kissing in front of him. Rachel pulled away quickly. Willa watched the girl's expression change. It took Rachel only a moment to switch into survival mode.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

Willa felt confused for a moment, then she saw it on Rachel's face: The girl was protecting herself. Quarantining from whatever fate Willa was well on her way to being sacrificed to.

"That's disgusting! You're crazy!" Rachel shouted. General Klein stepped between them like a referee. He made no big scene. He just took Willa by the hand.

"Let's get you back home right now," he said.

Rachel sat in the town square. She did nothing as the general led Willa away. For decades after that morning, Rachel would play this final encounter back in her head. She would apologize to Willa over and over again—in her dreams and in the many letters she'd write the woman with no possible destination where they could be mailed. She would feel the most terrible guilt for her actions, for what she failed to do in those forty seconds that passed between their kiss and their forced separation.

For Rachel, that morning in the town square would come to serve as a dividing line between her youth and the rest of her life. Until that morning,

Rachel had always considered herself an exception to the rules that governed everyone else around her, all those people who appeared so eager to conform, to bow to power. But this belief had been hubris, naïveté. She'd had feigned obedience the moment she spotted the general's approach. She did it to save her life, her reputation.

After that morning, Rachel could never shake the self-loathing this moment instilled in her. She had met her own limits, and almost instantly it made her old. She could have done something else. She could have fought for Willa. Gone down with the ship unsullied, her conscience pure. But she hadn't had the courage. She had been a coward. She'd abandoned someone she was just beginning to love. And the worst part of it was, after that morning in the town square, Willa was so far gone that Rachel couldn't even apologize for her cowardice.

• • •

General Klein delivered Willa back home before Elliot woke up. The general sequestered Willa at the kitchen table as he called to her husband to come downstairs.

Willa sat like a child as the two men spoke out of earshot in the next room over. Eventually the general left, and Elliot joined his wife at the kitchen table, his face pale.

"We'll get you help," he said. "There are facilities for women who . . . We'll get you help, is the point." Willa wasn't listening. She was lost in the buzz in her brain. She stared at Elliot's briefcase resting in its usual spot across the room.

"You wanted me to find it," she said.

"What?" Elliot asked.

Willa stood up. She walked over to the briefcase and reached inside the front pocket, but the tablet device was no longer in there.

"Where is it?" she said. "Where did you put it?" She dug through the bag until Elliot walked across the room and pulled her back up to her feet, using force now.

"Oh, I get it," Willa said. "You don't need it anymore. The damage is done. Is that it?"

Elliot shook his head. “You’re hysterical,” he said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Look at you. You’re sick, Willa. I love you, but you’re sick and you need help.”

“You left it for me to find. You knew I wouldn’t be able to resist watching it. I’m not your wife at all, Elliot. I’m your test subject.”

“You are my wife,” Elliot said. “I need you to listen to me: You’re sick. You’ve been sick for a long, long time. You know it. I know it. Even Marty knows it.”

“Marty . . .” Willa said. Her son’s name caught in her throat.

“I have no desire to hurt you. Please try to believe me. I just want to help you get better.”

Willa took a step towards her husband.

“Elliot,” she said. “If you want to help me, just tell me the truth. I’m not angry. I’m just tired. I’m just in pain. I know all about it. I know about Chicago. I know about the deal you made, and I just need you to tell me that it’s true. To treat me like your partner. Your wife. Tell me I’m not crazy. Tell me what you want me to do, and I swear I’ll do it. I’ll do anything for our family—for you, for our children . . .” She looked towards Marty’s room. She thought about sweet Joseph overseas, her oldest boy soon to come home to a new world without her in it.

Elliot relented. He spoke slowly.

“You’ve never been happy here,” he said. “We both know it.” He stared at her. “Everything I’ve done at Los Alamos, I did for the safety of our country. For the future of our family. And I promise—I promise you, Willa, your sacrifice won’t be in vain.”

“Sacrifice?” Willa asked.

Elliot smiled his handsome smile. He was trying to calm her down.

“You’re going somewhere incredible, dear. I promise you. It’s where you’re meant to be. Where you’ve always been meant to be. And the work you’re going to do there . . . it will be glorious. Please, Willa, just . . . let me walk you there. Let me deliver you, and I promise that soon you will know a peace that’s eluded you your entire life.”

Willa stared at her husband. She wanted to believe him. To give in and not think anymore. She glanced down the hallway towards Marty’s bedroom.

“Can I say goodbye to our son?” she asked. “Can I see him one more time, and then I’ll go with you?”

Elliot didn’t respond, but he didn’t say no. Willa walked slowly past him towards her son’s bedroom.

• • •

Marty stirred awake as Willa crouched by his bedside. “Were you and Daddy fighting?” he asked as he opened his eyes.

“No,” Willa said. “No, honey. Your father and I were just talking.” She looked at her son and tried to keep herself from crying. She wanted to maintain her composure so Marty’s final memory of her would be a good one.

“Did you know that you’re going home soon?” she asked. A tear escaped her eyes, dribbled down her cheek. “To your real home, with your father. The war is almost over.”

“I am?”

“That’s right. And do you remember your older brother Joseph? You were just a little beach blanket when he left, but he’ll be there, too.”

Marty snuggled under the covers, leaned his little head against the pillow.

“And can I get real Christmas presents this year?” he asked.

“Yes, honey,” Willa said. She kissed him on the forehead.

“It’s not time to wake up yet,” Marty said. “Let me go back to sleep.”

“Yes, honey,” Willa told him. “Okay.” She was crying, but Marty didn’t notice. He fell back asleep.

“I do love him,” Willa said aloud to herself. She repeated the words to make sure she meant them. “*I do love him.*”

She stood up, wiped away her tears. She prepared to return to Elliot in the living room, but as she approached the bedroom door, she changed her mind. She decided to run.

• • •

She escaped out the back of the house, hopped off the porch, and sprinted across camp. It wasn’t difficult to find the dirt road just past the

cabins leading to the front gates of Los Alamos. She passed that familiar sign with the monkeys covering their eyes and ears and mouths. The one that read:

WHAT YOU SEE HERE

WHAT YOU DO HERE

WHAT YOU HEAR HERE

WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE

—Let It Stay Here—

She crossed onto the desert highway. She wasn't sure where she was headed. She was leaving the base for the first time in years, as desperately and as quickly as she possibly could.

No one seemed to realize yet that she'd escaped. Or at the very least they didn't appear to be giving chase. So after she got about a mile down the highway she allowed her feet to slow to a walk.

She kept walking all day. The highway led nowhere except more highway, more desert. She was pretty sure she was at least forty miles from the nearest town, if she'd even headed in the right direction. The longer she walked, the more confused she felt about why no jeeps from the base had come after her. There was only one road out here in the desert. They could have easily tracked her down, brought her back by force. So why hadn't Elliot alerted his superiors to her jailbreak and sent a platoon out to recapture her? It was a sudden stroke of luck that felt too convenient to be possible. Even though no one was around for miles, she sensed herself being tracked and monitored, as if hunted by a predator powerful enough to be utterly confident in the inevitability of its kill.

But even if it was futile, Willa refused to turn around and deliver herself back into her captors' hands. She walked. Then she ran. Then she got tired again and slowed down once more in the sweltering heat. Questions of survival now occupied her mind. Would she be better off continuing down this road where the men could find her whenever they wanted? Or should she cut a more secluded path through the desert, which might give her slightly better odds at throwing them off her trail?

Ultimately the decision was made for her. As she continued to walk down the highway, Willa noticed a barrier up ahead. It looked like a mirage at first,

a blockage wobbling and sizzling on the horizon line. But as Willa got closer, she realized it was no mirage at all, nor was it a barrier. It was people. Two men. Or, more accurately, Willa realized as she got closer, two *things* that had borrowed the shapes of men.

The creatures before her had no skin, no faces or bodies. They were merely outlines of the human form. All through themselves they vibrated with pinpricks of electric energy. The same formless grain she'd seen on her husband's tablet device and in that massive Conductor beneath the lab on the hill. The entities made no sign of movement. They blockaded the road, as if inviting Willa to join them.

Perhaps they really were a mirage. Perhaps she was succumbing to heatstroke. But she'd resolved not to turn herself in that day, not to the men of Los Alamos, and not to these strange glowing creatures waiting for her in the road. So she sprinted into the desert, running until she couldn't see any sign of civilization anymore. Until it was just her and the endless sand, the cacti, and those reptiles who, unlike her, could live for months without water.

Willa slowed down, realizing just how thirsty she was, how hopeless this all was. She rested in the dirt. She fell asleep and woke back up, remembering the dryness in her throat even in her dreams. It was worse than any thirst she'd ever experienced. The sun beat down on her. By the time it finally set beneath the desert horizon that evening, her skin was peeled and burnt.

The night was surprisingly frigid. Willa crumpled herself into the fetal position for warmth and tried to fall asleep. She wasn't sure if her body had the water reserves necessary to wake up again, and she felt fairly certain this would be her last night alive. In her dreams, she longed now for the men from Los Alamos to come and find her. To fetch her out of the sand and drag her towards whatever destination they had in mind. Perhaps there would be water there. Perhaps Elliot hadn't been telling her another lie when he assured her that she would like her new home, whatever and wherever it was.

When Willa woke up the next morning, she realized that she had indeed been monitored and followed, though not by her husband and his colleagues at Los Alamos. Those silhouettes of men made of electricity were standing not ten feet away, just staring. She stood up and briefly considered running

again. But she knew there was no point. There was just more desert ahead, no hope for survival.

“What do you want?” she asked the static men.

They stared at her, then began floating in the opposite direction. Willa was no longer sure what she herself wanted. To be left alone to die out here? Personal autonomy seemed irrelevant with thirst so urgent. So Willa followed the static men. And slowly, they led her through the desert.

• • •

Elliot hadn’t slept that night. Not because he was worried about his wife, but because he had been too busy with his final preparations for the Chicago Project. That morning would be the culmination of his life’s work to date.

Around four A.M., just as his colleagues had done on the morning of the Trinity test, Elliot and a few others piled into a buggy and drove out into the desert. They arrived at their destination before sunrise. They donned safety goggles and entered a small wooden building designed to protect them from the spectacle that, if all went according to plan, they were about to witness.

None of the scientists spoke as they took their spots by the window and waited for the test to begin. Then, about an hour after the sun rose, Elliot finally saw his wife on the horizon. She was trailing behind two men made of static. This was exciting. Elliot had only ever personally glimpsed the static men twice before in all his years working on the Chicago Project.

The scientists held their breath. Elliot watched his wife stumble through the desert. He could tell his colleagues were nervous, and to be honest, he was, too. Elliot had always prided himself on his ability to remain composed during big moments like this one, but even he let out an audible gasp at the first flickers of neon.

And then the illumination spread. A storefront built itself into existence in the middle of the desert. It spelled out letters on a big marquee.

“C . . . A . . . P . . .”

Glass windows blossomed from thin air, decorated with hand-painted drawings of astronauts and aliens, pirates and scarecrows, blue illuminated letters advertising all that the store had to offer:

NEW RELEASES. HORROR. DRAMA. ROMANCE.

• • •

Out in the desert, Willa realized that she knew this place. That she'd always known it, before she even knew her own name. How could she have forgotten?

Captain Video completed its formation. It towered in front of her. The door opened, inviting her inside. She smelled the aroma of popcorn wafting out into the desert and she no longer felt afraid. She understood now how absurd she had been to run, to struggle against the inevitability of her fate.

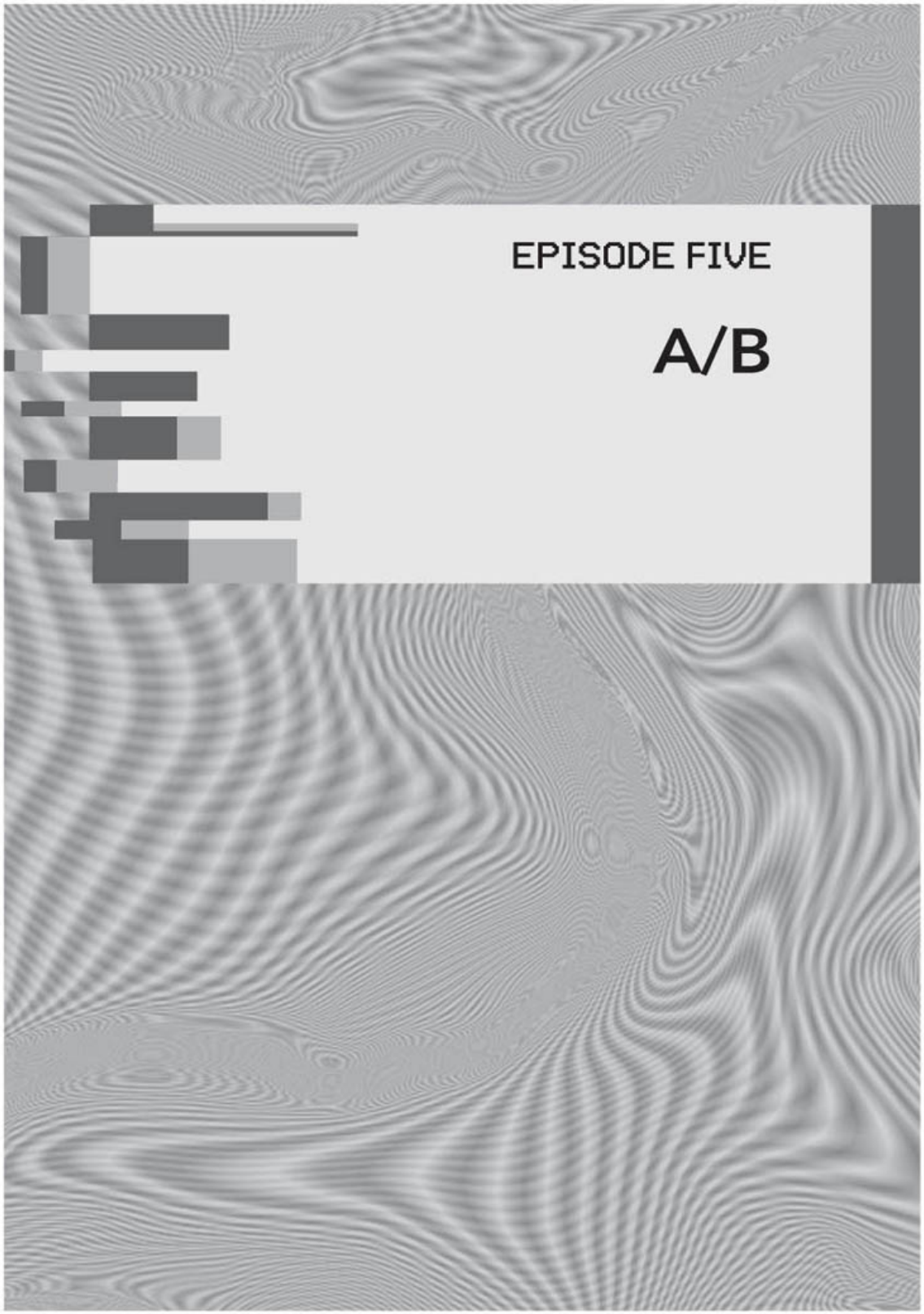
She walked towards the store's entrance. She heard the gentle chime of a little bell above the door as it opened, felt a refreshing gust of air-conditioning welcome her inside.

Her thirst was gone. Soon everything else fell away, too. It was so easy to let it all go: her name, her body, Elliot and Rachel, Marty and Joseph. Everything and everyone she'd ever loved. Mornings she'd spent with her mother as a little girl by the ocean. All of it dissolved into warm fluid, melting down as quick and easy as butter in a hot frying pan.

The little bell chimed once more as the door to the video store closed behind Willa. The storefront evaporated back into nothing, and soon the desert was calm once again.

The scientists all departed before noon. Their experiment had been a success.

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EPISODE FIVE
A/B

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1

BETHANY RETURNED TO AUSTIN with her tail between her legs. Which, I know, is dangerous imagery to use to describe a trans girl. But maybe a bit of adolescent humor is appropriate to start this episode off, because Bethany Peters was right back in the exact same place she had been when she was just eighteen years old.

She was feeling pretty far gone these days. She'd come down with a bad case of what was either insanity or Screen Sickness, depending on whom you asked. But even through her newfound haze, Bethany could recognize the irony of having looped right back to the start of her journey in this moment that felt so definitively like the end. Since getting back into town, she'd been crashing on her best friend Lily's couch, just like she'd done almost a decade earlier when she first arrived in Austin.

Back then, Bethany had staked her hopes on this city. She had believed Austin might offer a path forward, that for the first time in her life she might even find *herself* here. Austin had been earlier in its gentrification process then. Downtown hadn't yet been overtaken by the tech industry. There was still some collective hope in the air that this liberal enclave in the Texas droughtlands might successfully be kept "weird" in the face of rising mortgage rates.

But now, almost a decade later, from the window of the bus back into town, Bethany stared out at a city she once considered home and found it nearly unrecognizable. Austin had been assimilated, fully anonymized over the past decade until all that was left was Starbucks and traffic jams. Those pleas to "Keep Austin Weird" had fallen on deaf ears. Probably it had always just been a marketing hook, a slogan to put on T-shirts at the airport. To attract yuppies, to win tech bids. And now those Silicon Valley transplants had hollowed Austin out, and there was no place left for Bethany here. She had been part of the city's ill-defined "weird," and like

the rest of it, she was overdue for removal. Sure, Bethany was in the throes of static-brain paranoid psychosis, but she felt certain that at any moment some entity would come knocking on Lily's door to forcibly remove her from her former city, from the very surface of the earth. To take her far down below where she could no longer stink up the joint, pollute this bland new world that so many real estate developers had fought so hard to create.

• • •

Bethany hadn't seen a static man in person since that night at the Starlight Motel back in Lubbock. But that didn't mean they had left her alone. She felt surrounded by them at all times now, monitored and surveilled from deep inside her own body. The static men were in her dreams and in her head, clustering themselves together in an ongoing effort to take form.

They made it hard for Bethany to think. The static thrummed against her frontal lobe, tamping down her faculties until her brain felt like one big cotton ball soaked in ether.

How do you plan a defense against an undiagnosable illness taking over your body? How do you outsmart an enemy that's making it impossible to even think? Bethany still had no idea whether she was suffering from delusions or something supernatural. But it didn't really matter anymore. Either way, she was losing herself.

She knew Lily could tell that something was wrong—could sense that Bethany wasn't herself anymore; that whatever was going on was far more severe and sinister than your run-of-the-mill trans girl depression spiral. But Lily was out of her depth. She clearly had no idea how to help. So all she did was say, "You can stay here as long as you need. We love having you at our place."

It wasn't true. The other night, Lily's cis wife Mona had stepped out of her bedroom to breastfeed her infant and accidentally caught a glimpse of Bethany zoning out on her GlobalVill feed, watching a video of a man in a ski mask having sex with the top half of a severed deer carcass.

"I get paid to watch this," Bethany said, which was her attempt at an explanation. Mona shielded her baby's eyes from the screen as Bethany clicked the red button on her admin panel.

Later that night, Bethany heard Lily and Mona arguing through the bedroom wall.

“She’s going through a tough time,” Lily said. “She’s one of my oldest friends. I want to be there for her. You know how I feel about T4T.”

“I don’t care about T4T. I don’t feel comfortable in my own home,” Mona said. “I don’t think my baby is safe around her.”

Bethany sensed that eviction was imminent, and she was running low on backup plans. It seemed like everyone in her life was suddenly missing. She’d been searching for Jules Estrada on GlobalVill.com since that night at the Turbo Putt, but Jules hadn’t posted any new videos. And Kyle, the only other person who felt like anything of an ally in the wreck that her life had become, was still MIA as well. Bethany had called and texted him countless times over the last week. “Don’t let them make you disappear,” Kyle had said to her at the end of their first real conversation at GlobalVill HQ. And now he’d gone and done exactly that.

Everyone who could help her was gone, and Bethany knew that if she didn’t do something to save herself soon, she would be next. And so she went against every instinct in her body and made the phone call she’d been avoiding now for over a month. She packed up her stuff and left Lily’s without writing a note, then caught the bus downtown to meet her long-lost boyfriend Abel for dinner.

• • •

Abel was already seated at the table when Bethany arrived at La Paisible, a four-dollar-sign French spot where Bethany had suffered through more than one anniversary dinner. Abel stood up when he saw her walk through the door. Bethany could tell from his expression that he was disturbed by how ragged she looked. He was extra gentle as he hugged her. Bethany could feel Abel’s fingers tremble on her shoulder blades. He was handling her like damaged machinery, and that was how she felt.

“It’s so nice to see you,” Bethany said. It wasn’t true, but she’d made a decision to pretend, and she was going to see it through because this was about survival. The question of whether her relationship with Abel was a healthy one felt laughably irrelevant now. She needed an escape hatch, fast, and he was her only option left.

Abel didn’t ask many questions about where Bethany had been. He ordered a nice bottle of wine and told her that the police had called him to let him know that his car was sitting totaled in a tow yard outside Lubbock.

“They asked me if it had been stolen recently, and I told them yes. That I hadn’t had time to report it because work had been crazy. And you know what, Beth? It’s basically the truth. You stole my car. You disappeared. You left me kneeling on the ground with a ring in my hand.” He was angry. Bethany could tell he’d practiced this speech in therapy.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry about the car. I’ll pay for the repairs. Whatever it takes.”

The waiter presented Abel with the bottle of Malbec he’d ordered. Abel took a sip and nodded his approval. “I’m sorry, Beth,” he said. “But I’m done. I love you so much, but I’m done being your doormat.”

“I love you too,” Bethany said. She waved the waiter away from pouring her a glass. Abel looked surprised.

“You’re not drinking?”

“I stopped,” Bethany said, trying her best to sound penitent. “I’ve been . . . I know I’ve been awful. A mess. A complete monster to you. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Abel stared at her, trying to maintain the stern composure he’d clearly practiced with a licensed professional, trying to keep his gaze from softening.

“I’ve been sick,” Bethany said. “Unwell. Mentally, and physically. It started with the job—that stupid fucking job—but it’s become more than that. I know that you hate me right now, but I need help, Abel. If you ever loved me, I need your help because *I think I’m going to die*.”

Bethany was shaking, her voice louder than intended. All the normal couples enjoying their normal dinners stole glances at her, eavesdropping as Bethany cracked.

“Beth,” Abel said, shaking his head. “You’re not going to die.”

“No. You don’t understand. I am. I really am. I—I’ve—been seeing things. Hallucinating. And having thoughts—really dark thoughts that I can’t slow down. Like something terrible is about to happen to me. I can feel it coming.”

Abel put his hand out to calm her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry for what I did to you and the way I’ve treated you lately. I know it was wrong. I just—I wasn’t well, Abel. You were right. That job wasn’t healthy for me. And I’m quitting. I want to quit. I want to get better. And then you proposed out of nowhere, and I was in such a bad place, and I just didn’t know what to do. But I want to get better. Please don’t give up on me.”

Abel paused. He took another sip of his Malbec. He closed his eyes and then opened them again. And then he relented. He gave in, because that was just the kind of guy Abel was.

“Of course I won’t give up on you,” he said. “I love you, Beth.”

Bethany felt a surge of relief. She took his hand from across the table. “I love you too,” she said. “Thank you.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Abel told her. “Together. Whatever is happening to you. And whatever *this* looks like—us, long term: marriage, breaking up, whatever. That doesn’t matter right now. I don’t want you to worry about that. But if you need help, and I believe you when you tell me that you do, I’m here for you. I love you so much, and I want to help you.”

“Abel . . .” Bethany said. Tears formed in her eyes. She let her body untense, her posture ease for the first time since that night on Jules Estrada’s mattress on the floor of the Turbo Putt.

“You’ll quit your job,” Abel said. “And we’ll get you help. And I—” Abel blinked a few times. He looked suddenly confused. “I . . .” he said again. He pulled his hand away from Bethany and looked around as if someone had just turned off all the lights in the restaurant. He blinked a couple more times.

“Abel?” Bethany asked.

Abel clutched his chest and groaned loudly, then bellowed out a harsh cry, as if his intestines were being squeezed like a wet dishrag. He fell out of his chair onto the floor of the French bistro, pulling the tablecloth down with him, knocking over his fancy glass of Malbec.

The couples seated nearby had something new to gawk at now. Bethany rushed from her chair to Abel’s side. She knelt in front of him and tried to help him sit up.

“Abel?” she asked. “*Abel?*”

He was in too much pain to hear her. He grasped at his chest in a battle against whatever was happening inside him.

“Oh my god,” he said to himself. He looked at Bethany but also past her, as though something more urgent was playing across the film of his bulging irises.

“Help!” Bethany shouted to the patrons and waitstaff. “We need help!” She looked back at Abel on the ground, and for half a second she saw a flicker of gray television static flare across Abel’s eyes. Then the static receded. His eyes were still open, but they were no longer looking at anything.

Someone was calling 911 from behind Bethany. Others were rushing to her side to see what they could do. But Bethany knew all of it was useless. Abel was gone. Her sweet pushover of a boyfriend was dead, and now there was no one left who could help her.

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2

NO ONE TELLS YOU how lonely it is being a CEO.

Unlike the rest of the employees at GlobalVill.com, this company he'd founded and now ran, Anthony "Fisch" Fischer didn't have a *team.* Sure, he had an executive assistant (and Jennifer was a lovely young woman), but ultimately, Fisch sat all by himself at the top of a very tall corporate pyramid.

The other C-levelers here pretended to be his friends. They dined with him and asked how his family was doing. They sent Christmas cards in December. But Fisch wasn't naïve. He knew every single one of these vampires would bare their fangs at the first hint of blood. It was how they'd gotten so far in the tech world in the first place: innate ruthlessness.

Fisch didn't have that kind of cruelty in him. He hadn't needed it, because he'd had a special leg up the corporate ladder, had been what the kids on his streaming platform these days referred to as a "nepo baby." When Fisch was young, they'd had a different word for the same phenomenon. A better word, one that didn't obscure the way inherited power could be an albatross as much as a gift. How it could steal you from yourself before you ever had a choice in the matter.

Legacy, they'd called it.

• • •

Fisch's Chief Security Officer Shailene phoned after midnight. Here was a perfect example of the kind of tech-industry sociopathy Fisch was talking about. She was infamous in the Valley for her reputation to *get done what needed to get done*, always without any hint of emotion. Fisch had poached her from Facebook five years earlier for a low eight-figure salary,

and she came down to Austin to join the GlobalVill team, no humanity included.

“It’s done,” Shailene told her boss tonight. “The boyfriend has been removed.”

Fisch felt his body go cold. He talked to Shailene almost every day, but the callousness in her tone still inspired actual terror in him. It also meant she was good at her job.

“I understand,” Fisch said. “Let’s hope for a crossing overnight.” Shailene hung up without another word, and Fisch stayed awake a while longer, sitting alone in his study. He knew he should get to bed. He had the quarterly board meeting in the morning, and it was certain to be a bloodbath. Bethany Peters and this whole cursed A/B test he’d fought so hard for had become the bane of his existence. Tomorrow, up in Conference Room K, he’d greet more adversaries disguised as colleagues. He’d put on his best CEO’s smile, even in the face of failure, and he’d make a litany of excuses for the mess his ill-fated passion project had become.

Fisch powered down his laptop. He tiptoed across his ranch-style home, sneaking quietly past Justin’s bedroom in case the boy was still awake. Then he gently shut the door to the master bedroom and undressed in the dark. His wife Aubra was already asleep in bed. Good. Fisch couldn’t face her right now. Aubra, like most everyone else in this world, had no idea about the true nature of Anthony Fischer’s work. She was a sweet and generous woman. She loved Fisch unconditionally, just as he loved her. But talking to his wife right now, even sleeping here in this bed next to her, it would only make him feel more alone.

• • •

When Anthony Fischer was twelve years old, his dad took him and his brother on a hunting trip and told him that their family wasn’t like other families. This wasn’t a secret to be shared with the women of the Fischer clan. His mom didn’t know a thing about what his father revealed that day. Fisch had already known that his grandpa Elliot, a scientist by trade, had enjoyed unparalleled success after the war. The old man had designed the most popular television set on the consumer market, and had built an electronics empire in its wake. But what the boy didn’t know about his

grandpa until that hunting trip was that Elliot had received a leg up from the United States government, and that his entire empire was, in many ways, a front for the more specialized work he still did behind the curtains in the name of national security.

It would be many years until Fisch understood the full scope and history of it all: the great sacrifice that his grandma Willa had made during the war (bless her for her courage), and how his own father had dedicated his life to carrying on the family legacy as best he could.

Marty wasn't built for it. Fisch's father had been a lifelong drunk, the sad, withdrawn kind. Anthony had always sensed the gulf in his father's gaze before the young boy even knew what inebriation was. Marty was a tragic case. He always had been. A man who only ever seemed at peace late at night when he was alone, a glass of bourbon on the coffee table and an old black-and-white monster movie from his youth on the television. Marty died of liver failure at fifty-four. Fisch's grandpa gave the eulogy at his own son's funeral, glaring from beneath the eyepatch he wore now over his right iris.

After his father's death, Fisch vowed to escape the family legacy. He wouldn't let the same sad, slow fate that befell his father come calling for him as well. He went to school out east and studied painting. He found he had a natural aptitude for the arts, a creative instinct to match his charismatic personality. It made him something of a rising star on campus. He liked how none of his peers knew anything about his family business, about the sinister work that was paying his tuition.

Eventually, his grandfather called him home. Now Elliot himself was finally dying, at the ripe old age of ninety-six. The great man had never retired, and here he was even now, still working from his own deathbed. He had his people buy Fisch a plane ticket, and he made it very clear that if the boy didn't come meet him at his bedside, he could kiss those art school tuition checks goodbye forever.

And so Fisch flew back to Texas. He drove himself to the hospital in one of his dad's old cars and he knelt respectfully at the side of his grandpa's deathbed, planning to kiss whatever ring he needed to kiss, one last time, in order to ensure his continued freedom out east.

"Your father never had the strength for it," Elliot said that day. His voice was weak but lucid, as if he was delivering his last will and testament. "He

never had it in him to do the work that needed to be done. Your brother, he doesn't have it in him either. But you, Anthony." Elliot sat up in his bed. He stared at Fisch with his one remaining eye like he was staring at himself from the other side of a time machine. "You have what I did. The strength and the willpower I recognized in myself when I was just a boy, before the war, back when I had nothing. *You can be a leader.* You can do the work that no one else has the courage to do. That's a rare gift. It's something that can't be taught. That's something you either have inside you, or you don't."

"Thank you, sir," Fisch said. He made sure his tone was polite and reverent. He didn't want those checks to stop arriving in the mail.

"*No*," Elliot growled, and Fisch was startled by the fierceness the dying man was still able to conjure. "You don't understand what I mean. *It's inside you, boy. It's inside you right now.*"

Then Fisch's grandfather had reached his shaking hand out towards the little wooden drawer next to his hospital bed. He opened it and removed a small plastic trinket that would forever change the course of Anthony Fischer's life.

An hourglass.

Elliot told Anthony the demonstration would only take a minute. Then he turned the cheap little hourglass over on the bedside table, took off his eyepatch, and let the sand start to drip down.

"Look at me," Elliot said. Fisch did as he was told. He stood there and stared into the hole that once housed his grandpa's eye, and he watched as the old man showed him the thing that would forever separate Anthony from all others, from the rest of the employees at his company, from his wife and son and all the normal people in this world. After that, Fisch understood the urgency of his family's work. He understood what would happen to this world—*to all of existence*—if he didn't join the family business.

Sixty seconds passed, just as Elliot promised. The last bit of sand dripped down through the plastic pinhole in the center of the hourglass, Elliot secured his eyepatch back into place, and then there was no denying it anymore. Fisch's birthright. His link in this particular chain. *His legacy.*

• • •

The morning of the quarterly board meeting, Fisch woke up at six A.M. Aubra was still asleep in bed next to him. Justin wasn't yet awake. The CEO got dressed, gathered up his laptop and handwritten notes, and met his driver Charlie outside the ranch. Fisch stared out the window of his black-tinted SUV as it shuttled him from his secluded home out past the suburbs towards I-35, then finally into the early-morning congestion of downtown Austin. He walked quickly through the parking lot, then into the lobby past Rusty, the elderly security guard who always offered him a sucking candy and talked his ear off about his grandkids. Fisch had no time for such pleasantries this morning. He rushed past Rusty up the catwalk, then found Shailene waiting for him in his corner office.

"Unfortunately, she didn't cross overnight," Shailene said before Fisch could ask about his A/B test's progress. "It's looking unlikely that it'll happen today. Best estimates are twenty-four to thirty-six hours. But we feel confident this time that Bethany Peters is on track to complete her—"

"Fine, Shay, fine," Fisch said, cutting her off. He stared up at Conference Room K on the third-floor balcony. The first board members were starting to arrive, to take their seats around the conference table.

Fisch looked at his smartwatch. Fifteen minutes until the firing squad.

• • •

Today was supposed to be a victory lap. The cherry on top of Fisch's storied reign as CEO. He was supposed to be up in that conference room on the third floor clicking his way through a Keynote about the first-ever *fully automated crossing* to Public Access Afterworld, sharing slide after slide about how this work that he'd dedicated his life to—just as his father and his father's father had done before him—could now be automated. Trusted to an algorithm to handle moving forward. His legacy could end, before his own son grew old enough to be swallowed by it, too.

Fisch should have been bragging today about how he and his team had targeted potential "crooked" subjects based on demographic info and watch history, had served them job postings about entry-level positions in cities with GlobalVill campuses. How they'd hired the applicants who took the bait as content moderators, then triggered their symptoms via a custom algorithm designed to deploy video after video of exactly the sort of

material most likely to infect them with Screen Sickness. He should have been bragging about the unprecedented speed with which these crooked subjects had crossed over. How he and his team had kept them under direct supervision for this trial run, but that going forward, the algorithm could be deployed sitewide, would do their work for them without anyone ever needing to be hired as content moderators or even monitored at all. Here was the dream of the digital era: *full automation.*

But instead, today Fisch had a slew of embarrassing misfires and uncorrected bugs to make excuses for. The algorithm had been lacking. It served too much brutal content too quickly. Most crooked subjects simply stopped watching, wriggled their way off the line before they could be reeled in, stopped showing up to work or had a breakdown so severe they were no longer dependably controllable.

But then there had been Bethany Peters, whose initial readings indicated a perfect crooked subject, a near patsy whose pre-entry diagnostics were so flush with electricity he should have only needed the slightest nudge to make it all the way to the video store. *She.* Sorry. *She.* Fisch thought back to his DEI training and reminded himself to use the right pronouns.

The point was, it should have been simple. But the algorithm that his team cooked up had failed to land even such a slam dunk. Sure, the videos the algorithm had served Bethany hastened her symptoms, but then rather than cross over, she'd unwittingly intervened in her own experiment, had not only nearly quit her job, but had begun investigating Public Access Afterworld on her own time, had even taken it upon herself to make contact with one of the users whose videos the algorithm had been serving her.

For a moment, Fisch had even been worried she might figure out the whole charade—then the jig would be up and he'd need Shailene to remove Bethany Peters from the playing field entirely, as her security team had done last night with the boyfriend.

What an embarrassment that had been. The final humiliating blow to what had once seemed fated to be a model A/B test. It had made Fisch sick to poison a civilian, but he'd made an exception in hopes it might nudge Bethany over the edge in time for today's board meeting. The stakes were far too high, the hole he'd dug himself far too deep. He'd been working on this special project for years, and he knew its future—his son's future along with it—rested on the shoulders of one pesky transgender person. That this

Bethany was his last best shot at ending the Fischer “legacy” once and for all. Jennifer knocked on his door.

“Yes,” Fisch said. “I’m on my way.”

He straightened his sweater-vest and studied his reflection in the icy gray of his office’s glass. He flashed himself his CEO smile and tried to gather his confidence. As he headed up the catwalk towards Conference Room K, he thought back to his grandfather’s words in the hospital. The old man had insisted Fisch had something in him that couldn’t be learned. Something you were either born with or you weren’t.

It’s inside you, Elliot had said that day all those decades ago. Then he’d flipped over his cheap plastic hourglass, and in sixty seconds proved once and for all just how right he was.

It’s inside you right now. Fisch entered Conference Room K, ready to face the firing squad.

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3

“ABEL . . . ABEL . . . WHAT CAN you say about Abel?”

Bethany lost her train of thought. This had been happening constantly these past few days as she flickered in and out of hospital waiting rooms and funeral parlors. It now took intense concentration to stop her brain from switching onto autopilot and stealing time from her.

Where was she right now? Bethany looked around the church. Shoot. That’s right. She was at a funeral. Abel’s funeral. She was supposed to be delivering a eulogy.

“I’m sorry,” she said, up at the catafalque. “I spaced out.” She looked down at Abel’s family in the front row. They glared up at her, probably assuming she was drunk or high.

“Abel,” she said. “Abel was a good man. Abel was kind to me when no one else was. He wanted to help. Really that’s all he ever wanted. And I took him for granted. I ran away from him, but Abel never gave up on me. And now, probably because of it, he’s dead.”

Bethany felt another tickle of static creep up the nape of her neck. It was trying to make her numb again. Trying to put her back on fast-forward and take her away from her body. She shook it off, willed herself to stay focused.

“The doctors said Abel died of a heart condition no one even knew he had,” Bethany said. “But that doesn’t make any sense. It’s too convenient. He was trying to help me, and then he died at exactly the moment when I needed him most.”

Abel’s mother looked at her husband. The man placed a firm hand on his wife’s leg, as if to keep her in her seat, to stop her from storming the catafalque and attacking.

“There’s something I haven’t told anyone,” Bethany said. “And I know you might not believe me. But listen: Right before Abel died, I saw his eyes flash with television static. That’s not normal. That’s not normal, *right*?”

A priest approached the stage. He put his arm around Bethany’s shoulder and led her back to her seat like a baseball coach walking an injured pitcher to the dugout. Bethany could feel everyone staring at her. Some mourners shook their heads in disdain. Others whispered to one another, unable to hold their gossip for the post-funeral reception.

Another violent burst of static in her brain tried to zap Bethany away. She fought against the invasion. This new disease—this poison cloud spreading through her. She closed her eyes and imagined herself shooting laser beams at it *Space Invaders* style, batting away each new cluster of static as it attempted its continued takeover.

“My son was my life,” Abel’s mom said. “As a baby, he would smile up at me with the most beautiful smile in the world.”

Bethany opened her eyes. Abel’s mother was up at the front of the church now, delivering her own eulogy.

“We never knew about Abel’s heart condition, but I can assure you it’s real. The doctors confirmed it. It’s cruel and terrible, and it hurts so much that he’s been taken from us so young. But we have to accept that he’s gone now. That if this is God’s will, it must be natural.”

“No!” Bethany shouted, sitting up suddenly in her seat. “It wasn’t natural!”

“What?”

“It wasn’t a natural death,” Bethany repeated from the back of the room. “I told you: His eyes flashed with television static!”

“It *was* a natural death,” Abel’s mom insisted, attempting damage control for the crowd. “My son died of a heart attack at thirty-four years old, and he will be forever missed.”

“Then why did his eyes flash with TV static?” Bethany shouted. “Television static in your eyes is *not natural*!”

No one offered her a ride home after the funeral ended.

• • •

She caught the bus back to North Austin, mumbling to herself from a seat near the back. She had to talk out loud. It was the only way to keep track of her thoughts.

"The coincidence is too big," she said. "So I can't just be crazy. *I am crazy*, but that's not all that's happening here. Abel was going to help me, and someone made sure he didn't. Can static do that? Can static kill someone at a French restaurant?"

A lady wearing nursing scrubs turned around and shot Bethany an annoyed look. The other passengers on the bus could all hear her ramblings, and like Abel's family at the funeral, they assumed Bethany was strung out and insane. Because she *was*. But something had made her this way, and she needed to figure out who or what it was before it was too late.

"No. Static can't do that on its own," she said. "Static doesn't have arms, so it can't poison you. It was someone else. The static has an ally here in Austin."

"Please shut up," a grad student shouted at her. "And take a shower. You smell terrible!"

Bethany hunched low in her seat, balling herself up. Mania gave way to shame. She felt suddenly embarrassed, hyperaware of her own repulsiveness. She thought about those realtors who had transformed this city. Maybe they were the static's secret leaders. Maybe this was all part of their plan to "de-weird" the city, the final phase of their blueprint for a new, better Austin, Texas.

She could hear the static cooing to her now from its stronghold in her frontal lobe. It spoke louder than her own voice.

We'll be here soon, it told her. *And we promise it will be easy. It won't hurt to leave your body. It'll feel just like a warm bath . . .*

• • •

Bethany rang the bell for her stop, then stumbled off the bus into the late afternoon. She got lost several times on her journey home, taking wrong turns down North Austin streets she'd walked hundreds of times before. Eventually she found her old block by process of elimination, then approached the house she used to share with Abel.

She found the keys where they always used to be, under an old coffee tin. She let herself inside, and immediately discovered two floating static men waiting for her in the living room, levitating above the carpet, staring right at her.

“Nope!” she said, then slammed the door shut. “Not interested!”

She sprinted across the front lawn. As she neared the edge of the property, she almost collided with those same static men. They were out in the road now, just off the edge of the lawn, as if teleported. Their bodies sizzled and crackled and mocked her.

“No thank you!” Bethany shouted. “I’m not interested in what you’re selling. Go away, please!”

The static men just floated there, as if they found her petulance childish. She kept running, sprinting down the street away from her old home in the same direction she had come. Once she was halfway down the block, she glanced over her shoulder and saw the static men floating after her.

“Not today!” she shouted. “Nope, please!”

• • •

She couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, so she delivered herself back to GlobalVill.com’s Austin campus. Rusty, the elderly security guard at the front desk, looked terrified to see her. The last time the two of them were in the same room, Bethany had sort of held him hostage. She told the old man she was back from her trip, back to work the night shift at her old desk. She tried her best to sound normal and calm, but she knew she wasn’t fooling anyone. She smelled rank. She looked like roadkill.

Rusty typed a slow Slack message one finger at a time, not taking his eyes off Bethany. “Please wait,” he told her. He didn’t offer her a sucking candy like he always used to.

Bethany sat in the lobby and tried to read a magazine. The buzzing in her skull made it hard to see the words and pictures on the page. Eventually Douglas came down to meet her. Here was a guy Bethany would have been happy to never see again. Her old manager took a quick look at her and smirked, as if her current state of disarray was a personal victory.

“Wow, Bethany,” he said. “Loving the new look.” Then he chaperoned her back to her workstation. “Let’s try our best not to make another scene

tonight, okay?" he asked like he was speaking to a child. "There's a board meeting in progress."

Bethany glanced at the conference rooms on the building's third-floor balcony. Through the glass she saw CEO Anthony "Fisch" Fischer clicking through a Keynote presentation. She'd never seen the famous man before in person but knew him well from his many appearances on her laptop screen. It struck her as surreal to see him here, in the flesh. Everything from her real life was disappearing, and everything from the screen was coming to life.

• • •

By eleven P.M., the office had cleared out. A few daytime employees had worked late to try to impress the visiting CEO. But now with the board meeting over, the last of them packed up their totes and called it a night.

Alone at her desk, Bethany began to feel nervous again. She could sense the static nearby. It was speaking to her from inside her head.

We're not here to hurt you, it insisted. *We made this body you've been stuck inside, and now we want to unmake it . . .*

Bethany turned the volume up on her laptop. She tried to focus on the screen, to distract herself with her queue's deluge of violence, porn, and violent porn. But it was no use. The videos only made Bethany more jumpy and paranoid. She worried that at any moment the static might reach a hand out through the video player and pull her inside the screen.

She took a break, hoping that a glass of kombucha might clear her head for at least a few minutes longer. But as she walked down the catwalk from the main floor to the kitchen area, she failed to notice the static had taken form once again, until soon two glowing men were floating just in front of her, leading her ever downwards. This latest invasion had been so seamless, so *natural,* that Bethany hadn't even realized when it began. And now she was doing exactly what the static wanted, following it far down below.

The static was right—it felt easy. Bethany felt so numb and far away, far too vacant and drained to practice anything but obedience. So she followed the static down the catwalk, past Rusty the elderly security guard, past broken pinball machines that clanged to life as those glowing harbingers floated ever downwards.

Maybe the static wasn’t lying to her. Maybe it really did want to help. Either way, it felt impossible to keep fighting. As Bethany stepped off the catwalk into the building’s bottom level, she discovered the floor completely transformed. It was like something out of a dream. The hallway stretched forever, resembling the darkened innards of a subway tunnel. Now Bethany was somewhere new and uninhabited: an abyss, like the dark side of the moon. The static men continued to usher her forward. And as she let the void swallow her up, slowly, a new faint glow began to flicker. At first it reminded Bethany of the famous white light people claim to see during near-death experiences. But this, here, was more than just light. This was *somewhere*.

Neon danced itself into formation, emerging straight out from nothing, until soon, just ahead, there was a storefront wedged between the slim margins of the endless hallway.

“New Releases!” the neon lettering advertised. “Horror! Sci-Fi! Romance!”

The static men floated through the storefront’s entryway like ghosts passing through a wall. And this time, they didn’t need to use words, didn’t need to speak for Bethany to understand what they wanted her to do. She was supposed to follow them inside. So she kept walking forward, and the awning before her began to form its name, one letter at a time. “CA . . . PT . . . AIN . . . VID . . . EO.”

The front door opened, beckoning Bethany closer. A little bell rang out. It all felt so warm and easy. To disappear. To forget her name and everything else as she let her body draw closer.

No.

What was left of her brain protested from beneath heavy layers of bubble wrap.

You can’t let this happen to you. You can still try to resist.

She slowed to a stop right in front of that open door with the bell on it. She gathered whatever coherence she had left to resist the pull. She shook her head and screamed out loud, trying to ground herself in the reality of her own voice. She focused her remaining strength on escaping this hallucination, because that was what it was. A hallucination. This wasn’t real. If she didn’t let it be real, it couldn’t take her.

The video store shorted itself out suddenly, like a blown fuse, and then Bethany was back in the hallway at GlobalVill HQ, the actual, normal-sized hallway that connected the lower-level bathrooms to the staff cafeteria.

The static men were gone. It had worked. At least for the moment, Bethany had managed to return to herself. She hadn't let the static make her disappear.

She could still feel it buzzing inside her brain. And now it was getting annoyed, growing impatient with her pointless disobedience. *No matter,* it whispered to her. *We'll take you soon. We both know you can't resist much longer.*

The static was licking its wounds, already regathering its forces. Bethany could feel it in her head. The static wasn't lying to her. Its next attempt to take her would be impossible to resist.

• • •

A minute later in the kitchen, Bethany felt eyes on her. Douglas, she assumed, here to tell her she wasn't allowed to drink any more of the staff kombucha. But when she turned around, she realized it was someone else. Fisch, the CEO. He was packing up a briefcase on top of one of the diner booths, his shirt untucked. He looked exhausted. For a second Bethany thought he might chastise her for illegal snacking, but instead he smiled at her.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but is your name Bethany?"

Even though Fisch was looking right at her, had just said her name, it took Bethany an extra second to comprehend that he was actually talking to her.

"Yes?" she said, like a question.

"You're the moderator on our Trust and Safety team who reported that poor suicidal user to the authorities." He closed the top flap on his briefcase without zipping it up and took a few steps towards her at the kombucha tap. "I'm Anthony Fischer. Fisch, for short. I work here."

"I know who you are," Bethany said. "Everyone here does."

"Ah," Fisch said. He looked down at the ground like he was embarrassed.

“People here worship you,” Bethany told him. “You know that, right?”

Fisch shrugged. He seemed charmed by her.

“Yes, well . . . I’m a fan of yours.” He looked Bethany in the eye and smiled again. She couldn’t help but feel flattered. “What you did that night took courage, showed a great deal of compassion and leadership. I was very moved to hear about it.”

“I’m sorry about—” Bethany said. She looked down at herself, feeling suddenly embarrassed about her unkempt appearance, about that nasty, unshowered odor people kept noticing on her. “I’m not my best right now. I’ve been having a tough week.”

“That makes two of us,” Fisch said. He smiled once more, and it put her at ease. He walked back to his briefcase and zipped it up. “But now, finally, I’m going home.”

“I’m sorry about the food also,” Bethany said. Why did she feel such an urge to apologize in front of this man? Probably because he was famous. “I know I’m not supposed to have kitchen privileges.”

Fisch laughed. “You’ve more than earned that kombucha,” he said. He nodded to the glass in her hand then slung his briefcase over his shoulder and walked back over to Bethany.

“It was nice to finally meet you,” he said, extending his hand. “I think you’re a very special person, and I can’t wait to see where you go next at GlobalVill.”

Bethany shook the CEO’s hand, feeling grounded by his firm grip.

• • •

After Fisch left, she stayed in the kitchen, kombucha glass still in hand, playing their conversation back in her head.

Whatever strange spell she’d been under just a minute ago had momentarily cleared. She felt peaceful. The all-encompassing unreality of that interdimensional video store had been abruptly and totally washed away by Fisch’s calming presence.

He wasn’t anything like she imagined a CEO would be. He’d been so gentle, had put her at ease and made her feel cared for. Unlike Douglas and everyone else here who made her feel like a replaceable cog in a machine,

the CEO of all people had been the one who treated her like she mattered. Fisch had known her name, known who she was, made her feel like somebody who deserved to exist.

Then she remembered that it was literally the man's job to make her feel that way. It was a sleight of hand, a trick they probably taught in CEO school. Make everyone feel like they matter, that way they'll be more likely to do what you want. The revelation hit so suddenly that Bethany's kombucha glass slipped out of her hand and shattered on the ground.

She jumped out of the way of the shards. The fermentation wafted upwards, and in that moment she felt something she hadn't in weeks: *certainty.*

She grabbed another pint glass from the cabinet and filled it up with fresh kombucha. She gripped it tight in her hand as her heart beat faster. She worked the puzzle pieces of her new theory together in her head. What if it hadn't been some supernatural curse or a sudden bout of schizophrenia that had been making her crazy these past few months? What if it had been a person? Just a person, like any other?

A CEO.

Bethany stood alone in the kitchen, kombucha glass in hand. She knew the static would be back soon, and she suspected next time she wouldn't be able to resist its pull. But she was still here. She still had time to fight back. To wreak a little havoc before she departed this realm. In her newfound clarity, there in the GlobalVill kitchen, Bethany promised herself that even if it was the last thing she ever did on this planet, she was going to make that CEO pay.

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4

FISCH HAD TALKED TO her. It had been a long day, but that kind of behavior was downright sloppy, inexcusable. God. Why had he done that? Had he even got her pronouns right?

On the ride back to his ranch, he chalked it up to curiosity. Bethany Peters had become such a consistent headache these past months, and yet he'd never even met her in person. He only knew Bethany through studies and reports, team updates, and diagnostic profiles. It felt wrong for someone who had become such a big part of his life to be a stranger.

But no. He knew better than to blame his carelessness on mere curiosity. He'd been doing this work for decades, and Bethany Peters was far from his first challenging subject. So if it wasn't curiosity that made him introduce himself, what was it?

Hubris, maybe. The board meeting had gone better than expected: Sure, a few of the more openly adversarial figures—those who represented the US government's interests more than Fisch's own—weren't pleased with the progress of his latest A/B test. They'd never been. Had always felt the concept of automating such sensitive work was absurd, like leaving it to a computer algorithm to negotiate a peace treaty with North Korea. As predicted, the board had made theater of grilling Fisch on his test's many hiccups, and all the resources he was bleeding on one single person's journey to Public Access Afterworld. But Fisch had maintained his resolve, had turned the charm up to eleven, batted away all interrogations with wit and confidence. He could tell from the laughter and warmth in the room that he still had the majority of them on his side.

Then Shailene had knocked on the conference room door, interrupted him mid-sentence, and whispered in his ear that Bethany Peters herself was in the building. He hadn't lost his cool, had whispered orders right back to his head of security, telling Shailene to let Bethany in, to let her get back to

work. This was his territory. Having Bethany here could only hasten her progress.

And then later, after he'd packed everything up, responded to the "congratulations" and "great job" emails that came in from his warmer relations on the board, he saw Bethany in the cafeteria. She'd looked so dazed and disheveled that Fisch couldn't help but say hello. Perhaps he had just wanted to celebrate his imminent victory. To look this person who'd caused him so much trouble in the eye, to celebrate his victory in advance.

No. Hubris didn't quite explain it either. Fisch wasn't a vindictive person. Such behavior was beneath him. He knew there was something else, something deeper that had inspired him to introduce himself to the broken person who it was hard to not think of as his victim.

On the ride back to his ranch outside Austin, as his driver Charlie whisked him home, Fisch finally admitted to himself what had actually inspired his carelessness. Guilt.

Seeing that poor girl whom he'd built up into some kind of archnemesis these past months looking so wrecked, so helpless, it reminded him in a visceral way of the ugliness of this work he did. It was easy to hide from such realities when his life was all board meetings and Keynote presentations, business lunches and TED Talks. But there was a hidden human cost, and *there she was*, spaced out by the kombucha tap, hours away from a fate Fisch had worked very hard to ensure. That he'd doomed so many others to over his many years doing this work.

God. Was this whole A/B test just a manifestation of his guilt? A way to punish himself? He realized now that he had engineered a program to literally bring one of his victims right to him, directly to the office. And then he'd talked to her, put her at ease; charmed her, just like he did everyone, in order to get her to do what he wanted. He felt disgusted with himself.

As his car approached the estate, Fisch resolved to take a long break once this nasty business with Bethany Peters was finally through. Shailene's latest reports indicated that Bethany had already glimpsed the video store, would be safely inside it and fully crossed over in anywhere between twelve and twenty-four hours. Once it was finally over, Fisch would play the solemn general for Shailene and the others as he always did after a

successful crossing, then give his team marching orders to deploy the results of his A/B test sitewide.

And then? Vacation. Rest. He knew he was no good in this state. No soldier lasts long when all they face is war. He needed to rest, recharge, hide from the brutality of his work in his wife's embrace, his son's still-innocent smile.

• • •

"Tough meeting," Aubra said as Fisch walked through the front door. She could read his expression like a crossword clue.

"No. No. It went well," Fisch told her. "Kind of touch and go at first with the board. But by the end of the presentation, I had them eating out of my palm."

"Of course you did," she said. She hugged him, rubbed his back.

"Justin needs some help with his multiplication tables. I told him you'd knock on his door once you were ready."

"Great," Fisch said. He walked upstairs to their third-floor master bedroom. As he passed his son's room, he called through the closed door. "Hey, buddy—I'll be right in after I shower."

But as he put on his nighttime clothes a few minutes later, a sudden wave of foreboding overtook the CEO. He knew this feeling. Before he had time to prepare, it was too late. The monster was on top of him, tackling him to the ground. He tried to force himself not to scream as bat wings whipped outwards, flapped wildly beneath the bedroom's ceiling fan.

The monster Chimotera let out a terrible roar. That iconic, instantly recognizable roar from so many of his movies. The creature bellowed out across the bedroom like an air-raid siren. He kept clawing wildly, performing an improvised autopsy on the CEO.

Fisch gargled and gasped and tried not to scream as Chimotera tore him open. As the monster sliced his claw right down Fisch's middle, then wasted no time digging out the intestines and vital organs he found inside. It hurt like death, but Fisch forced himself to maintain his composure.

"Buddy!" he shouted to the half-man, half-bat on top of him. "Buddy! This is a disturbance. You're having an episode."

Chimotera growled in ecstasy, flapped his bat wings in violent flutters as he kept digging out Fisch's insides. Then a look of mild self-awareness crossed over the monster's face, and he began to slow his attack.

As Chimotera came down from the high of his bloodletting, Fisch calmed himself, too. Those wounds that just a moment ago had hurt like real death now receded back into fantasy. Within seconds, Fisch was whole again, without a single scratch on his chest. The confused monster sat on top of him like a dog reprimanded for pissing on the carpet.

"I thought you were past this sort of behavior," Fisch told Chimotera. He sat up and buttoned his shirt. "We talked about this: If you want to talk to me, you don't need to attack me. Just call for me and I'll meet you in the usual place."

Chimotera stared at Fisch.

"Okay? I'll see you there."

He smoothed out his shirt, and when he looked back up, Chimotera was gone.

Fisch finished dressing. Justin's multiplication tables would have to wait a bit longer. Fisch's workday, it seemed, was not quite over yet.

• • •

Fisch headed to the east wing of his house, to the secluded basement he'd had renovated a decade earlier into his own personal home theater. He rushed past La-Z-Boy chairs to the wooden cabinet under the big screen where he kept his movie collection. He thumbed through Blu-rays, DVDs, and when possible, 4K editions arranged in chronological order. Here was the monster's whole series: *Chimotera!* (1944), *The Bride of Chimotera!* (1946), *Son of Chimotera!* (1948), *Chimotera! Meets Abbott and Costello* (1949), etc., etc.

He found the particular title he was currently up to near the end of the shelf: *Chimotera! '99* (1999), a nu-metal soundtracked reboot generally considered the nadir of the franchise. If the monster wasn't locatable in *Chimotera! '99* anymore, Fisch would have to move on to the next reboot, *Chimotera* (2006), a humorless Michael Bay–produced exercise in gore that held an 18 percent Critics Score on Rotten Tomatoes.

Fisch was getting close to the franchise's end, and he shuddered to think what would happen to his long-standing working relationship once he ran out of remakes and reboots to communicate with Chimotera within. He'd have to find a new franchise character on the inside. Perhaps Freddy Krueger? Batman? It should be someone with as many movies as possible, to maximize their time together. Or maybe he could just get his allies on the board with Hollywood connections to fast-track a new trilogy of Chimotera reboots quickly, even if they had to be bargain-basement, straight-to-streaming duds.

Fisch loaded the *Chimotera! '99* Vinegar Syndrome twentieth anniversary special edition into the Blu-ray player, dimmed the lights, and took his seat in his favorite recliner. The iconic One Universe Studios logo flashed across the screen. Fisch let his eyes go soft and his vision blur. He tried to will the film he didn't actually want to watch to transform from its surface-level plot back into an assemblage of sounds and colors: the movie under the movie.

On the screen, a group of teens played by Breckin Meyer, DJ Qualls, Jessica Biel, and a few other minor nineties teen heartthrobs were filling their campervan up with gas. They were parked outside a rest stop that overlooked an abandoned laboratory on a hill. Chimotera's old lab, of course.

"Yeah, it's just a weekend away with friends. Don't worry, Mom," Jessica Biel said into a pay phone. "Josh's uncle owns this rustic building where they used to do gnarly experiments back in the 1940s. He's converting it into a boutique hotel for touring musicians and alt artists. And he's letting us stay this weekend for free."

Fisch willed all conscious thought from his mind. He focused on his breathing. He knew not to rush this process, because in this particular work he did, even more so than the rest of his CEO duties, anxiety was only going to make him less effective.

Slowly, he entered a trance state, using the movie on screen as a guided meditation. Back when he first pioneered the Screen Share program at GlobalVill, getting into this state used to take him full days alone in the dark watching the same movie on repeat over and over again. Now he was such a pro at it that he could usually dip into that meeting ground between realities before the end of act one.

And sure enough, as the latest batch of doomed teens approached Chimotera's old lab on the hill, Fisch felt the movie unform before him, melt back down to its component parts. Soon the narrative was long gone and Fisch was certain he had reached his destination. He allowed his eyes to refocus on the new image on screen.

"See? Was that so hard?" he asked Chimotera, who was staring back now from the other side of the screen, sitting in the front row of a movie theater of his own.

"I'm sorry," the monster said. He stood up and approached the screen. "My reveries—sometimes they get the best of me, and then the monster inside takes command."

Chimotera spoke like a thespian. That early-twentieth-century Laurence Olivier–style accent that had been so prevalent in his early Lon Chaney, Jr.–starring pictures had never quite left Chimotera's voice when he spoke to Fisch in this realm. Here where he was less any of the individual actors who had played him over the years and more a mélange of the most iconic attributes they'd all lent the role.

"Wilhelm, what happened?" Fisch asked, calling the monster, as he always did, by his human name from the first film.

"What do you mean?" Chimotera said, acting as if he hadn't just clawed out the CEO's intestines a few minutes earlier.

Fisch could tell something was wrong. It wasn't normal for Chimotera to have the kind of episode that had just occurred in Fisch's bedroom. In fact, it had only happened once before: years ago, during the Erin Morrison debacle. This had Fisch on edge. He got the sense immediately that the monster wasn't telling him something.

Which was nothing very new. Chimotera had been growing distant for a long time now, at least since the third or fourth entry in his franchise. As the sequels piled up, the monster had become more and more reluctant to collaborate on the work the two did together. Fisch genuinely considered Chimotera a friend—perhaps his only real friend outside his family—but he could tell Chimotera didn't trust him.

Now the monster was being purposefully evasive, pretending that everything was fine when clearly it wasn't. *Something* had made him freak out and hop between dimensions to gut the CEO in his bedroom, and Fisch

had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what it was. The longer Chimotera batted away his questions from the other side of the interdimensional screen, the surer Fisch grew.

“Did you see the person we talked about once?” he asked the monster finally. “Did you see *the receiver*?”

Fisch could tell from Chimotera’s expression that he had guessed right. That his worst fears were warranted.

• • •

A few minutes later, Fisch dialed Shailene from the driveway. Charlie was already on his way back to pick Fisch up as the two of them talked through a contingency plan to deal with Bethany Peters as quickly and cleanly as possible.

“I’ll call the boy and fill him in,” Shailene said.

“No. It should be me directly,” Fisch told her. “Just get the poison to his apartment. The same batch we used on the boyfriend.”

“Already in transit,” Shailene said.

Fisch felt slight relief at Shailene’s swiftness. She really was the best.

“I don’t need to remind you, but let’s not be sloppy here,” Fisch said. “Even if this is an emergency. We leave no trace, as always.”

“Of course, sir,” Shailene said.

“My god,” Fisch said. “What is happening these days, Shay? *The receiver.* In our own midst. Right under our nose.” Fisch shook his head. His driver approached. He felt humiliated. He shuddered to imagine the board’s reaction once they caught wind of all this.

“Let’s not forget, it’s still just rumors at this point,” Shailene told him. “The subject’s vitals are well within normal range. There’s no direct evidence to indicate he might be—”

“*She*,” Fisch corrected. “Let’s make sure to get our pronouns right.”

“She,” Shailene repeated. “Yes, of course. Regardless, we shouldn’t fixate until we know more. There will be a time later for reflection, analysis. Right now, we nip it in the bud. I’ve got your nephew on the other line for you. I’m connecting you now.”

“Thank you, Shay,” Fisch said.

• • •

Once the call was transferred, Fisch explained the situation to Kyle as best he could from the back of the car. He wanted there to be no mistake. Bethany Peters needed to be removed immediately. *Dead,* in the ground, where she couldn't ever reach Public Access Afterworld.

He repeated this last bit several times: that the girl they'd spent the last two months spending millions of dollars and countless hours trying to force towards the video store could now under no circumstances be allowed to reach her destination.

"Are you sure it should be me that does this?" Kyle asked his uncle. The boy sounded sleepy. Probably stoned. "It seems sloppy, doesn't it? I removed myself from the playing field a week ago when we agreed the most effective narrative was me as the latest victim to disappear."

"She trusts you, and right now, that's our greatest asset," Fisch said. "Shailene's men will be at your house in ten minutes. They'll cook for you, decorate the place, take care of everything. You just need to get dressed, get back in character, and give her a call."

On the other end of the line, Kyle sighed like this was all just an annoying imposition on his social calendar. Fisch didn't love the idea of involving his nephew in a matter this delicate. The kid had always struck him as entitled, too eager to coast by on his last name, to rise through the ranks at GlobalVill without really doing the work because he knew that the place was, even after all these years, still a family business.

But Shailene was right. Kyle was the cleanest option for this particular emergency. He'd been embedded with the project from the very beginning, had done a good job so far monitoring Bethany's progress firsthand, gaining her trust. He was the one most likely to be able to get Bethany alone and take care of this quietly. And if he didn't, Shailene's entire team would be waiting in the wings with other contingencies ready to execute.

"Okay, Uncle Fisch," Kyle said. "I'm on it. I won't let you down."

"Good," Fisch told him. He hung up and leaned against the headrest in the backseat of the car.

Fisch took a brief moment then to silently mourn his A/B test. He knew the special project that he'd been working on for years, that just this

morning he had defended so vigorously to the board, now was all over. And with it too his hopes of innovating himself and his son an exit strategy out of their shared birthright.

He silently cursed Bethany Peters. He tried his best to hate her. It seemed absurd that one person could cause him so much trouble. And yet the guilt he'd felt after their meeting in the GlobalVill cafeteria was still with him even now, and he couldn't help feeling sorry for what had to be done to the poor girl.

He knew it was necessary. Shailene had seemed skeptical of Chimotera's intel, but Fisch could tell from the monster's expression back in his home theater that this was no false alarm. This was a genuine emergency. If Bethany Peters was allowed to live through the night, if she managed to make it to Public Access Afterworld, the trouble she'd caused Fisch so far would be nothing compared to the destruction that would follow.

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5

BETHANY CAUGHT THE BUS to Lily's, pint glass of kombucha in hand. She rang the doorbell ten times, then pushed her way into the living room once her friend finally answered. It was three A.M., and Lily was in no state to keep up with Bethany's manic ramblings about the grand conspiracy she'd just unraveled back at GlobalVill. Lily nodded, listened, fetched her troubled friend some fresh linens, and told Bethany that she was going back to sleep. They'd talk in the morning.

Minutes later, while Bethany paced the living room, the glass of kombucha sitting on the coffee table in front of her, she overheard Lily and her wife arguing through the bedroom walls.

"She's not in a good place," Lily said. "Have some empathy—her boyfriend just died."

"She wasn't in a good place long before that," Mona said. "She's never been in a good place."

Eventually her hosts fell back asleep. Bethany stayed up all night fleshing out her new theory in her head, then she watched the sun rise through the backyard window.

She didn't dare go to sleep, lest the static in her brain overtake her again. She felt it in there still, of course, rebuilding, gaining strength for its next attempt to pull her towards the video store she'd seen form out of thin air back at GlobalVill.

GlobalVill. That's where all of this insanity began. It was so obvious now. Through the fog she had seen it clearly, glimmering in her kombucha glass like a smoking gun.

They'd been behind it all, everything she was going through. They were the ones responsible for driving her insane, for ruining her life and killing her boyfriend. They'd done it on purpose. Their Code of Conduct and

pinball machines, their corporate technobabble and rooftop gardens, it had all been window dressing, a ruse to appear less sinister. But the truth was GlobalVill wasn't a tech company at all. They were *satanists*. Or maybe demons. This part Bethany was still working out. Potentially they were warlocks from an ancient evil sect, pagans, or, okay, long shot here, leprechauns who had somehow mastered the dark art of gigantism so as to appear regular sized.

It didn't really matter. Whoever or whatever her tormentors were, she was going to expose them, throw a fucking pipe bomb into their whole innocent tech world act. Bethany basked in her newfound clarity. She refused to entertain the thought that this latest theory of hers might be the product of a deranged mind. That's what they would want her to think. She knew she was crazy. She also knew she was right.

Wrath, it turned out, was a more powerful inebriant than the static trying to overtake her, at least for now. It gave her purpose, kept her here in her body for one moment longer, and then for the next.

A little after sunrise, Lily and her wife spoke in hushed debate from the bedroom, though Bethany couldn't hear the words. Finally, her friend emerged, and seemed disappointed to find Bethany still pacing the living room floor, just as she had been in the middle of the night.

Lily convinced Bethany to sit down at the kitchen table, to drink some water. She begged her to calm down so they could have a rational conversation. She spoke calmly and slowly. She told Bethany that Mona had put her foot down, that Bethany couldn't stay in the house another night.

Then Lily took out her wallet and asked Bethany what she needed. She said that she and Mona wanted to contribute financially to help Bethany get through this crisis. But this was a one-time deal. Until Bethany could get herself the help she needed, could get healthy again, she couldn't be in their lives anymore.

"I don't need to stay another night," Bethany said. She tried to sound calm. "I don't need your money, and I don't need to ever bother you again. But I do need your help with one last thing before I go, because I don't think I'm lucid enough to do it on my own. And then I'll be out of your hair forever, I promise."

Lily sighed. "What do you need, Beth?"

“I need you to buy me drug tests,” Bethany said. “Lots of drug tests.”

• • •

By the time Lily returned from her errand, it was late in the afternoon. She found Bethany pacing, as manic as ever, eating ham cold cuts from the fridge.

“The ham helps me stay here,” Bethany told Lily before her friend had closed the front door. “If I focus on how the ham tastes in my mouth, I don’t disappear.”

“Okay,” Lily said.

She put the shopping bag down on the table, then glanced towards the bedroom where Mona had been hiding from their houseguest all day.

“Did you get the drug tests?” Bethany asked, mouth full of ham.

“Yeah. I had to go to three different pharmacies and one specialty store for chemists, but I think I got every drug test currently on the market. And a bunch of science stuff, too.”

Lily emptied her supplies onto the table. Beakers, test tubes, pipettes, a scale, and as promised, at least a dozen self-administered drug tests. If this really was the last thing Bethany needed to finally leave her and her wife alone, Lily wanted to do a thorough job.

Bethany scavenged the materials, ripped open a few boxes.

“Yes. Yes, great. This should do it. We need to test for everything. Drugs hasten the process. Hasten the Screen Sickness.”

Bethany stared at Lily, wide-eyed and jittery.

Lily looked at the kitchen table. “Do you want to give me . . . um . . . a urine sample?” she asked.

Bethany laughed.

“No. Ha! No! These tests aren’t for me.” She pointed at the pint glass of kombucha on the coffee table. “It’s for *that*.”

• • •

It was getting near dinnertime as Lily got to work testing the kombucha for drugs.

Bethany had continued to ramble like a crazy person about satanists and . . . gigantic leprechauns? But through the paranoia, Lily had gleaned the basics. Bethany was convinced her employers had been drugging her to drive her crazy, and so she'd escaped from work with a sample of the office kombucha to prove her theory.

Lily carefully assembled each test, laid them all out on the kitchen table, and calmly humored her friend's request to test the liquid for every drug known to man.

Bethany paced behind her the whole time, more wired than ever. Lily squeezed a few drops of kombucha from a pipette onto each of the strips she'd bought. And as each test slowly came back negative, she could feel Bethany finally start to crash, to come down from her manic episode.

THC, negative. Cocaine, negative. Methamphetamines, diacetylmorphine, negative, negative. Lily announced each new result to Bethany with the bedside manner of a nurse delivering news she knew would crush her patient.

Ketamine, negative. GHB, negative. PCP, benzodiazepine, negative and negative. Psilocybin . . .

Wait, positive?

Lily had to take a second glance at what felt like the hundredth test strip of the day to confirm that the stolen kombucha Bethany had showed up to her house with had indeed tested positive for psilocybin, the chemical component responsible for the hallucinatory qualities of magic mushrooms.

"See!" Bethany shouted as Lily retested on a fresh strip to make sure it wasn't a fluke. This second test came back positive too, the non-control line bold and unmistakable.

"Psychedelics," Bethany said. She was growing excited once again. "It makes perfect sense. Just test for psychedelics. Have you done LSD?"

"Like in real life?"

"No," Bethany said, as if her friend was the insane one. "The test."

"Oh. No. Not yet . . ."

Lily searched the strips she'd arranged on the table and found a test for diethylamide, the chemical component in LSD.

“I knew it!” Bethany shouted. She danced around the living room to celebrate as the results of this latest test came back positive as well. “I knew it! Yessss!”

Mona stepped out of the bedroom, stirred by the commotion in her kitchen. Lily tested for LSD once again, just to make sure. She and Bethany both stared in horror as they awaited the latest results.

Positive. Very, very positive.

“Jesus,” Lily said. She looked at Bethany. “You said you got this from the GlobalVill kitchen tap?”

Bethany nodded as she searched the remaining drug tests. “Salvia. Do salvia next,” she said, shoving another test strip into her friend’s hands.

• • •

A few minutes later, after several more positives, Bethany paced around the living room feeling vindicated, nearly bouncing off the walls. Lily and Mona argued in the bedroom about what to do next.

“How do you even know that kombucha came from her office?” Mona asked. “She could have brought it from some drug den she’s been hiding in.”

“Maybe she really is in trouble,” Lily said. “I know her. I’ve known her for years, and she hasn’t been herself lately. Not since she started that job. Maybe someone really is spiking her drinks. Trying to drive her crazy.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Mona asked.

“Why would people do that to a trans girl?” Lily said. “*People hate us,* babe. We’ve been together for how many years now and you still haven’t learned that?”

“So call the cops,” Mona said. “Have her fill out a complaint against her employers and then get her out of our house like you promised.”

“Excuse me,” Lily said. “Do not tell a trans woman to call the cops. *Ever.*” As the conversation escalated into a marital spat, Bethany heard the baby in the nursery wake up and begin to cry.

Mona stormed out of the bedroom. She glared at Bethany as she passed, then slammed the door to the nursery behind her as Lily too stepped back out into the living room.

“It’s real,” Bethany told her. “I drank three glasses of that shit last night. They’ve been serving it to me since day one. Do you believe me now?”

Lily sighed. “I do,” she said. “Or . . . I’m going to choose to believe you, because even though it’s insane, my heart tells me I should.”

The two friends stood in silence. From the nursery, the baby’s cries quieted as Mona presumably began to breastfeed.

“So what do you want to do?” Lily asked Bethany. “Where do we go from here?”

Before Bethany had time to answer, her phone rang. She walked over to the coffee table and picked it up. She was pleasantly surprised to see the name on the caller ID. She hadn’t heard from Kyle in over a week, had all but given up on him. She’d decided that very night that she was sure he was dead by GlobalVill’s hands. But here he was, the only other person on earth likely to believe her about what her employers were trying to do. Maybe her luck was finally turning around.

• • •

“Kyle—”

“I’m sorry. Sorry sorry sorry,” he said before Bethany had time to get another word in. “I’m sorry for disappearing, I just—I told myself I wasn’t going to burn out, and I shoved it all down and it bottled up until it blew. And I needed to get out of there. A clean break. So I ghosted you. I’m an asshole, basically. How are you?”

“I need to see you. It’s an emergency . . .” Bethany said. She opened the front door and stepped out into the yard, walking diagonals up and down the grass.

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “I mean—yeah, of course. I’ve been wanting to see you too. I’ve been missing you, and thinking a lot about my life.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot, too,” Bethany told him. “And get this: They’re fucking *satanists.* Douglas, Fisch the CEO, the whole damn place. Satanists! Or warlocks. But the point is, they’ve been poisoning me. *Us.*”

“What?” Kyle asked.

“I’m here right now at my friend’s house. We just tested a sample of the GlobalVill kombucha for hallucinogens, and guess what? It’s spiked! It’s

very fucking spiked!”

“Holy shit,” Kyle said.

“I know. It’s going to be national news. I’m going to blow the lid off their whole damn operation.”

“We need to meet,” Kyle said.

“Yeah. I know. Maybe downtown? I don’t know whether to talk to the police, or—”

“My place. Let’s start at my place. You should come over. I’m making dinner, and there’s something I need to talk to you about, too. Something urgent that’s been on my mind.”

“Oh—” Bethany said. She stopped pacing. Lily stepped out onto the porch to make sure she was okay. “All right,” Bethany said. “Yeah. I guess that works.”

“Good,” Kyle said. “I’ll text you my address.”

• • •

Twenty minutes later, Bethany hugged Lily and stepped out of her friend’s car into Kyle’s South Austin driveway.

“You sure you’re up for this?” Lily asked.

“Yeah. I need to talk to him. He’ll understand. He’ll know what to do, and then I’ll be back soon.” Bethany looked her friend in the eye. “Just protect that kombucha sample.”

“It’s not going anywhere,” Lily told her. Bethany closed the car door and walked up to Kyle’s front porch.

Lily waited by the curb to make sure Bethany got inside okay. She saw the lanky kid her friend had told her about usher Bethany inside. Once Lily knew Bethany was safe, she turned her car back on and drove home.

Mona was waiting for her in the doorway, sleeping baby cradled in her arms. Lily felt exhausted, in no mood for a fight. She knew she had to be firm here, or her wife would shut the whole thing down.

“I believe her,” Lily said before Mona could speak. “I don’t need you to, but I am choosing to believe her. I’m choosing to help.”

“I understand,” Mona said. “I’m not the enemy here. If she’s right, I want her to be safe. And if she’s making it up, I want her to get the help she needs.”

“Thank you,” Lily said. She hugged her wife, kissed their sleeping baby on the forehead. Then she noticed the guilty look on Mona’s face.

“Oh God, babe. What did you do?”

“I’m sorry, I just—this is above our pay grade, Lil. I called the cops.”

“You—”

The doorbell rang.

“If it’s real, they’ll be able to help,” Mona said. She answered the front door.

The woman standing on their doorstep didn’t look like any cop either of them had ever seen before. She wasn’t dressed in a uniform, though no one would mistake her designer pantsuit and perfectly manicured nails for “plainclothes.”

“Hello,” the well-dressed lady said. “I’m Shailene.”

She stepped into the house without being invited inside.

“You’re . . .” Mona looked confused. “You’re with the cops?”

“In a sense,” Shailene told them. “Or maybe more like the cops are with me.” She surveyed the home, then walked towards Lily over by the living room couch. “Do you mind if I turn on the television?” She picked up the remote control on the coffee table.

Before either Lily or Mona could answer, Shailene pressed the power button. That prestige cable show about werewolves that everyone was talking about was playing on HBO. Shailene smiled as she turned the volume all the way up.

“Oh, I’m totally addicted to this one. Have you seen it?” She put the remote back down on the table, then shook her handbag off her shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Lily asked. Shailene opened her bag and put on gloves. On the television screen, a werewolf and a human made love in the crumbling foundation of an old plantation home.

Lily and Mona exchanged a final confused look as Shailene withdrew a revolver from her pocketbook. She fastened the silencer onto the tip of the

gun, trusting the noise of *The Wolves of Birmingham* to cover whatever clamor was soon to follow.

• • •

Five minutes later, the rest of GlobalVill's security team was hard at work cleaning the place. Gloved hands filled trash bags with drug tests, beakers, and scales.

Everyone was careful not to disturb the bodies on the ground. The more squeamish of the team avoided glancing down at the sight of those two mothers and one newborn cradled together on the carpet. On the TV, greedy Uncle Morphole, second in line to the Clan Lycra throne, inked a treacherous blood alliance with the vampire king. Shailene glanced at the screen as she poured the contents of Bethany's tainted kombucha glass into the sink, washing it down the drain before handing the glassware back to her men to seal up in a little plastic evidence bag.

"Do you mind turning that off?" she asked the guy nearest the remote. She hadn't seen this new episode yet, and she didn't want to accidentally catch any spoilers.

Once the kombucha was fully disposed of, Shailene took out her cellphone to check for updates on Kyle's progress.

"We need to be moving," she said as her team finished their work. "The night is just beginning."

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6

“SO AT FIRST I thought they were satanists and it was some kind of Black Mass ritualistic sacrifice, but I was thinking about it more on the drive over, and a tech company like that? With so much money behind it? All kinds of shady investors? It could be anything. It could be a government conspiracy to test new weapons or something like that.”

“Uh-huh,” Kyle said.

Bethany hadn’t taken more than two steps into his living room, hadn’t even bothered to say hello, before she launched into a tirade about her latest theories.

“But it’s some sort of experiment, and they’re behind it. That much I’ve figured out. It makes sense, right? All the stuff I’ve been experiencing. The mood swings. The hallucinations. Even being obsessed with Public Access Afterworld. They made me obsessed! They designed the algorithm that chose what ended up in my queue. They fed me those videos. They wanted me to fall down that rabbit hole because they wanted to infect me. They wanted to drive me crazy.”

“Okay, slow down,” Kyle said. “Can we start with ‘Hi, it’s nice to see you’?”

Bethany paused. She suddenly felt embarrassed for launching right into everything. She laughed and shook her head.

“Jesus, yeah. Sorry. I’ve been like this.” She took a step forward and hugged her friend.

“It’s okay,” Kyle said. “I’m here for you. I want to be here for you. And I might have, um . . . overprepared.” He stepped out of the way so Bethany could get a good view of his living room. It was decorated with lit candles and mood lighting. Stevie Wonder was playing on the record player. The table was already set for dinner.

“Oh. Wow,” Bethany said.

“Too much?”

“No. Well . . . I dunno. Just not what I was expecting.”

“I’m sorry,” Kyle told her. “I overdid it. You’ve just never been over here, and . . . I guess I wanted to make sure you were impressed. I thought we could have a nice dinner.” He rolled his eyes in his usual self-effacing way.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be,” Bethany said. She felt bad once again, as if she had let Kyle down by being so one-track-minded. “I just—I’ve been so preoccupied with everything happening. I didn’t think about . . .” She trailed off, remembering something Kyle had said on the phone. “You said there was something you needed to talk to me about. Something urgent.”

“Right,” Kyle said. “Well, it’s definitely not as big as LSD in the kombucha. Honestly, it can wait.”

“No,” Bethany said. “Tell me. Please.”

“Well, okay.” Kyle shifted in place, awkward like a middle schooler at winter formal. “I just—I haven’t seen you since you left town. And all this stuff that’s been happening with us—talking every night while you were away, then me being a jerk and ghosting you after I quit. I just . . . I guess I realized how much I missed you.”

Bethany stared at Kyle. She felt confused.

“I missed you, too,” she said.

“What I’m trying to get at is: I’ve been thinking about you, Bethany. Worrying about you, basically nonstop. And I think it’s because . . .” He was stammering, too nervous to make eye contact. “*I like you.* Basically, yeah. I’ve got a crush on you. I don’t know if you feel the same way about me.”

Bethany was silent. Kyle’s confession made her heart race, but it also confused her. Was now really the time?

“Okay. Yeah,” he said, reading her ambivalence. “Anyway, back to the LSD kombucha.”

“Kyle . . .”

“No. Don’t worry. Forget about it. It was crazy for me to say anything. I just want to help. To figure out what’s going on.”

He looked around his duplex like he was trying to shake off the sting of his confession, and once again Bethany felt guilty.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m just in no state for . . .”

“Totally,” Kyle said. “Look—I cooked us some stew, and I’m a pretty good cook, so why don’t we just sit down, eat something, and talk about what we’re going to do about GlobalVill being satanic creeps?”

He smiled at Bethany, trying to ease the tension.

Bethany nodded. “Okay. Yeah. That sounds good.”

“Great,” Kyle said. “Give me thirty seconds.” He hustled into the next room, grabbing an oven mitt from the table and closing the kitchen door behind him.

• • •

Bethany felt too manic to sit down, so she explored the duplex. She sifted through filmmaking books on the shelf by the record player. Kyle didn’t talk much about his creative ambitions, but Bethany remembered him telling her during their first real conversation about how he took the content moderation job at GlobalVill to put himself through film school.

She found a framed picture on the bookshelf of Kyle, years younger, posing for the camera on a nature hike. He had his arm around a teenage trans girl so early in transition that she seemed afraid to look at the camera. Bethany stared at the photo. She picked it up.

Kyle walked back into the living room, carrying two bowls of stew.

“Is this your sister?” Bethany asked. Kyle glanced at Bethany by the bookshelf as he placed each bowl down on the table.

“Yeah. I told you about her. Right?”

“On our first night talking,” Bethany said. She stared at the photo. There was something about it that struck her as strange, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. “But you haven’t mentioned her since.”

“I try not to think about her too much,” Kyle said. “It’s too raw.”

Bethany studied Kyle’s sister’s face, feeling saddened by the girl’s timid, ashamed smile.

“She’s beautiful,” Bethany told Kyle.

“Thank you. She was beautiful.” Kyle pulled out a chair and smiled sadly at Bethany, then nodded for her to join him at the table.

“Come on. Dinner’s ready.”

Bethany felt herself ease. Kyle was sweet and gentle, never too pushy. He’d always been this way with her: on the phone during her road trip and down in the diner at GlobalVill HQ. He calmed Bethany’s nerves and made her feel less insane. *Safe*, even. As if some form of respite might be possible. Then another thought struck her.

That’s exactly how the CEO made me feel too.

• • •

Bethany put the picture back on the shelf. She picked up her tote bag from the couch and walked over to the dining table. As she sat down, she fished a thermos out from her bag.

“Coffee. I brought it from my friend’s place. When I fall asleep, things get . . . dodgy, so I’ve been caffeinating every hour.”

She took a sip, then offered Kyle the thermos.

“Want some? LSD-free, I promise.”

Kyle shook his head. Bethany sat down across from him, taking care to rest her tote bag on the ground by her feet.

“I gave up caffeine the moment I quit the night shift,” Kyle said. “I was drinking like six cups of iced coffee concentrate a night, just to get through my queue.”

“I bet it was tainted, too. You felt better, right? After you quit?” Bethany screwed the cap back on her thermos and slipped it into her tote.

“So much better,” Kyle said. “Careful, the stew is still hot.” He lifted a spoonful from his bowl, blew on it, then swallowed it.

“You know,” Bethany said. “I don’t think I would have survived very long at that place if I hadn’t met you.” She smiled at Kyle then picked up her own spoon. “I swear, that job was so psycho I would’ve quit if I hadn’t met another normal person, someone else who was experiencing the same stuff I was.”

“Totally,” Kyle said. He sipped another spoonful of broth from his bowl.

“An entire company of creeps out to drive me insane, and there you were: an ally. The one guy in the entire place who understood what I was going through. Who I could trust.”

Bethany put her spoon back down on her napkin.

“You should try the stew before it gets cold,” Kyle said. “So what do you think we should do? GlobalVill drugging their employees. That’s a big story. I think you’re right—we have to go to the media.”

Bethany picked up her spoon again. She clinked it against the side of her bowl.

“Yeah . . .” she said.

Kyle took another big, slow sip of stew. It was like he was filming an instructional video on how to eat stew.

“Was that picture photoshopped?”

“What?” Kyle asked.

“That photo of you and your sister on the bookshelf. Was it photoshopped?”

“Was it . . . photoshopped?” He repeated the question like he didn’t understand what she was asking.

Bethany just waited for him to answer.

“No,” Kyle said. “It wasn’t photoshopped. I mean—I don’t think so. Not that I’m aware of. That was six summers ago. At Yosemite.”

Kyle glanced over at the bookshelf. Bethany kept clinking her spoon against the side of her bowl, tapping out a rhythmic pattern.

“It’s just that you had no shadow,” she said. “Your sister’s got a big shadow under her feet, but you don’t have any shadow at all. In the photo, I mean.”

Kyle stared at her.

“Wait, seriously?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“That’s so weird.”

“Check it out. See for yourself.”

Bethany held eye contact. Kyle glanced over at the bookshelf.

“It must have been the position of the sun or something like that,” he said.

“I don’t think it was the position of the sun. Go look.”

She motioned to the bookshelf. Kyle laughed nervously. He didn’t get up from his seat.

Bethany kept silent, like a game of chicken. Eventually Kyle got up from the table and walked over to the bookshelf.

The moment his back was turned, Bethany reached into her tote bag and wrapped her fingers around Jules Estrada’s handgun. As Kyle walked across the room, Bethany stood up slowly in her chair, trying to be quiet enough that he wouldn’t notice. Once Kyle reached the bookshelf, he picked up the photograph of him and his “sister” and Bethany seized the moment.

“ALL RIGHT, HANDS UP!”

Bethany shoved her chair backwards against the living room wall. She jumped up, careful to position herself far away from any windows, so no snipers could reach her.

Kyle turned around to find Bethany pointing a pistol at him.

“HANDS UP RIGHT NOW!” she shouted.

Kyle’s eyes went wide. He dropped the picture frame to the ground and raised his hands into the air.

“Bethany—what are you . . .”

“Don’t,” she ordered. “Don’t say a word.”

“Okay—”

“I SAID DON’T SAY A WORD!”

Bethany thrust the gun out towards him. Kyle just nodded.

“Come over here,” Bethany said. “Back in this direction.”

Kyle followed Bethany’s orders. He kept his hands in the air and walked back towards the table.

“Okay! Freeze right there,” Bethany said.

Kyle slowed to a stop in front of the dinner table.

“I want you to eat the stew.”

“What? Bethany, what are you—”

“I SAID SHUT UP!” Bethany clicked the safety off Jules’s handgun. “Let me remind you that I’m hopped up on caffeine, hallucinogens, and Screen Sickness, so I’m pretty crazy and dangerous right now. I think you should do exactly what I say and eat that stew.”

Kyle stood still. He nodded, letting her know he understood.

Bethany motioned with her pistol towards the dining room table. Kyle reached for his bowl.

“NO!” Bethany shouted. She fired a shot at the table. Kyle jumped in place as his bowl shattered into pieces, carrots and chicken and broth spilling out across the table and floor.

“Fuck that,” Bethany said, then motioned with her gun to the other side of the table. “The other bowl. *The bowl you served me.* Eat it.”

Kyle stared at her in terror. Slowly, begrudgingly, he walked around to the other side of the table. He picked up Bethany’s stew bowl, held it in his hands.

“Bethany . . .” he said.

“I will shoot you right now unless you eat that stew.” She kept the gun trained at his head. “Eat the stew,” she repeated. “Eat the stew. Eat the stew!”

“Okay.”

Kyle tipped the bowl towards his mouth. Bethany waited.

And then, just before the bowl touched Kyle’s lips, at the last possible moment, he feigned clumsiness and dropped it to the ground, letting it shatter across the floor.

“Damn it,” he said. He shook his head. “I’m so sorry. My hand slipped.”

“Yeah,” Bethany said. “Sure it did.” She laughed out loud, and felt an adrenaline rush. Vindication: another one of her supposedly insane hunches turning out to be very much *not* insane.

“I’m really sorry,” Kyle said. “I can go get another bowl from the kitchen.”

He turned to walk away, but before he could take two steps, Bethany fired another shot. This one shattered Kyle’s record player. Stevie Wonder cut out and the room was silent now.

“Don’t fucking move,” Bethany said.

“Okay. Okay.” Kyle raised his hands back up in the air. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I think you’re having a psychotic episode right now. I want to help you, but this is really scary.”

Bethany kept her gun trained on him. She reminded herself that if she made one careless mistake, the snipers outside would get her.

“Are you going to kill me?” Kyle asked. “If you’re going to kill me, just kill me. Or tell me what you want to do here.”

Bethany looked around the house. She didn’t move from her spot against the wall.

“Do you have a car?” she asked him.

“Yeah, Bethany,” Kyle said. “I have a car.”

She kept the gun pointed at his head. She nodded to the front door.

“Let’s take a drive. I want to speak to your manager.”

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7

BETHANY CALLED THE GLOBALVILL front desk from the highway. She sat perched low in the backseat of Kyle's Jeep where no snipers could reach her, keeping Jules Estrada's gun trained on the back of her hostage's head. Kyle drove in silence, keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

Rusty the security guard picked up after one ring. Bethany explained the situation to him slowly. She told him that she was on her way into the office, that she had a hostage, and that she needed to speak to Anthony "Fisch" Fischer, face-to-face. She knew Rusty didn't hear so well, so she reemphasized this last point. She wouldn't settle for anyone less than the CEO himself.

Rusty asked Bethany to please hold. He put the phone down for a while, and when he returned, he spoke like a parrot, repeating verbatim the words that someone else had just instructed him to say.

"Mr. Fischer's schedule is clear for the rest of the evening. He'll be ready when you arrive."

"Good," Bethany said. "We'll see you soon." She hung up the call.

• • •

Across town, GlobalVill's campus was kinetic, like Broadway before the opening curtain. Shailene and her team were midway through evacuating the building of all nonessential personnel. The CSO stood by the lobby exit into the parking lot, personally reminding every single employee about the NDAs they'd signed when they started work.

"Not a single word about any of this," she said as she ushered everyone out the door, calibrating her voice to the precise level of threat she hoped to imply. "Not on your social media. Not even in your internal Slack group chats."

Upstairs, her snipers settled into position on the third-floor balcony, obscuring themselves behind houseplants and arcade games. The rest of her men worked below, booby-trapping the main floor, lining the underside of each shared desk with small remote-triggered explosives.

Anthony Fischer stood watch by the entrance to his corner office. He couldn't help but feel a thrill watching his tech HQ transform into a military-grade sting operation. One of Shailene's men was by his side, helping him into his Kevlar, ensuring that beneath his smart-casual sweater, he'd be bulletproof.

Stay focused, Fisch reminded himself. It's not over yet. Bethany Peters had been playing her hand well tonight. She was smart. She'd been careful not to expose herself to any windows while still inside Kyle's house, so all Shailene and her men could do was listen through their various bugs while Bethany turned the tables on them. She'd used Fisch's nephew as a human shield on the walk between the front door and car, somehow correctly deducing that Fisch wouldn't have the heart to give the kill order. This was his family held hostage. He knew he'd never hear the end of it if his nephew ended up dead on his watch.

Before tonight, Fisch had already known that Bethany Peters wasn't someone to underestimate. But now he was utterly convinced that she really was someone special. Of course she was. She was *the receiver.*

Fisch reminded himself that he still had the upper hand. He thought ahead to the coming hours, and the strategist in him came to the same conclusion. Bethany was running on borrowed time. She was trapped, outmatched, only a few moves away from checkmate.

Shailene had been taking new readings every five minutes from the device they'd implanted in Bethany's right arm before her first night of work. Fisch's head of security had confirmed that Bethany was now coming down from the brink of Screen Sickness. Her electromagnetic readings were steady, not too far from normal range. A few hours ago, this news would have infuriated Fisch. Now it calmed his nerves. The receiver was lucid again, feet planted solidly back on earth, presumably scared sober by the evening's high-octane events. She was in little danger of crossing over imminently to Public Access Afterworld. Which meant that for now, the universe was safe.

So what move did Bethany have, really? Sure, Fisch reasoned, let her come to GlobalVill HQ. Let her play out her little action movie hostage situation—her big last stand—here in this building downtown that he owned. *His turf.*

Shailene's man finished fitting him for his bulletproof vest, then asked if he needed help getting his sweater back on. Fisch waved the guy away. Shailene ascended the catwalk on the other side of the floor. She nodded to her boss, calm as ever. It was almost time.

"Jennifer?" Fisch called, turning now to look at his administrative assistant sitting at the little desk next to his office. "Do you mind fetching me some tea before we start?"

• • •

Kyle pulled his car into the GlobalVill parking lot.

Bethany remained huddled low in the backseat, gun poking through the driver's-side headrest as Kyle circled three stories up the curves of the ramp that led to the lobby entrance.

"Shift into park," Bethany ordered once they were just a foot or two from the door. Then she told Kyle to get out of the car first. She kept her gun trained on his head as he walked slowly around the vehicle and opened her car door.

She pounced, wrapping her arms around Kyle's shoulders and hugging him from behind. She pulled herself out of the car using his weight, then lodged her handgun against the nape of his neck.

"Move," she ordered, and then the two were shuffling in unison towards the lobby entrance, taking each step together.

Rusty was waiting for them at the front desk. The old man looked terrified. Bethany noticed that he'd repositioned the framed pictures in front of him to face outwards, presumably so Bethany could see his grandkids with her own eyes. She wondered for a moment if employees like him were in on it all, or if some of the people who came to this building every day were just unlucky wageworkers caught up in a conspiracy they didn't fully understand. Then she reminded herself not to get distracted. Not even for a second.

“You can go up,” Rusty told them. He sounded scared. “Fisch is ready to see you now.”

Bethany nudged Kyle with the tip of her handgun. He got the message and began walking again. The two of them moved together up the catwalk. Once they reached the main floor, Bethany paused for a moment to glance in every direction, trying to smoke out potential traps. Everything seemed empty and peaceful. But obviously, appearances were deceiving tonight.

She moved slowly, sidling her way across the massive open floor against the right-side wall, pushing herself and her human shield past photocopiers and supply closets. Together they headed towards the CEO’s corner office, Bethany remaining ever mindful of her position behind Kyle, in case any snipers were hiding in the balcony above, waiting to get a clear shot.

Fisch’s secretary Jennifer was the only other person visible. She sat like she always did at her little desk outside Fisch’s office. Bethany squinted past her and saw a warm yellow glow emanating through the frosted film of the CEO’s window glass. A lamp light, as if burning in some cozy winter cabin.

“He’s ready for you,” Jennifer said as Bethany and Kyle approached the office. “Can I get you a coffee or a water or anything?”

“Just open the door,” Bethany ordered.

• • •

The CEO stood by his desk in a sweater-vest. Bethany tried to case the room for traps, surveying the mantel of Fisch’s bookshelf, lined with awards and mementos from a storied career. Fisch took a calm sip of tea from the mug in his hand and nodded at Bethany and Kyle like they’d just arrived for Christmas dinner.

“Please,” he said. “Come in.”

Bethany moved quickly and decisively, shoving herself and her hostage into the office in one single push. She ducked low, kicking the door shut behind her, pulling Kyle down against the thickest wall in the room, the one least likely to be penetrable by gunfire.

“It’s nice to see you again, Bethany,” Fisch said.

“Let’s cut the Mister Rogers act,” she said. “We’re well beyond that now.”

“Whatever you want,” Fisch said. He set his mug down on the desk. “You’re in charge here.”

“I know you don’t know me, but please do what she says, sir,” Kyle whimpered from his spot on the floor. “She’s lost her mind.”

Bethany nudged Kyle with her pistol. “Over there,” she ordered. “Get behind the desk—right behind him so I can shoot you both at once if I need to.”

Kyle scurried across the room.

“She’s gone crazy,” he said as he positioned himself behind the CEO. “She thinks we’re all part of some conspiracy. She’s been hallucinating, and I think she’s going to—”

“Kyle,” Fisch said, cutting the boy off. “It’s okay. You can drop the act.”

Kyle blinked a few times. He suddenly looked confused.

“She figured it out,” Fisch said. “She made you. The A/B test is over.”

Bethany kept her gun trained on the two of them. *Stay focused,* she reminded herself. *Everything could be a potential trap, so don’t let your guard down. Not even for a second.*

“What . . . what are you talking about?” Kyle asked, still feigning ignorance.

“It’s okay, Kyle,” Fisch told his nephew. “She outsmarted you. You can drop the act.”

“Wait . . .” Kyle paused. “Are you being serious?”

“Yes,” Fisch said. He looked at Bethany and put his hands up in the air. “Okay, Bethany? You’re right. You’ve been right about nearly everything. It’s an experiment. A conspiracy. This has all been an A/B test we’ve been running on you. You were the B group.” Fisch took a furtive step forward. “You couldn’t have known,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I wished we could have told you. That’s why I wanted to talk to you last night in the cafeteria. I felt for you. But I couldn’t reveal the truth because it would have blown the whole experiment.”

“I didn’t tell her, Uncle Fisch,” Kyle said. “I swear I did exactly what you __”

“It’s okay, Kyle,” Fisch said. “I hope this can be a teachable moment for you.” He kept his eyes on Bethany. “So can we talk calmly?” he asked. “I promise I’ll explain everything. And after I do, you’ll understand the truth: that we aren’t trying to hurt you . . .”

He took a step forward. Bethany thrust her gun out and clicked off the safety.

“Stop moving!” she shouted.

Fisch froze. He put his hands up higher to let Bethany know he understood.

“I told you last night that I thought you were a very special person,” he said. “And I meant it. It’s why we chose you, Bethany. I know how all of this looks, and I’m mortified. Truly. But I promise you that we don’t mean you any harm. We’re trying to help you realize your full potential. We’re trying to make you the version of yourself that you’ve always been meant to be.”

“By poisoning me with LSD kombucha?” Bethany demanded. “By killing my boyfriend and driving me insane?”

“We didn’t kill your boyfriend,” Fisch said, his voice firm and even. “We had nothing to do with that. And I’m so sorry for what you’ve had to go through. Really, I am. But if you just listen to me, I swear it will all make sense.”

“Okay,” Bethany said. She kept her gun pointed at both men. Her hands were shaking. “Go ahead. Explain.”

“*You don’t belong here*,” Fisch told her. He took a tiny half step closer, as if every movement was part of a negotiation.

“You belong somewhere else,” he said. “Down below, in the world underneath all the other worlds where television gets made. Public Access Afterworld.”

“I said don’t fucking move!”

“You weren’t meant for this plane of existence,” Fisch said as he took another small step closer, ignoring her orders. “You never were supposed to be here. You can feel it, right? The way you don’t fit in? The way you never did? There’s a reason for that. There always has been. It’s because you’re meant for something greater . . .”

Bethany tried to think through her best next move while he spoke. Should she just shoot this asshole? Make a run for it? Call the cops or the media or . . . ? Her mind flitted between a slew of bad options. Suddenly it seemed absurd to have ever come here.

The CEO continued to proselytize. “I know you’ve always felt it. That you were different. That you had a realer life—a better life—waiting for you

somewhere very far away. And Bethany . . . *you were right.* You're special. You're one of the special ones."

"If you call me *special* one more time, I will shoot you right in the goddamn face," Bethany said. Her heart was racing. She realized now how utterly dead-ended she was.

"Go ahead," Fisch said. He took another step towards her. "Shoot me. It won't change the fact that you belong somewhere else. *In Public Access Afterworld*. We're trying to send you there, Bethany, because it's where you're meant to be. Let us help you. Let us arm you with all the knowledge you'll need to—"

"HEY!" Kyle shouted. Before Bethany could realize what was happening, he'd grabbed his uncle's tea mug off the desk and hurled it at her. It smashed into Bethany's forehead. Her grip went limp for just a second, and she felt Jules Estrada's gun escape her hands. Her head pounded and her vision blurred. Where did the gun just go? She looked around, desperate to locate the weapon through her disorientation.

"Jesus!" Fisch cried. "That took you long enough." He shot Kyle a quick pissed-off look then ran for the exit. His driver Charlie was waiting outside just half a block away. Shailene and the rest could take it from here.

Kyle stayed behind. He dropped to his hands and knees, lunging under his uncle's desk for the gun. There it was: Bethany spotted it too under the desk. There was clearly no way she'd reach the gun before Kyle did. Unless . . .

She screamed at the top of her lungs and shoved the CEO's desk backwards, wedging Kyle like Play-Doh against the wall. Awards and hardbound books rained down from the mantel like an avalanche. Kyle was stuck, at least for now, and Bethany had time to drop below the desk and grab for Jules Estrada's handgun. Just as her fingers touched metal, the sniper fire began.

• • •

She covered her head with her hands and snaked behind the desk for cover. The glass windows of Fisch's corner office shattered. Thousands of tiny shards rained down like snowflakes. She heard Kyle scream and curse as he broke free from her trap and made a run for it. She balled herself up underneath the desk as bullets sprayed in every direction.

Bethany understood now how obvious it was: She never should have come here. What an absurd and idiotic plan it had always been. She had been manic—so high on her streak of good guesses back at Kyle's house that she'd actually believed herself to be an action movie star. Invincible, like Jason Statham or something. She'd come here because she wanted to play the hero, to look Fisch in the eye and prove to him that she knew everything he was doing to her and that she wasn't going to take it like *just another victim.* But by delivering herself here, she'd become exactly that. And now she was crouched under a desk, alone and utterly outmatched.

She was going to die. The realization hit her suddenly, making the hair on her arms. It wasn't theoretical anymore. Death wasn't something that would happen tomorrow or next year if she didn't find a better place to live or a job that was stable or a partner who she actually wanted to be with. No. She was going to die *right now.* In a matter of seconds, she'd feel the lights of consciousness switch off. And then, perhaps after a brief final bout of searing pain, everything would go black, forever.

It was finally here. The moment she'd been flirting with since she was fourteen years old. The moment that her parents had understood was inevitable that day she came out to them. They'd known then what she'd resisted. That everything leading up to this point—all her half-realized struggles to build a life for herself—had been irrelevant. It had all just been a form of petty writhing, an extended temper tantrum that did nothing to actually change what had always been inevitable. She was going to die young, before she was even thirty years old. Here on the glass-strewn floor of this "campus" where she used to work the night shift.

• • •

She decided to make a run for it.

There were about a dozen feet between the CEO's office and the far stairs leading down to the building's first floor, to the bathrooms and the kitchen. She wasn't sure what she would do once she got down there, but it seemed the only reasonable plan. There was no way she'd make it all the way back across the massive floor to the building's main entrance.

The sniper fire subsided after about a minute. But Bethany wasn't naïve enough to imagine that it was over. She knew it would start back up again the moment she made her move.

She looked around Fisch's office for anything that could help her cause. She found a hardcover book that had fallen off the mantel. A *New York Times* bestselling memoir. *Village Person: A CEO's Journey to Online Connection*.

Bethany used the book as a decoy. She tossed it shot put–style from behind the desk onto the main office floor. It was greeted by an immediate wave of renewed sniper fire. Bullets chewed through the bookshelf behind her like holes carved through Swiss cheese.

And then someone with an overeager trigger finger made a small mistake by detonating a remote explosive device just outside Fisch's corner office. One of the shared desks about eight feet away from Bethany's hiding spot went up like a car bomb. Company-owned laptops and decorative bobbleheads immolating in a sudden plume of fire.

It was the only distraction Bethany was going to get, so she took off running, praying that the explosion would give her enough cover for the six or seven seconds she needed to get from Fisch's office to the staircase.

She dove as bullets littered her periphery in every direction. More explosions triggered now, one after another, like dominos down a line. Bethany gasped and squeezed her eyes shut as she toppled herself towards the staircase. And then she was not so much walking as *falling*, bruising her body even more as she left the sniper fire behind, as she cascaded down a series of steps towards the kitchen below.

She recovered her balance just before she reached the bottom, but she didn't stop moving. She knew there was no time. She clutched tight to Jules Estrada's handgun and rushed for the staff cafeteria ahead. She caught a brief glimpse of an emergency exit out on the other side of the room past the last of the diner booths. Of course! How could she have forgotten? There was another way out.

"Hey!" Kyle shouted, jumping at her suddenly from his hiding spot near the bottom of the staircase. He was covered in blood, looking grotesque.

Before Bethany had time to react, Kyle clocked her in the forehead with a glass jar of wasabi peas. She tumbled face-first down the last few steps of the staircase and felt her gun slip from her hands once again. Glass shattered hard against her as hundreds of wasabi peas spilled like marbles across the floor.

"Finally!" Kyle shouted. "Thank fucking Christ." He scooped the gun up from the floor.

Bethany gasped and cried, reeling in pain.

“It’s over now,” Kyle told her. He pointed the gun at her head.

Bethany blinked up at him as her vision blurred.

“It sounded like your uncle wanted me alive,” she said.

“Nope,” Kyle told her. “He was mostly telling the truth up there, but he left out the part where, as of a few hours ago, we actually *do* want you dead. Sorry, Bethany, you should have just eaten the stew.”

• • •

Bethany looked down at the ground. She closed her eyes and tensed, prepared now for the end of everything. She heard a gunshot ring out, and she thought, *Funny to actually hear the shot that kills you*. Her ears buzzed and her mind quieted. She opened her eyes back up, and what Bethany saw next was so surreal that it only convinced her further that she was dead. What other explanation was there for seeing Jules Estrada running towards her down the staircase?

“It’s okay,” another voice said. Bethany felt a hand reach down for her and grip her shoulder. “You’re okay.”

Bethany blinked a few times. How was it possible that she was still thinking? Still able to see things? Was this what happened after you died? Did life just *go on*?

Jules rushed past Bethany and grabbed their old handgun from Kyle’s lifeless palm. His brains seeped across tiled floor, carrying a few stray wasabi peas in their tide.

Meanwhile, David Sawyer helped Bethany up to her feet.

“We’ve gotta go,” Jules said to the cult leader. But David’s focus was elsewhere.

“I’ve been looking for you for a very long time,” he told Bethany, staring her intensely in the eyes, as if he was meeting his own personal lord and savior.

I’m dead, Bethany kept thinking. *I’m dead*.

“You’re going to help me find someone I lost a very long time ago,” David told her.

[MIDSEASON HIATUS]

Then we became ghosts of the night, haunting those same circular hallways our chaperones led us down each morning. The sun blared into Saint Thomas through the hole in the center of the donut and we walked in single-file lines, gesturing obedience, fighting the brain fog, holding on to our anger and that simple, besieged fact that our bodies were still our own.

And then, after lights-out, we became translucent. Passed through the doors of our windowless rooms and floated down the same hallways we'd been herded through in daylight. Now we were silent explorers, children locked overnight in some strange museum at the end of the universe. We didn't speak. The building hummed, and we played a silent game of Marco Polo that never reached its ending, because we were ghosts, and ghosts couldn't hope to ever really find one another.

At night, it was pitch-black on the other side of the double-reinforced plastic at the center of the donut. We lacked the key cards necessary for true escape. So we floated and observed, until eventually we sensed it was time for another episode. And then, as if responding to a chime that signals the end of intermission at the theater, we made our way down the ramp to the therapy room, and we took our seats on the carpet. We crossed our legs or closed our eyes, settling into our preferred prime-time rituals. We hummed along with the building's settling, forming a quiet chorus, a séance to summon our leader.

My friend would emerge on those nights through the double doors and take their seat at the front of the massive basement rec room, flashlight in hand. Without even saying hello, soon they'd begin to narrate another episode.

They seemed far away and haunted. Haunted in the literal sense of the word, because they knew perfectly well that all of us down there on the carpet were just ghosts. That they were just one apparition speaking to a room full of others.

They seemed sad and lonely on those nights when they told us their TV show. Utterly convinced of their isolation. I thought they were beautiful.

• • •

The more I listened to my friend's TV show that summer, the more questions I had for them. And not just about what would happen in the next episode. I didn't crave spoilers. No, the questions that began to preoccupy my mind were more personal, less about my friend's fake TV show and more about where it came from. What did it even mean, I began to wonder, to have a fake TV show stuck inside your head? And why had my friend been so desperate to get theirs out that they had almost taken their own life?

I wanted to know everything about them. It was parasocial even though we occupied the same space. I wondered all day: What had inspired that TV show and those characters? Were parts of their story autobiographical? Was that why my friend had decided to name the character David Sawyer after themself? Perhaps this whole ritual was some oblique form of confession, a coded attempt to share some deep truth they didn't dare speak aloud in group or in Sunday services, in earshot of our chaperones.

And what about those stray references to "the hospital," to that dreadful place where Bethany had been committed as a teenager? Was that place meant to be *this place*? Was my friend trying to tell us all something about Saint Thomas itself through the fiction of their television show?

• • •

I never asked my friend any of these questions. It felt disrespectful—dangerous, almost. Besides, it was very clear that they preferred to communicate this way, in code, through their episodes. They remained quiet and reserved in the daylight. They pretended as if those stories they told us each night didn't even exist.

Maybe they didn't. Maybe that was all part of some other layer of reality that happened far away in another place. A shared dream after lights-out, once the glow at the center of the donut had dimmed and it was possible for all of us to disappear once again, to escape our confines and become ghosts on the carpet in the basement, together and alone, listening to a fake television show.

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EPISODE SIX

SCRIPT GIRL

HARTSDALE, NY—
FALL 2009

Senior Year

OceanofPDF.com

1

ERIN MORRISON'S FINAL AUGUST on the planet was a slog. Humid and endless, thirty-one days of sticky repetition.

Most summers, Erin's basement had the best central air-conditioning on the East Coast. But during those dog days, the heat overpowered even Erin's legendary AC system, rendering what was usually an underground oasis swamp-like and wrong.

Every night that August, David brought over a family-sized tub of rainbow sherbet that he bought with his CVS employee discount. He drove straight to Erin's basement after work, and together the two of them would sit on a single beanbag sharing a spoon, taking turns whittling down the tub while they watched static hiss from the Toshiba across the room.

It was more than a routine for the two of them now. It was a rule—all they ever did together. Every night, they'd sit and stare, willing themselves into a shared trance state, trying to conjure another phantom broadcast. And most nights that August, it worked.

It usually happened around the two A.M. hour, just as Erin was starting to drift off on her side of the beanbag. David would notice the first hint of interference, then he'd shake his friend awake just in time for them both to watch that iconic logo peek through the static. "Public Access Afterworld," each cartoon letter bouncing up and down in, faded MTV chic.

Sometimes the broadcasts would feature a new would-be cast member they'd never seen before. For instance, a vacant old woman rubbing the camera lens and making cooing sounds with her mouth had become a recent mainstay. And the first person they'd ever seen on Public Access Afterworld, that blond lady with spatula hands, had appeared a few more times as well. But that August, by far the most frequent visitor to Erin's Toshiba was Erin herself. The doppelganger version who stared back from

behind glass, who without fail would repeat those same words every night, like a bedtime prayer.

“Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real.”

How was it possible? Erin had no memory of recording the transmissions, and yet there she was on the screen, starring in each of them. A glitch, trapped inside her own television.

• • •

By the end of August, Erin found herself longing for the school year to begin.

She wanted to get lost in her studies again. She wanted rituals that didn’t involve staring at TV static. Homework and morning announcements, school supplies and pep rallies. She was even excited about the homecoming dance. She’d told David she didn’t want to go, but she was still secretly hoping he’d ask her.

When the first day of the school year finally arrived, the local forecast in Hartsdale was still hovering in the mid-nineties. Erin’s mom offered to drive her to school that morning, but Erin turned her down. She wanted to walk. It was a little tradition she had with herself, a ritual that she’d missed over the summer. She’d set her alarm half an hour early, put on her headphones, then walk her town’s quieter streets, the streets with no yellow lines, where she could wander in the middle of the road without fear of getting hit by a car.

As she approached the high school that first morning, she dipped around the back way, sneaking past the band shell just in front of the football field so she could enter the building through the quiet side entrance leading into the gymnasium. There she’d face little risk of fake-friendly small talk, of being pulled into an agonizing “How was your summer break?” style conversation she had neither the social skills nor the energy for.

Erin preferred being alone. Especially in the mornings. The gymnasium was calm before first period, its empty largeness comforting. That first morning of the school year, unlike everywhere else on the East Coast, the gym was surprisingly cool. It provided a brief respite from the lingering heat wave, a final moment of solitude before Erin would be strapped onto the conveyor belt of another school year.

There was a lone basketball idling on the linoleum court. It made Erin think of the video Jim Davis uploaded last June before their first and only meeting. That video had featured an empty gymnasium much like this one. When Erin had first seen it, she'd been struck by a feeling of uncanny familiarity. It was like the guidance counselor had somehow known about her secret morning ritual here. How she would hide in this big open space for a few final moments each Monday morning before going downstairs to meet David and the others in the AV dungeon.

She could feel them all now, waiting for her below. She knew David would be eager to see her. So she let track five of *Boys for Pele* finish on her Discman, then took her headphones off, shrugged her JanSport over her shoulder, and headed to the basement to meet the Auxiliaries.

• • •

By the time Erin arrived in the AV dungeon, the place had already been transformed into a mission control center for all things Public Access Afterworld. Ralph was at Ms. Walsh's desk, printing out posts from TheUncannyValley message board, handing them to Fran to pushpin up on a corkboard on the wall. David stood near a tape deck, combing through a pile of VHS tapes he'd brought from home, an archive of all the broadcasts he and Erin had captured over the summer. He read the labels out loud, taking a tally of each tape's contents.

"We got another 'Creepy Moaning Old Woman,'" David said. Ralph's little brother Gerald, an incoming freshman and already a new recruit to the Auxiliaries, added a tally mark on the chalkboard.

Erin looked at the names written there. "Creepy Moaning Old Woman" had five tallies next to her column, meaning five appearances total. "Spatula Handed Housewife" had three. "Pigtail Fruit Shirt," eight. "Static Erin Doppelganger" was in the lead with a whopping fifteen tally marks to date.

Erin slumped into the corner near a tangle of HDMI cables. David turned from his work to greet her.

"Morning."

"Hey," Erin said.

"Get a room, you two," Ralph announced.

Ms. Walsh walked in the door. She took a quick look at the corkboard covered in tally marks and fan theories. “Great job, everyone,” she said. “I see you’ve wasted another summer you’ll never get back.” She noticed Ralph sitting at her desk. “Get out of my chair right now,” she said.

“You know, Barbara,” Ralph told her as he hopped up from her swivel chair. “You really should watch some of David’s tapes. What’s happening is crazy.”

“If you ever call me by my first name again, there’ll be a contract out for your murder by first period,” Ms. Walsh said. She put her “World’s Best Nephew” mug down on her desk and settled in for another year down in the dungeon with these losers.

“I was a skeptic at first,” Ralph said. “But I’ve seen it with my own eyes. You should come over to Erin’s basement one night and watch the static with us. It’ll change your life.”

“I’m not going to do that, actually, because I have a husband and a child,” Ms. Walsh told him.

“I think it’s aliens,” Gerald chimed in from his spot by the corkboard. “That’s my theory, anyway. That the broadcasts are coming from outer space.”

“Shut up, Gerald,” Ralph said. He looked at Ms. Walsh. “This is my little brother Gerald. He’s the future of the Auxiliaries.”

“Hi, Ms. Walsh,” Gerald said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Shut up, Gerald,” Ms. Walsh told him.

“I miss Leslie,” Erin said quietly from her spot by the HDMI cables. “It feels weird down here without her.”

“I know,” Fran said.

Leslie had graduated back in June, and she was now hours away, starting college in Boston. The so-called “twins” had reluctantly broken up over the summer, separated, perhaps forever, by their one-year age gap.

“Did you see anything last night after I left?” David asked Erin.

“What?” Erin said.

“In the static. Were there any new signals that came through?”

“Oh.” Erin thought a moment then shook her head. “No.” She stood up and walked across the room, grabbed a slide projector, and wheeled it out

the door to her first job of the morning. She didn't say goodbye.

• • •

"Erin! Hey!"

David rushed out of the AV dungeon after her. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Hey," Erin said, turning around. David gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

"It's good to see you," he said. "I missed you."

"You saw me ten hours ago."

"I know. But I mean—it's good to see you *here*. I haven't seen you in high school in . . ." He did the math quickly in his head. "Two thousand one hundred and sixty hours. That's a long time."

Erin laughed at David's joke, mostly because she could tell he wanted her to.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked. "You seem off this morning."

"I'm fine," Erin said. She wheeled her slide projector towards the end of the hallway, then pressed the up button on the elevator. Only faculty and licensed AV Club members were allowed to use the school elevator. The doors opened, and the two of them walked inside.

"Hey," David said as the doors closed behind them. "You know you can tell me anything, right? Whatever's bothering you. I'm here. I want to help."

"It's just first-day-back doldrums," Erin said. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being weird."

"Come here."

Erin took a step towards him. David wrapped her in a hug.

"Tell me what's going on," he said.

"I don't know . . . I guess maybe it's just starting to wear on me . . . Public Access Afterworld, I mean." She could feel David straighten to attention at the mere mention of the name. "I think maybe I just need to focus on something else for a little while," Erin said. "Like I might need a break from all that, you know?"

“I thought you were obsessed with Public Access Afterworld,” David said. He was speaking softly, but there was something defensive in his voice, like he was worried she might be breaking up with him. “You were the one who started the investigation,” he reminded her.

“I know,” Erin said. “And I *was* into it. But I guess it’s just different when it’s . . . *you*, you know? When you’re the person on the screen, staring back at yourself like some kind of harbinger of doom.”

The elevator doors opened on the first floor.

“I spent the entire summer waiting for something terrible to happen to me, and I don’t really want to spend all school year waiting for the same thing.”

David stepped in front of her to block the elevator doors so they would stay open.

“How do you know it’s something terrible?” he asked. “What if it’s like . . . something cool that’s happening to you?”

Erin shrugged. “I don’t know, David.” She nudged him out of the way. “Look, I’ll see you at lunch. I’ll get over it and be in a better mood by then. I promise.”

David followed after her down the hall. “We’re still on for *Living Dead* Friday night, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Erin said. She gave him a quick kiss.

“Good. ’Cause I’ve got a surprise I can’t wait to show you.”

Just then a meathead walking in the opposite direction bodychecked David, abruptly knocking him to the ground.

“Fuck!” David shouted. Erin crouched down to help him back up to his feet. This happened sometimes.

The first-period bell rang.

“Wow,” David called to the Neanderthal in the letter jacket. “You really asserted your dominance there. Great job, asshole!”

• • •

After school, Erin walked home alone again, headphones on, listening to the back half of *Boys for Pele*.

She hadn’t been assigned much homework yet since it was the first day of school, and she knew there was no point in working more on her college essay. She’d been over those twelve hundred words twelve hundred times by now. But Erin felt eager for schoolwork. She’d always been a perfectionist. Her appetite for overachievement had been voracious from the youngest age, since her father had started bragging to relatives about her unparalleled aptitude before kindergarten even started. Really the only times Erin ever let herself relax were when David wanted to relax (which, conveniently, was all he ever wanted to do). She’d take breaks from her homework to watch TV with him, and for once she wouldn’t feel guilty doing so, because that wasn’t her being lazy. It was her supporting someone she loved.

In her bedroom, she shed her JanSport and tried to read ahead in the new textbooks she’d received that day. But her mind was elsewhere, still foggy from the heat, and from a summer spent staring at static. Eventually she closed her books and reached for the phone on her nightstand. She called Leslie, curling the phone cord around her fingers. She wasn’t really expecting the wayward twin to answer. Leslie was just starting college. She probably had better things to do than talk to her younger friend. But to her surprise, the former Auxiliary picked up right on the first ring.

“Oh my god,” Leslie said. “I was just thinking about you. I’m so glad you called. How was the first day back?”

“I don’t know,” Erin said. “Boring, I guess. The AV office didn’t feel the same without you.”

“Was Ms. Walsh mean?”

“I think she got even meaner over the summer. Ralph called her by her first name, and she told him if he ever did it again, she’d put out a contract kill on him.”

“Ugh,” Leslie said. “Inject it into my veins. I’d give anything to be back there tomorrow with you guys.”

“You’re not liking Boston?” Erin asked.

“I’m sure it’ll get better, but . . . my roommate made me watch *The Bachelor* with her in the dorm common room last night.”

“You’ll find your people soon,” Erin said. “And worst-case scenario, I’ll be there next fall, god willing.”

“Did Fran mention me today?” Leslie asked.

“She really misses you. It’s obvious.”

“I need to call her. I shouldn’t call her, right?”

Erin stared up at the Polaroids on her bedroom wall. There was one of her up there with both of the twins from two years ago, smiling in the AV office, looking younger. David was in the background of the picture making a goofy face. He was in nearly every Polaroid up on the wall, always making a goofy face.

“I think you just need to let yourself enjoy college,” Erin told her friend. “You finally made it out of Hartsdale. That’s cause for celebration.”

“I don’t know,” Leslie said. She paused for a while on the other end of the line. “I just miss it, I guess. Even if I know Hartsdale sucks, it feels like I lost a part of myself when I left.”

“I think that’s normal growing-up stuff,” Erin said.

“Yeah,” Leslie replied. Erin listened to her friend breathe on the other end of the phone receiver. “I just think something dies when you leave your hometown,” Leslie told her. “And I’m worried that now it’s gone forever.”

• • •

Friday night was *Return of the Living Dead* at the IFC Center. Hardly the most famous film in the *Living Dead* franchise (and arguably not even canon—the film was an unlicensed sequel to *Night of the Living Dead* by that film’s co-writer John A. Russo, one that launched a parallel series to Romero’s more widely known franchise). But *Return* was one of David and Erin’s all-time favorites: the kills were absurd, the soundtrack was iconic, and the screenplay was super witty and self-aware.

The weekend was supposed to be Erin’s time at her dad’s, but she negotiated with him, explaining that IFC was doing an all-too-rare screening of the underrated zombie classic (on 35mm no less, David made sure to specify). There was even going to be a zombie costume contest with prizes before the movie.

Erin’s dad was reluctant. He tended to get pretty territorial about their allotted weekends together. But David cheered Erin on as she held firm, insisting that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They were talking

about *Return of the Living Dead*. On 35mm, no less! Lawrence relented eventually and they reached a compromise. David would drop Erin at her dad's place after the movie (by midnight at the absolute latest, she promised). And Erin would stay with her dad for the rest of the weekend. Then, rather than drop Erin off back at her mom's place on Sunday night like he usually did, Lawrence would drive Erin to school Monday morning to make up for the time they lost together on Friday.

The heat wave finally broke before the weekend. It rained all through the school day Thursday, and by Friday morning, the summer was a distant memory. Now it was breezy out, a seventy-degree autumn day. The perfect conditions for a zombie costume contest.

David and Erin put their makeup on down in the basement after school. The house's AC system was back to its normal climate-controlling power. The two of them stood below cooling vents, lathering on face paint and prop gashes from Spirit Halloween. For once the Toshiba on the other side of the room was turned off. The lack of white noise lent the space a refreshing calm. Finally, it was just the two of them again down here.

And for the first time in weeks, as David applied zombie makeup for her, Erin knew it without a doubt: She was in love with him. It was a question that had been idly on her mind since early in the summer—since that night she and David had gone to see Jim Davis in Troy, New York, then had sex for the first and only time in a rest stop parking lot.

Was this love? Like, *real love*? Erin knew she and David loved each other as friends. They'd been each other's people since basically childhood. At this point David felt more like a phantom limb attached to her body than an actual separate person. But since their relationship left the realm of the platonic, Erin had been racked with anxiety about whether she and David also shared that other, more rarified kind of love. Passionate, romantic, *sexual* love. The kind they made movies about.

Now, at least for a little while that afternoon, the answer felt self-evident. As David lathered her in cheap prosthetics, Erin remembered how no one else in the world could make her feel this way. As if all that was subtly weird about her—her mousy awkwardness and anxious severity, her try-hard perfectionism—how these weren't kinks or flaws, but exactly what made her special. David saw her like she was beautiful, and it helped her see herself that way, too. He made her fit together. As he traced a final line

of fake blood across her cheek, she stared into his eyes and she felt like herself again, for the first time in weeks.

The feeling stayed with her all the way into the city. It remained through the movie and the costume contest, too. It was with her on the train back home to the suburbs, and then on the drive three towns over to Erin's dad's apartment.

David pulled up to the curb and nodded at the clock on the dash. "Eleven fifty-two," he said. "Got you here with eight minutes to spare."

"How should we spend our bonus time?" Erin asked. The question hung in the air. The silence immediately felt tense. Erin hadn't even meant the question flirtatiously, but that's how it came out. And now, even unintentional sexual innuendo had reignited the unspoken anxiety between them.

"You should probably just go inside," David said. "I want points with your dad."

"My dad loves you, David," Erin said. "He always has."

David just sat in the driver's seat and stared at the steering wheel. It made Erin feel guilty, as if she was somehow to blame for his skittishness around sex.

"Hey," Erin said. "Didn't you have something you wanted to show me?"

"Oh." David kept staring at the steering wheel. "Oh yeah . . ."

"What is it?"

"Nothing," David said. "It was stupid. It wasn't really anything."

"Were you going to ask me to homecoming or something?" Erin said, then rolled her eyes and laughed like it was a joke.

"No," David said. He unbuckled his seat belt. He leaned over to Erin's side of the car, and for a second Erin thought he might be going in for a kiss.

"It's not a big deal. It's about Public Access Afterworld."

Erin felt another bout of anxiety flare in her. *Of course it was*.

"But it doesn't matter," David said. "Really. Forget it." The clock on the dash switched to 11:56 P.M.

"Tell me," Erin said, mostly because she felt bad for disappointing him. "What's up?"

“Really?” David asked. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yeah. I want to know.”

David paused. He put his hand on her shoulder. Then he reached over and popped open the glove compartment.

“Do you remember a TV show called *Short Stack*?”

Erin felt confused. “The old sitcom?” she asked.

“Yeah,” David said. He grabbed a VHS tape out from the glove compartment and dropped it into Erin’s lap.

It was a tape that Erin had seen once before. She recognized it immediately as the same tape from that night at Jim Davis’s cabin. The tape Erin had almost watched after she’d stripped down to her underwear and knelt on the grungy basement floor. The one she’d knocked to the ground after reading its label.

ERIN MORRISON 2/5/83, it had read. And here it was again.

“That’s what’s on it,” David said. “*Short Stack*. The old sitcom. That’s what Jim Davis wanted to show you that night.”

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2

WELL HOW ABOUT YOU? Do *you* remember the TV show *Short Stack*?

Let me try to jog your memory. *Short Stack* was a family sitcom that aired for eight seasons on ABC from 1977 to 1985, Saturday nights at 8:30 Eastern / 7:30 Central. This was before streaming or DVR, when network television was still once-a-week appointment viewing, an opportunity for families around the country to gather together in the living room for a wholesome evening of laughs and lessons.

Still not ringing a bell? Maybe you remember Lil' Angus, the show's breakout fan favorite character, a classic little stinker, the youngest kid in the family, who, episode after episode, concocted harebrained schemes that would inevitably land him in hot water with his teachers, the principal, and above all, his loving, ever-patient parents.

Okay. If you're still drawing a blank on *Short Stack*, maybe this will jog your memory: "*I dono about that!*"

Lil' Angus's iconic catchphrase, which you had to live under a rock not to hear ten times a day during the show's initial run. That catchphrase graced the cover of both *TV Guide* and *Rolling Stone*, not to mention countless TV shirts, lunch boxes, and other merchandising tie-ins throughout the late seventies and early eighties.

Or maybe you don't remember *Short Stack*. Though it was extremely popular at the time, the sitcom was seldom memorable. Really the show was a pretty prototypical product of its era, content to stick to tropes and not push any envelopes. That was part of its appeal. *Short Stack* was disposable and unchallenging. There'd be hijinks. Dinner with the boss gone disastrously wrong or boxing lessons with Uncle Charlie after a bully challenged Lil' Angus to a fight. Most weeks the show would work in a lesson or two by the end of its twenty-two minutes, but for the most part, we're talking about pretty low-stress stuff here.

That is, until winter 1983, when “Air Ball Blues” (S06E17) aired on an otherwise uneventful early February evening. The very special episode would go down in history as one of the absolute weirdest, most discordant half hours to ever air on network television. It’s still included to this day on internet listicles of the all-time strangest moments in TV history.

“Air Ball Blues,” or as it would come to be better known, “the episode where Lil’ Angus almost gets molested by his basketball coach,” wasn’t the first time *Short Stack* had broken from its usual formula to address a more serious topic. Previous “very special episodes” had focused on painkiller addiction (S03E12, “The Sting Operation”), domestic violence (S04E07, “The Trouble with Andy’s Dad”), and PTSD from the still-fresh Vietnam War (S05E19–20, the Emmy-winning “Those We Left Behind, Parts 1 and 2”). But when “Air Ball Blues” first aired on February 5, 1983, it featured far and away the most controversial hot-button topic the show had bitten off to date, perhaps the darkest subject matter that any family-friendly sitcom had ever attempted to address in prime time.

As Wikipedia now notes, the episode was greeted upon its initial broadcast with mixed positive reactions. Most critics praised the show’s sober handling of such taboo subject matter as an important resource for families to watch together and discuss. Others felt the episode overreached, accusing *Short Stack*, which at that point was solidly in the throes of late middle-age, of being high on its own Emmy supply (the episode, for what it’s worth, did receive a nomination in the Outstanding Writing category later that year, but ultimately lost to *Cheers*).

In time, though, the early eighties stranger danger craze passed, and the episode’s reputation changed. By the dawn of the internet, “Air Ball Blues” was solidly canonized as an absolutely beguiling cultural artifact, indisputably the moment when *Short Stack* once and forever, to put it in internet parlance, “jumped the shark.”

• • •

Years later, on a humid July night in 2009, David Sawyer and his best friend Erin Morrison drove to Troy, New York, and ended up in the basement of a very creepy high school guidance counselor named Jim Davis, who ordered Erin to strip nude and watch a VHS tape with her name on it.

If Erin hadn’t tackled the guidance counselor and run for safety that night just moments before Jim loaded his mysterious VHS tape into the VCR and showed Erin the footage he insisted would change her life forever, she would have been treated to a home recording of “Air Ball Blues,” that infamously ill-conceived very special episode of *Short Stack*.

The tape was recorded directly off TBS reruns, edited with a manual start-stop recording method that removed commercial breaks between the cold open, the first and second acts, and the end credit stinger when special guest star Alfred Morans as Detective Drummond asked Lil’ Angus if he had any more questions about his near-miss with childhood sexual assault, and then the precocious child star replied in his classic hammy affect, “Just one more question, Mr. Detective: Can I still join the basketball team next season?” And then there came the thunderous laugh track and applause. And finally, a freeze-frame on Lil’ Angus’s smiling, still-innocent face, over which the end credits scrawled.

If you looked really carefully at those end credits on the tape, you would notice what seemed like a strange error, though you’d have to slow the tape down, almost go frame by frame to catch it. Just before the production company logos, and well after the rest of the below-the-line crew’s names had scrolled by, one more credit was included seemingly by error, wedged between a list of participating post-production facilities and some legally required language about the California tax credit . . .

Script Girl—Erin Morrison

It’s the only episode of *Short Stack* with such a credit. By then, the title “Script Girl” had been phased out in Hollywood. “Script Supervisor” was now the less overtly sexist industry standard. And anyway, the Script Supervisor for season six of *Short Stack* was named Deborah Ingraham (she’s even in the credits of “Air Ball Blues,” listed earlier with the rest of the crew).

So what was Erin’s name doing in the credits of this very special episode that was shot and aired nearly a decade before she was even born? David wondered that exact thing when he first saw those end credits on Jim Davis’s tape.

And you might be wondering, how did David get his hands on Jim's tape anyway, after he and Erin fled that basement like their lives depended on it? Well, that mystery is easy to solve: He went back and asked to see it.

• • •

It was midday by the time David arrived in Troy, New York, on July 6, the very same day when, early in the morning, he'd witnessed his best friend beam through the static for the first time.

The whole ride back up to Troy, David kept asking himself what he was doing. Why did he want to return to this nightmare place he'd escaped less than twenty-four hours earlier? And why had he not even told Erin he was planning to pay Jim a return visit?

Because he was ashamed. Ashamed at how excited he was by everything that was happening. After he'd finally witnessed the static broadcast himself that morning, after he'd seen his best friend hissing from the screen with his own eyes, David no longer had any doubts. This was supernatural. Something *actually impossible* was happening. Which meant that Public Access Afterworld was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to David. That would *ever* happen to him. Finally, here in the real world was something that felt like magic. Something that could only ever happen on a TV show. It was too exciting an opportunity to let pass. And no matter how creepy that guidance counselor had been, Jim clearly knew more about what was going on than David did.

The internet was starting to get excited, too: David's once dormant thread on TheUncannyValley message board was now a mainstay on page one. Emily, the moderator who'd unlocked David's post, was corralling a small group of obsessives eager to explore the mysteries of Public Access Afterworld, and David was desperate to lead the charge. So he drove to Troy that next afternoon and parked his mom's Volvo in the same dirt driveway he'd peeled out of the night before.

Jim greeted David trepidatiously. The guidance counselor stepped out onto his front porch. He had a black eye, scratches and bruises still fresh from the damage his guests had inflicted on him the previous evening. "What do you want?" he asked David, ice pack up to his blood-dry lip.

"I need to see the tape," David told him. "I need to know what's on it."

Jim Davis stared at David, then he shook his head in unsurprised annoyance, as if David was his longtime sidekick, a real chip off the old block.

“All right,” Jim said. He lowered his ice pack and opened the front door. “Well, then I guess you better come back inside.”

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3

"HOW DID YOU GET THIS?" Erin asked David. The tape with her name on it was still resting in her lap. The clock on the dash blinked another minute closer to midnight.

"I stole it," David lied.

"You . . ." Erin looked at him in disbelief.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I knew you would tell me not to if I told you what I was planning, but I went back to Troy a few times after we took that trip. I scoped out that weirdo's house from afar. He leaves his back door unlocked. And I finally worked up the courage to just sneak in when he wasn't home, to steal this for you."

"For me?" Erin repeated, still catching up.

"I figured I could watch it for you, tell you what was on it so you could decide whether you wanted to watch it yourself. It's an episode. It's just a random episode of *Short Stack*."

"*Short Stack*?"

"Yeah. The sitcom. How well do you remember it?"

"I . . ."

"Lil' Angus? 'I dono about that!'" David tried to jog her memory.

"*Short Stack* . . ." Erin shook her head. "Yeah. I used to watch it after school sometimes when I was a kid. Reruns on TV Land, back in elementary school. Before my parents split. It's . . ."

"Just some random episode," David said. "A classically bad one, too—Lil' Angus almost gets molested by his creepy gym teacher."

"Jesus, David. What?"

"Yeah. But there's one more thing about it you need to know . . ." The clock on the dash switched from 11:57 to 11:58 P.M. "The credits. You're in

them, Erin. You're listed as the Script Girl."

"I'm what?"

"'Erin Morrison'—if you watch it, you'll see. Your name is right there, even though it's definitely not in any other episodes. I cross-checked. I watched the whole series over on DVD. It's not just this tape. It's in there, too."

"You watched the whole series on DVD?"

"Yeah," David said. He reached over and closed the glove compartment.

Erin shifted in the passenger seat, staring at the tape in her lap.

"Anyway," David said, "I wanted you to have it. So you could choose whether or not you wanted to watch it."

"David, I—"

"You don't have to. Obviously. Really, you don't. Destroy it, for all I care. But I thought you deserved to at least have the option to choose."

Erin sat in silence until the clock on the dash switched to midnight. She took the tape and her overnight bag, and got out of the car.

"Tonight was perfect," David said.

Erin smiled at him, but inside she felt sick.

• • •

A few minutes later, Erin sat on top of the covers in the guest room her dad so badly wanted her to think of as her second bedroom. The tape rested in her lap. She played David's story back in her head. He hadn't outwardly said that he was giving her the tape because he wanted her to watch it, but the implication was clear.

She felt taken advantage of somehow. David had lied to her, kept this secret for weeks. And now here he was pressuring her to do something she didn't feel comfortable with, trying to get her to continue being a part of this adventure that she had told him earlier that week had started to make her feel unsafe. It made her angry.

She briefly thought about leaving the tape in a drawer and waiting until morning to make a decision. But then she changed her mind and let her hands make the call for her. She ripped the VHS apart, forcing the film out

from its binding. Then once she'd mangled it sufficiently, she dumped the ruined tape's remains in the trash can by her bed.

• • •

On Monday, Erin's dad took her to school as planned. "I'm so glad we could do this," Lawrence said as they drove down the residential roads Erin usually walked to school on.

He spent most of the ride waxing poetic about how he couldn't believe the way time passes. It was senior year, but it felt like just yesterday he'd brought Erin outside and showed her the stars through his telescope, back when she was just three years old. "I knew even then that you were destined for great things," he told her. "For MIT. For NASA. The youngest female astronaut ever in space. I called it early—mark my words." It was a constant refrain, a fantasy that through sheer force of repetition Erin had adopted as her own. But this morning, hearing her dad's prophecy only stressed her out.

Lawrence could tell Erin's mind was elsewhere. "Just a second," he said as he dropped her off around the back of the school. "I want to speak with you about one more thing before you go."

Erin clutched her JanSport.

"It's about your boyfriend," her dad said. He was speaking in that unsubtle tone dads sometimes use when it's time to have a serious talk.

"His name is David, Dad. You've known him since we were both seven years old."

"I know. I know. And I love David. He's a sweet kid. I just wanted to say, as your father . . . you two have been so tethered together since you were so young. And it's great that you were able to find each other here in Hartsdale. I just . . . I worry you might be getting too attached. And that he might be trying to hold on to something that he needs to let go of. I know your mother feels the same way I do about this."

"You haven't said more than two sentences to Mom in—"

"All I want to say is, as your father who loves you and wants the best for you—you and David are going to be on very different life paths. You've got so much to look forward to in your future. And he . . . well, I hope he gets that job at Blockbuster he's always wanted."

There was something insulting in Lawrence's tone, perhaps even competitive. Was this because of Friday night, Erin wondered? Was her dad threatened because David had stolen a bit of their allotted time together?

Lawrence looked his daughter in the eye. "First love can be a very powerful thing," he said. "And I just want to make sure you know not to let it keep you from everything you've worked so hard for all these years. That *we've* worked so hard for."

"I get it," Erin said. She opened the car door.

"I love you," Lawrence called. "I'll see you in two weekends."

• • •

Erin slipped into the side entrance of the gymnasium. She stood alone in the empty sprawl. Her dad had dropped her off twenty minutes early, so she had some extra time to kill. Erin felt anxious and behind on schoolwork. The weekend's drama had distracted her from her actual responsibilities. She took out her headphones, put on Tori Amos, and dug her physics textbook out of her bag.

Fifteen minutes later, once the hallways were beginning to fill with students, David found her by her locker.

"Hey!" he called, rushing to catch her before she could head to class. "I didn't see you down in the AV dungeon this morning."

"Yeah . . . I got here late," Erin lied.

She closed her locker and began walking to class. David followed after her.

"Okay, I'm sorry to fixate," he said. "But did you watch it?"

"What?"

"The tape. Did you watch it?"

Erin blinked a few times. She shook her head.

"Oh . . . no. I didn't. I destroyed it."

"You . . ."

"I destroyed it. I just—David, this whole thing is too creepy. I don't know why that dude was so obsessed with me and some old sitcom. But it's twisted, and I'm done with it—"

“You’re . . .” David said. “You’re done with it?”

“I just want to forget all about Public Access Afterworld and try my best to enjoy senior year, because it only happens once.”

“Yeah, but . . .” David was getting defensive now. “What’s happening is real, Erin. The broadcasts. *Your* broadcasts. You can’t just ignore them.”

“You’re not listening to me,” Erin said.

“I’m sorry. I just think . . . this is happening. One way or another, it’s happening.”

“I’ve got class,” Erin said. She tried to get away, but David chased after her.

“Wait,” he called. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Erin, I’m sorry. I lied to you. Or—I guess I didn’t tell you the whole story.”

Erin turned around to look at him.

“I didn’t break into Jim Davis’s house, okay? I visited him again. We talked more—a few times now. He’s a weirdo, for sure, but he’s not a bad dude, actually. He knows a lot about what’s happening. He showed me the tape, and a bunch of other evidence. He wants to help.”

“Wait,” Erin said. “David, what?”

“He wants to help. And he’s not creepy. Well, like, sure, he’s creepy, but in a harmless loser kind of way. He’s one of us. Like an Auxiliary, just older. He’s part of this online group who investigates disturbances in TV history, like what’s been happening to you. It’s like Mensa for TV geeks.”

“David, what are you talking about?” Erin said.

“We should go see him. You need to talk to Jim. He can explain everything, like he did for me. About what’s happening to you.”

“Nothing is happening to me!” Erin said. She realized she was shouting. Several students slowed to eavesdrop.

“It is. It really is. And Erin—it’s incredible. Trust me. You just need to go talk to Jim. He can explain everything, show you things that—”

“I don’t want to talk to Jim,” Erin said.

“Then talk to me. Listen, Erin, what’s happening to you isn’t a bad thing. I promise. It’s incredible. Jim showed me pictures, newspaper clippings, recordings of other people who’ve crossed over to Public Access

Afterworld. All the special ones, like you. It turns out this has been happening for a long time."

"David, what—"

"The broadcasts. They're psychic transmissions, disturbances between realities. Between this world and all the other worlds. They're targeting you because you're special. Because our favorite TV shows, our favorite movies, they're all real. Like—really real. Real worlds that special people like you can enter. Can create. That *you* are going to create."

"David, listen to yourself. You sound insane." Erin tried to force her way past him, but he held on to her.

"Erin, listen to me. This is more exciting than anything else we'll ever experience. It's like . . . it's like magic is real. You've got *superpowers,* and Jim says all you have to do to unlock them is watch the tape."

"Jim says . . ." Erin repeated David's words. She felt like she was in the middle of a bad dream, one she couldn't wake up from. The first-period bell rang.

"Please," David said. He tightened his grip on her shoulder. "You just need to trust me. We can do this together."

"I don't want to!" Erin shouted. She shoved David out of the way, pushing him hard, toppling him against a set of lockers. David fell to the ground. His knapsack opened, and a bunch of VHS tapes spilled out onto the hallway floor. A few kids nearby laughed. David scrambled to collect the tapes, and by the time he got back up, Erin had managed to escape to calculus.

• • •

She didn't see David again for the rest of the school day, and by eighth period, her anger had transformed into guilt. She knew David well enough to know how badly he wanted this. And despite herself, she felt guilty for disappointing him, for robbing David of the excitement he'd invested in Public Access Afterworld. She knew her feelings didn't make any sense, and alongside the guilt, there was still anger. But Erin loved David. She wanted to make him happy, not be the thing keeping him from happiness.

Erin began to feel a deep anxiety building inside her. Was this the end of their relationship? Of their decade-long friendship? She'd never even let

herself consider what a life without David Sawyer would feel like. And now she discovered she didn't have the strength to even imagine it, let alone live it. She realized that David was more than just a phantom limb connected to her body: He was an internal organ. If he went away, her whole body would shut down.

By the time the final bell rang, Erin missed him terribly. She felt as if her lungs were closing up. She was desperate to catch a glimpse of him in the hallway so they could make up and things could just go back to being normal again.

Her dad had been right that morning, even if he'd just been speaking out of jealousy. David and Erin were tethered together. They'd been friends—family, really—for so long that Erin could feel David's feelings like they were her own. For better or worse, they had become part of each other, not just like a platitude from a Hallmark card, but in a dangerous, physical kind of way.

Erin felt like throwing up the entire bus ride home. She debated when to call David, what to say, whether or not she should apologize. She could psychically feel David across town, and she knew he must be feeling the same thing, the same sharp, withdrawal-like pain.

She decided she needed to call him the moment she got home. She walked fast from the bus stop, nearly sprinted through the front door towards her bedroom.

"Oh, honey!" her mom called from the kitchen. It was Mary's day home from work at the hospital. "Hold on. Your father stopped by earlier today."

"Dad stopped by?" Erin asked.

"That man is a piece of work," Mary said. "I couldn't tell if it was just an excuse to see me, but he said he found something you left at his place. A videotape. He thought it might have been a school project that got ruined."

Erin went pale. Mary didn't notice.

"He said he got out his toolbox and fixed it up for you. I think he was trying to impress me. Like I'd find it macho that he had a toolbox."

Mary rolled her eyes. Erin left her mom in the kitchen and walked towards her bedroom. The tape was waiting for her on her bed, repaired and back to normal. Erin felt a chill seeing it there. It was like something out of

an old episode of the *Twilight Zone*: the VHS tape that kept reappearing no matter how many times one tried to ditch it. It was absurd.

Maybe David was right. Maybe all this was fate. Erin's destiny, as he had insisted. But if this was her destiny, why did it make her feel so sick?

David called ten minutes later. He unloaded a string of apologies before Erin had time to get a full sentence out.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for lying to you, and I'm sorry for pressuring you, I'm sorry for everything. I just love you so much, and I got so excited because it felt so real. So magical. Like something out of a story I'd make up in my head but never tell anybody."

"I'm sorry, too," Erin said. She felt sorry, but she wasn't sure why. They talked for a while about how awful it had been to be mad at each other. They promised to never fight again, and David promised to never keep another secret. But neither one of them really addressed the subject of the fight itself—Jim Davis's story, Public Access Afterworld, and that tape David had so desperately wanted Erin to watch. The VHS tape that was now resting on her belly. Erin watched it rise and fall with her breaths.

"Is it dangerous?" she asked. "To do what Jim Davis says I can? To travel to the other side of the screen?"

"No," David told her. She could hear his excitement. He spoke slowly and cautiously, masking his eagerness because neither of them wanted a repeat of their blowup in the school hallway that morning. "It's the opposite," he said. "Jim has interviewed a lot of them: the special ones, like you. The people I heard talk about it said they were gone for a few minutes. A few hours, max. Apparently you see this crazy interdimensional video store, you enter it, and it's like . . . like shedding your body and becoming your own imagination. It feels like a warm bath or a lucid dream, because you're part of the universe's subconscious now. You have adventures and make TV shows, and then when you're done, you cross back over. Back into yourself. Back here on earth."

"And all I have to do is watch the tape?"

"Jim thinks so. He says it'll trigger something in you. And then you should start to feel different, to see static, but like outside the TV screen, maybe in the form of men called chaperones, and they'll lead you to the video store."

“My dad fixed it,” Erin admitted. “The tape you gave me. He brought it back over to my mom’s, left it waiting for me on my bed.”

“See? It’s because you’re supposed to watch it.” David was getting carried away again. He caught himself and slowed down. “I know this is a lot,” he said. “And I just want you to do what you think is best. I don’t want you to feel any pressure to do anything you don’t want to.”

Erin stared at the tape on her belly. They both knew what David said wasn’t exactly true.

• • •

Later that night, after Mary had gone to bed, Erin snuck down to the basement and loaded the VHS into her VCR. She sat on the carpet in front of the screen and watched all twenty-two minutes of “Air Ball Blues,” that very special episode that was supposed to change her life.

It passed quickly. The cold open, in which that handsome seventies actor who played Lil’ Angus’s dad broke the fourth wall and personally introduced the show from the sitcom’s living set, warning everyone in advance about the episode’s sensitive subject matter, and encouraging families to speak together about the topic after the show finished. And then act one, in which Lil’ Angus blew his big basketball tryout but made the team anyway.

“I think you’re star material, Lil’ Angus,” said creepy Coach Horton.

The whole episode felt oddly familiar to Erin. By the tape’s redacted commercial break, she was sure she’d seen it before. It made sense: she had watched *Short Stack* reruns on TV Land on weekdays after kindergarten, and at some point during that time she’d surely stumbled upon “Air Ball Blues.” But the memory of the episode was hazy, like a dream she’d mostly forgotten.

At the crescendo of act two, creepy Coach Horton gave Lil’ Angus and his two best friends pills in the locker room to induce sleep. But thankfully, because this was a sitcom and they weren’t going to go *that dark*, the whole plan was foiled by the principal just in the nick of time.

Erin watched the little stinger scene at the end of the episode between Lil’ Angus and the friendly detective with the comforting laugh track. “Just

one more question, Mr. Detective: Can I still join the basketball team next season?”

Then the end credits played. And just as David had promised, there was Erin’s name, clear as day, next to that outdated epithet: Script Girl.

• • •

Once the episode was over, Erin walked upstairs to her bedroom. She called David back.

“Did you watch it?” he asked, the anticipation no longer hidden from his voice.

“Yeah . . .” Erin said. “I just finished.”

“And did anything happen?”

“No.”

She could sense David’s disappointment through the phone receiver.

“You don’t feel any different?”

“Not really,” Erin said. It was the truth. She felt some anxiety in her gut, but that was nothing new. The feeling had been with her all day. The episode had done nothing to change anything. It hadn’t made her feel any better or worse.

“Maybe it just takes some time to kick in,” David said. “I’ll call Jim and ask.”

“Okay,” Erin said. She reached for her retainer on the nightstand. She said good night and I love you, and then she hung up the phone.

• • •

Erin had trouble drifting off that night, so she decided to get up and go sleep in her mom’s room. Erin had missed her mother while she’d been staying at her dad’s over the weekend, had missed Mary all day at school too as the guilt and anger from her fight with David overwhelmed her. She missed the feeling of it being okay to be helpless. She wanted to be cradled and cared for, to crawl into her mom’s bed like she used to as a kid, and forget about senior year, about MIT and NASA and being the youngest

astronaut ever in space. To forget about cursed VHS tapes. She just wanted to be a child again, safe in her mother's arms.

As Erin creaked Mary's bedroom door open, her mom turned over in her sleep, wordlessly making room for Erin in the bed. It was as if no time had passed since Erin was a little girl and this routine was a near-nightly occurrence in the Morrison household. Erin got under the covers and her mom wrapped an arm around her daughter, cradling her, trying to ease her into slumber.

Mary drifted off again quickly. She slept peacefully through the night while Erin lay awake until dawn listening to her mother snore.

Erin finally fell asleep for a little while just as the sun started to rise. In her nightmare, she was anxious about the upcoming basketball tryouts. It was a stress dream, obviously inspired by the sitcom episode that David had pressured her to watch earlier that evening. She slept lightly, and even in her deepest moments of unconsciousness, she could still sense her mother's warmth in the bed next to her back on earth. But the woman's presence didn't make things better like Erin hoped it would, because she wasn't a kid anymore. Sleeping in her mother's bed was no longer sufficient protection to ward off all the bad things waiting for her in the dream realm.

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4

THAT SATURDAY WAS THE night of the homecoming dance. Erin was still secretly hoping to go with David, but now they had other plans for the afternoon.

David had called Jim Davis right after Erin watched the tape. Jim assured David (and David had relayed to Erin in turn) that her lack of symptoms was perfectly normal. Sometimes, he said, it took subjects a few days to start feeling the effects. That for some, symptoms came on slow and steady from the moment of transmission, but for others it could hit suddenly days later, like a tidal wave.

Jim invited them both over so they could talk in person, so that he could answer any questions Erin might have about what to expect from all that was supposedly still ahead of her. Erin wasn't in any great rush to see the man. To return to that house in the woods where she'd spent one of the most disturbing nights of her life. But David insisted that it might make her feel better.

"You can decide for yourself if you think Jim is telling the truth," he said. "Either way, maybe it will give you some peace of mind."

Which sounded good to her, because the anxiety hadn't left her stomach for days now. Erin had been avoiding the AV dungeon all week. She studied nonstop, reading far ahead in her textbooks in an effort to keep her mind on schoolwork and off David's obsession with her magical TV destiny.

He still wanted to hang out every night and monitor the static, and of course she let him come over and sit next to her on the beanbag in the basement. She found herself feeling less like his girlfriend and more like a lab rat. David stared at the static on her TV and stole glances at her reaction every so often, studying her for the symptoms he and Jim Davis believed were imminent. He ate his rainbow sherbet and offered Erin his spoon

between bites, but she shrugged it away. She was never very hungry anymore.

• • •

The two of them were silent the whole drive up. They passed through Troy a little before noon and stopped to eat at the same diner where they'd met Jim Davis for the first time two months earlier. Then David continued down forest roads he now knew by heart leading to Jim's secluded cabin in the woods.

As they pulled up outside, they both noticed that there were no cars in the dirt driveway. No lights on in the house.

"I told him we'd arrive by one," David said. He seemed confused, even a little embarrassed.

Erin got out of the car and walked across the same driveway she'd once run down in her underwear in the middle of the night. She knocked loudly on the front door and waited for an answer. David followed her onto the porch. They waited together until it became clear no one was going to open the door and invite them inside.

"He might be out," David said. "We're thirty minutes early."

Erin knocked again. Still no one answered, so she tried the doorknob, and found it unlocked. She creaked the door open and stepped into the darkened entryway, leaving David out on the porch.

"Erin, I don't think we should . . ." David squinted into the front window as Erin walked inside. She pulled the dangling string light by the hallway entrance, and as the bare yellow glow flickered on, the two of them realized at the same time that something was very wrong.

Jim's house was totally empty. Not just of people, but of furniture, wallpaper, any decoration or indication that anyone had ever occupied the place. If David hadn't set foot in here several times in the past month, he would've been convinced that the cabin had been abandoned for decades. Gone were the retro seventies furnishings, the plastic-covered couches, the framed antique movie posters, all of it.

Erin walked down the hallway. She glanced through the door that led into the basement, down to that cavern that had once been stacked floor to ceiling with hundreds of VHS tapes. It was empty now, too. All the tapes

were gone. No trace of Jim's existence, or of the work that had brought them here.

"Something's happened," David said, as if that wasn't obvious. He followed Erin down the hallway as she continued past the basement staircase towards the main parlor.

"Maybe someone didn't want us to investigate," David said, speculating out loud, trying to come up with a theory that made sense. "They destroyed the evidence. It was the government, or—"

"No," Erin said. "It wasn't the government. *It was him.*"

She entered the parlor, eyes straight ahead. David followed Erin into the room, and now he saw what she was looking at. The far wall was covered in photographs, pictures that David had seen before. The same pictures that Jim had shown him on one of his visits that summer, headshots and candids of the many men and women (mostly women) he claimed to have helped cross over to Public Access Afterworld. Here again were those same photos, scotch-taped up in a vast collage above the dormant fireplace. Erin's picture was there, too. Her junior-year high school yearbook photo, right in the center of the display.

The eyes on all the faces had been removed from the photos. Cut out in two tiny holes like a little mouse had dug through them. Without eyes, the faces in the photographs looked distorted and perverse. Which was exactly how Jim Davis intended them all to look.

He'd left a message on the wall, too, scrawled in all-caps, splotchy graffiti.

TELL THEM JIM SAYS HELLO

David stared at the display, not yet really comprehending its meaning.

"He tricked us," Erin said. "It was a trick."

David turned to look at her.

"Why would he lie to us?" he asked.

Erin shook her head. She felt a sudden need to escape.

"I never should have watched that tape," she said. And then she panicked, rushing back down the empty hallway towards the front door.

Her heart raced. She felt like she was about to puke. Then, reality's bottom fell out, and Erin realized in her last moment of consciousness that there was one thing Jim Davis had definitely not been lying about: how for some people, the journey to Public Access Afterworld was a gradual thing, and for others, it came on quite suddenly.

It was finally here for her now. Erin stumbled out onto the front porch as all the dread and sickness that had been lodged inside her for weeks ruptured, as the anxiety burst inside her like an appendix. She felt her body convulse and electricity jolt through her, as though she'd just shoved her tongue into a wall socket. The static blotted out her senses, shooting through her arms and legs, her chest and head. It made her ears ring and her mind disappear.

By the time David rushed to meet her out on the porch, Erin was already mid-collapse. She let the static hug her, crumple her to the ground, her body now a used-up page of old newspaper.

• • •

She came to in her basement. David was trying to help her drink a glass of soda. He'd driven her back home and helped her down here, laid her out on the beanbag in hopes of nursing her back to consciousness.

"You've been in and out since Troy," David said. "You kept telling me you needed to make the basketball team. That your dad would be disappointed if you didn't."

Erin stared at him. She still felt far away. The past several hours were a blur. In her dream, she'd been Lil' Angus from *Short Stack*, and then she'd been herself but younger. A young girl eager to join NASA and make her father proud, to become the youngest female astronaut in space.

What was happening to her? Even the question itself felt hard to consider under the layers of fuzz coursing through her body and brain. Because "her" was a concept that felt increasingly remote, as if her mere existence as a corporeal thing was an abstract idea she had to work hard to grasp.

"It's happening," she said. "I can feel it, just like he said I would. I'm going somewhere else. Leaving my body behind."

David stared at her. He looked concerned. "I don't know what happened with Jim," he said. "Maybe it was all some weird game he was playing.

Maybe it was all fake.”

“No,” Erin said. “It was real. I can feel now how real it was.”

“You’ll be fine,” David promised. “Whatever happens, you’ll just be gone for a little while, and then you’ll be back, like he said you would be. In a matter of hours . . .”

Erin stared at him. David was panicked, terrified as he tried to parse the situation he’d gotten them both into. He suddenly looked small and pathetic to her. A selfish kid playing dress-up in clothes too big for his scrawny frame. A child pretending to be a man.

“You don’t love me,” Erin said suddenly. “You want to be me.” The thought struck her with perfect clarity. Through the haze of her illness, she could see the simple truth. “You want to live vicariously,” she said, growing angry now. The anger helped. It made it easier to remain here from one moment to the next. It eased the static numbing her brain and body.

David just sat on the beanbag next to her, staring, silent, inert, just like he’d stared at her that night back in Jim Davis’s basement when she’d undressed.

Erin felt a growing warmth in her lower belly. She crawled across the beanbag on top of David, letting her body lead. She climbed on top of him and he let her. She kept her eyes empty and faraway as she pulled his shirt up over his head. She understood now how sex with David Sawyer worked. She needed to lead. He wanted her to be in control.

“You like to watch, don’t you?” she asked. “Because that’s all you can do.”

“Erin . . .” David mumbled. He wasn’t sure they should be doing this, but he didn’t try to stop her.

“Shut up,” she said. She worked his jeans off and found his penis. She heard him gasp as she slipped him inside her. It was wet and easy, her arousal powered by the static in her body and mind, all of it a surge of white-hot energy.

“You want to watch me, because I’m your little TV show,” Erin said. She pressed her elbows into David’s ribs and began to move on top of him. He didn’t speak or protest.

“You want to dress up as me and play make-believe.” She steadied her elbows against his rib cage, lowering her arms towards his clavicle. She

wrapped her hands around his neck, and David just kept staring up at her. She felt him twitch inside her. He was turned on by the threat of being strangled. It made her mad, but it turned her on, too.

“I’m the little action figure on your shelf. Is that right? You want to play with me? Do you want to see me go on an adventure? Would that be fun for you?”

David began to cough and struggle. He kicked his legs up on reflex and pounded the carpet underneath the beanbag.

Erin felt her climax drawing closer. David edged towards asphyxiation, then erupted into a coughing fit. Just before Erin could finish, David managed to push her away, to escape her grip, to roll over off the beanbag and collapse onto the carpet in a fit of pained wheezing, eyes wet with tears.

Erin realized where she was. What she’d just been doing.

“I’m sorry,” she said, feeling suddenly guilty. “I’m sorry. I love you so much.”

“It’s okay,” David said. His voice was weak, choked out from him. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Erin curled up into his arms and let him hold her. “Everything is going to be okay,” David said again and again, like a prayer.

• • •

David fell asleep eventually. Erin wanted him to, because she knew he’d never let her do what she needed to do next. She’d accepted it now: David Sawyer was never going to ask her to the homecoming dance.

So she slipped quietly out from his arms and tiptoed across the basement. She found that old bottle of Tito’s inside her mother’s liquor cabinet, the one that she and David traded swigs from on special occasions. It was about a liter full, and she drank the whole thing down in one steady chug. She felt the alcohol burn through the numbness in her chest, but she only felt it faintly. Then she snuck upstairs to her bedroom and got dressed, slipped her retainer into the big pocket of her black hoodie, and looked out her bedroom window.

Her chaperones were here already, floating just above the cul-de-sac.

Before leaving, Erin picked up the phone on her bedside table. She bunched the cord up in her fingers and dialed a number she knew by heart. Her father picked up after the second ring.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“I’m running late,” Erin told him. “I have to go in a minute, but before I do, I need to ask you something . . .”

“Erin, are you all right?” her father said. “You sound strange.”

“Why did you rape me?”

Her father was quiet.

“Erin . . .” he said, his voice suddenly lowered down a whole octave.

“I was only a child, and you raped me. You and David . . . and Jim Davis, too.”

“Erin, what?”

“How could you do that to me?”

“Baby. Honey. What are you talking about? I never raped you.”

Erin was quiet. She tried to form thoughts through the heavy static in her brain. Was that true? Was she confused?

“I never raped you,” her father said again. “What is happening? Why would you call me and say something like that?”

Erin kept trying to think. Eventually she realized he was right. It was true. He had never raped her.

“I know you didn’t,” she said. Her eyes welled with tears. “So why do I feel like you did?”

She said goodbye, hung up the phone, and walked down the stairs. She found Mary unpacking some groceries in the kitchen, just arrived home from a double shift at the hospital.

“I’m going to the homecoming dance,” Erin said. She didn’t dare look at her mom as she said goodbye and walked out the door of her childhood home for what she suspected would be the final time. It would have been too painful.

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5

DAVID WOKE UP TO the sound of static from the Toshiba across the basement. He opened his eyes and saw Erin on the screen, beaming through from Public Access Afterworld.

He reached for her, the real her, as he had so many nights before, but realized she was no longer on the beanbag next to him.

"*I know why I made that episode now,*" the Erin on the screen said from beneath static. "*I died so young. I should have been so much more . . .*"

David sat up. Muscle memory urged him to crawl across the room and reach for a blank VHS tape so he could record this latest disturbance. But he curbed the impulse and just sat there staring at the screen instead.

"*My life,*" Erin said from the TV. "*My whole entire life. I was just a speck. A bottle of anxiety and emotions. Clueless and nervous and afraid to ask for what I really wanted. Alone, under the stars, lost somewhere in the cinematic universe . . .*"

• • •

Mary was still unpacking her groceries when David rushed up the stairs. She hadn't yet discovered Erin's bedroom phone left off the hook. She hadn't yet started to worry that something was very wrong.

"Is Erin still here?" David asked, already out of breath.

"Oh, David. No, honey," Mary said. "She went to the dance. I assumed she was meeting you there."

David grabbed his mom's car keys and rushed out the front door without another word. Mary watched David through the window as he ran to his car like he was late for his own wedding. She felt momentarily jarred by the boy's frenetic energy. But she didn't think much of it. By the time David

turned the keys in the ignition of his mom's Volvo, Mary was already back to unpacking her groceries.

For years after that, Erin's mom would castigate herself for not realizing sooner that her daughter was in danger. She'd recount her final, brief interaction with David for countless officials, police reporters, and documentary film crews.

"I remember the bruises on his neck," she said to HBO. "They looked fresh, like there had been a struggle. But in the moment, I didn't think much of it. David was never someone I would have considered violent or dangerous. Which I think just speaks to how nefarious a presence he really was . . ."

• • •

After he left Mary's, David drove across town, speeding down the quiet roads that Erin always walked to school on. He was hoping to catch her by the side of the road, but she was nowhere to be found.

Once he got to the high school, he checked all the usual haunts: the AV dungeon, the stairwells and the hallways, and of course the gymnasium. It was hard to see through the fog machine obscuration, so it took David a while to search the crowd, to push through the throngs of students all grinding together to top-forty pop on the dance floor.

David stumbled between the gyrating masses, feeling seasick, as if the gymnasium was a big ship on the ocean, lurching and wobbling with the waves of a terrible storm. He felt lost among all the bodies. Like he had always been lost among them. All those normal, carefree teenagers writhing in a thick haze of easy hormones, his peers who had so effortlessly come of age in a way that David never would.

• • •

He saw Erin one more time, out on the football field.

It had grown foggy outside while he was in the high school, almost as if the smoke machine from the dance floor had leaked out from the gymnasium and spread across the rest of the town. David had to squint to see her.

Erin was far away, walking slowly towards the end zone, approaching a strange neon light peeking out through forest, cutting the haze like storm lights. David squinted so he could see it with his own eyes: that hulking awning of the fabled video store that Jim Davis had told him all about that summer, that the man had described in rapturous poetics. Here it was for real, finally looming beyond the goalpost, out in the woods past the end zone. Wind hissed all around, whipped into frenzy by the video store's coming into shape.

"Erin!" David shouted, trying to get her attention over the tornado-like howl across the field. He squinted and tried to run against the wind. It pushed back on him. Erin kept her body turned away, facing the entrance to the video store before her. He couldn't tell if she could hear him.

"Erin, it's me!" David shouted again.

She turned to look at him. She seemed surprised to see him there, as if David was a remnant of a past life she'd already left behind long ago.

"David," she said. Her voice was calm. "It's okay. I get it now. I'm not really here. I never was."

David kept running towards her. The wind pushed against him, growing stronger the farther down the field he traveled.

"You don't have to go!" he shouted. "Listen to me! You don't have to go!"

"David," Erin said again.

He heard a little bell ring. Erin looked over her shoulder as the door to the video store burst open behind her. The wind changed directions and grew fierce, like a cosmic vacuum cleaner powered all the way up. It carried Erin abruptly off her feet and into the air. She screamed, now wide-awake and suddenly terrified. She reached down to claw at the grass of the football field, but she couldn't get a grip on anything against the overwhelming force pulling her forward.

Captain Video swallowed her quickly. David tried to follow her, but by the time he got to the end zone, the door to the video store was slamming back shut. That little bell above the awning rang once more, and then the neon dissipated quickly back into fog. David watched the storefront evaporate. Watched it leave this plane of existence behind with his best friend inside.

And as for Erin? Erin left the earth screaming and crying for help. She left confused and jolted by the suddenness with which she had been ripped from herself. With her last conscious thought before she was gone entirely, she wondered: *Was any of this even real? Had she ever even been anyone at all?*

• • •

When David got home an hour later, staggering through the front door in a state of sustained shock, his mom was standing in the kitchen with a phone to her ear.

"He's home," she said, then turned to her son. "David, it's Mary. She's wondering if you've seen Erin. I guess she never came home from the dance tonight."

David hadn't had enough emotional reserve to consider his alibi yet. He was still hoping Erin would be back soon, just as Jim had promised.

"I went to the school," he told his mom without really thinking about it. "I looked all over, but I couldn't find her."

His mom nodded.

"I'm sorry, Mary. He didn't see her. I'm sure Erin will turn up soon. No . . . no, I understand. I will . . ."

David walked to his bedroom. His mom's voice faded out of earshot as he shut the door behind him.

• • •

Later that night, David started a new ritual, one that would stay with him for years to come. After everyone else in the house had gone to bed, David snuck up to the attic. He dug through piles of clutter until he found what he was looking for: his family's old analog CRT TV (a Sony, though otherwise nearly identical to Erin's Toshiba).

He carried the set downstairs with him to the living room, then plugged it into the wall, crouched down in front of the screen, and turned it on. He made sure the volume knob was down low so he wouldn't wake the others in the house.

And then David squinted into the static, just like he had on so many nights these past months down in Erin’s basement. Only now Erin was gone and David was still here, left alone to continue their shared work, to continue monitoring the airwaves in hopes that someday another stray signal might peek through.

He flipped channels, hoping to catch a glimpse of Erin, a transmission from Public Access Afterworld, anything, really, that might inspire a modicum of hope that his friend was still out there somewhere. That someday he might be able to see her again, even if just on a screen.

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6

THAT SAME NIGHT, OUT on the country's other coast, Anthony "Fisch" Fischer sat at a booth eating mediocre sushi at a hole-in-the-wall dive in L.A.'s Koreatown. He was waiting for his older brother, the co-founder and silent partner of GlobalVill.com, the tech company Fisch had launched three years earlier. Jim was late, just like always. Fisch had come to expect nothing less from his black sheep of a brother. He had not been looking forward to this meeting.

"Hey there, little guy," Jim said once he arrived thirty minutes late. It had been Fisch's nickname as a child, and Jim still relished getting to use it. He approached the booth and smiled with the familiar condescension Fisch had been on the receiving end of countless times since childhood, as if Jim's three-year head start on life was undeniable evidence of his innate superiority.

Fisch reminded himself not to let it get to him. He was determined to remain professional tonight. This was a business meeting, not a family reunion. He stood up and hugged his brother, noticing the familiar waft of ketchup-like body odor, a smell Fisch remembered well from the lower half of the bunk bed they'd shared through childhood.

"So nice of you to finally join me," Fisch said. "Please. Take a seat." Jim settled into the booth across from his brother. "Do you want to order something?" Fisch asked, then offered Jim a menu as Jim unwrapped a pair of chopsticks.

"No. It looks like you have plenty. I'll share." Jim snapped his chopsticks in two, then helped himself to a salmon roll off Fisch's plate.

"So," Fisch said, trying not to let his older brother get a rise out of him, as was surely his intention.

Jim chewed with his mouth open. “So,” Jim repeated. “To what do I owe this rare and unexpected invitation from *Forbes* magazine’s ‘Rising Tech Innovator of the Year’?”

“Erin Morrison,” Fisch said.

Jim swallowed seaweed and raw fish. He grinned. “Not bad, right? I just got word an hour ago that she officially crossed.”

Jim reached across the table and helped himself to a sip of Fisch’s ginger ale.

“Some of my best work, honestly,” Jim said. “I really went all out on that one. You would’ve been proud. I traced the readings from the wires to find the girl just like Grandpa taught us, matched her with a tape from my archives. Then I played her and her best friend like a fiddle, convinced this insecure little guy to do half my work for me. I hired some call girls off Craigslist to record themselves pretending to be ‘crooked people’ fresh back from Public Access Afterworld, made up this whole elaborate fairy tale to convince this kid that his best friend was bound for glory and not . . . *you know.*”

He laughed to himself. “Oh! Get this . . . guess what I told them my last name was? This is the best part. *Davis. Jim Davis.* Like the *Garfield* guy.”

“One of my informants tells me that this girl’s electromagnetic readings were through the roof,” Fisch said. “In dangerous territory. Did you even test?”

Jim rolled his eyes. He did an impression of his little brother trying to sound important. “‘One of my informants. One of my informants.’ Oh my god—who was it that I heard a rumor you were working with these days . . .” Jim laughed as he remembered. “That’s right. Chimotera. The half-man, half-bat from that old horror franchise Dad used to make us watch as kids. I love that. Little brother, you need therapy. Have you tried OkCupid?”

“It was reckless of you not to test,” Fisch said. “She could have been the one.”

“Could have been the *what*?” Jim shot back. “The *receiver*? You still believe in that old wives’ tale, even after all these years?”

“Dad believed it,” Fisch said.

Jim helped himself to another piece of sushi off his brother’s plate.

“Yeah, well, was she? Was she your big bad fabled ‘receiver’?”

“No,” Fisch admitted. “She wasn’t. Her electrical levels weren’t quite high enough. But that doesn’t mean the next one won’t be.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “You know what I think this meeting’s actually about? Jealousy. We both know that girl is trapped somewhere very, very far away, and she’s never coming back. Which, I’ll remind you, is exactly the job we’re both being compensated very handsomely to do. This one was mine. I bagged her. So you keep the work going with your shiny new tech company and your movie monster informants, and I’ll keep it up the old-fashioned way. *Trace the lines. Follow the heat. Find the crooked*, just like Grandpa taught us.”

“You talk about it with such pride in your voice,” Fisch said. “It’s almost like you enjoy it.”

“Oh, god. Is it time for the Anthony Fischer ‘holier than thou’ variety hour? Come on. Don’t pretend you don’t enjoy it, too.”

“I don’t,” Fisch said. “I do what I do to protect the world. I do it because I have to.”

“Yeah, right,” Jim said. “I see you out there *innovating*. Giving TED Talks. Being a ‘thought leader.’ You love it, you little sicko.”

The waitress walked by. Fisch flagged her down and tried to hand her his plate.

“Actually, I’m still working on that,” Jim said, intercepting the dish out of his brother’s hand. He popped another roll into his mouth and waved the waitress away.

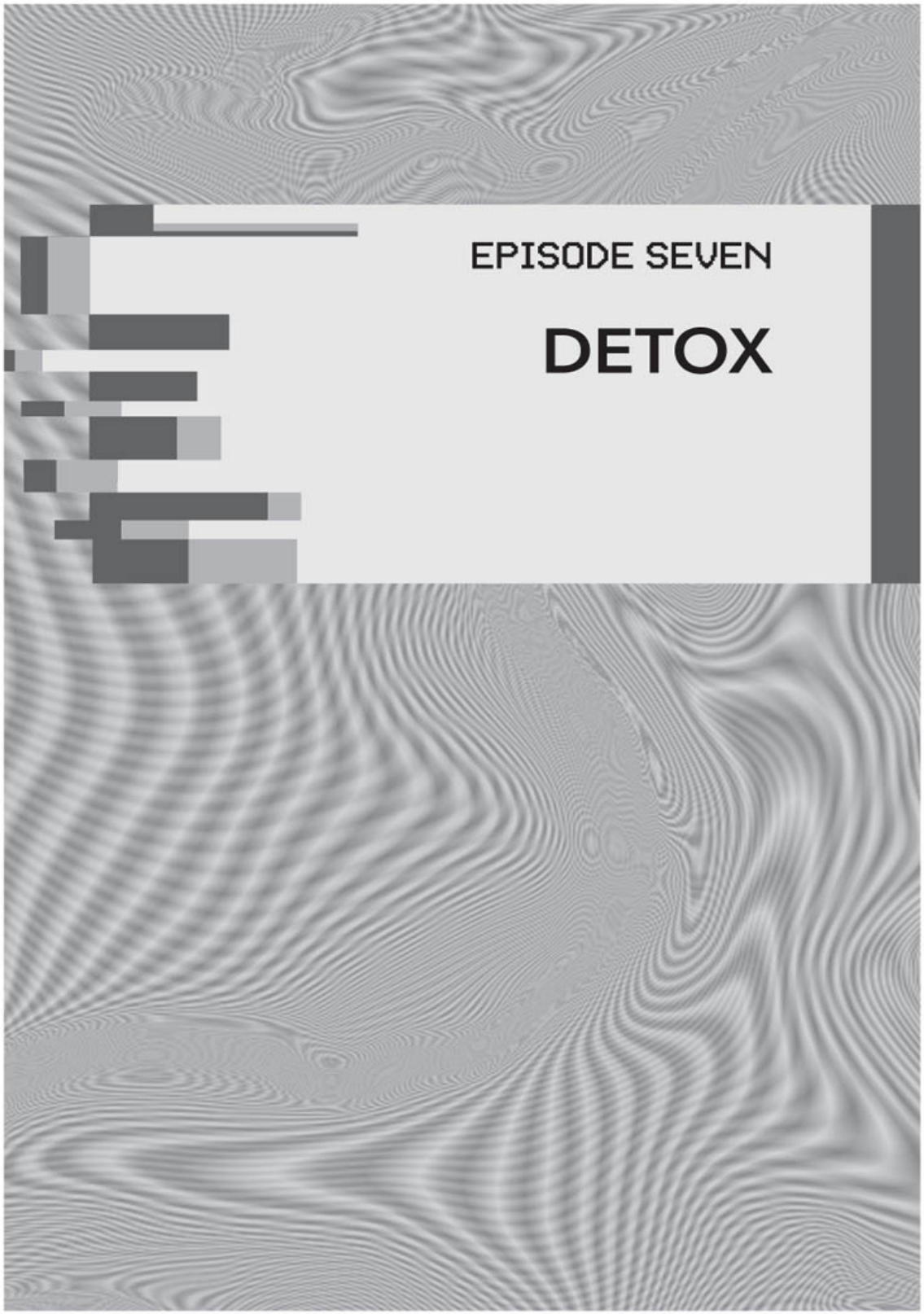
“I have to go,” Fisch said. “I’ve said my piece, and I hope for all of our sakes you’ll be more careful next time.”

“Come on,” Jim said. Fisch gathered his briefcase and stood up from the booth. Jim grinned at him, teeth stained with little flecks of raw tuna. “Look me in the eye, little guy, and tell me you don’t *get off* on making those girls disappear just like I do. Just like Dad and Grandpa did before us.”

“Good night,” Fisch said. He walked quickly, retreating towards the door. Jim reached across the table and took a sip of his brother’s ginger ale. He emptied the glass down to the ice, then shouted across the restaurant as his little brother the CEO rushed out the door in terror.

“That’s what I thought!”

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EPISODE SEVEN
DETOX

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1

THERE AREN'T THAT MANY full CDs that Douglas, assistant manager on the Trust and Safety team at GlobalVill's Austin campus, still listens to on the regular. At forty-four, he's mostly a podcast guy, and when he's in the mood for music, he lets Spotify's AI deejay spin him a few classics from his youth interspersed with the latest popular rock tracks. But occasionally, on a night when he's feeling really good and the temperature outside is just right, he'll reach inside his glove compartment for that one special compact disc he still keeps in there, his favorite album of all time: Third Eye Blind's first record, called simply *Third Eye Blind*.

In Douglas's opinion, Third Eye Blind's self-titled debut is the perfect rock album. His CD copy, the same one he's had since freshman year of high school, is probably his most prized possession. Remarkably, it's hardly scratched at all (there's a rough patch that skips during the second chorus of track eight, "Burning Man," but otherwise this jewel from his youth remains immaculate).

Self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) has always been there for Douglas. It's a part of so many of his happiest memories. He's introduced every ex-girlfriend he's ever had to the album over the years (maybe before they met him, they knew "Semi-Charmed Life," but did they know "God of Wine"?). And when the relationship ends, as Douglas's relationships always tend to after two to four months, he might be sad, but he knows that he's passed on at least one worthwhile thing in their time together.

Tonight, Douglas knows immediately when he steps outside: This is Third Eye Blind weather. He's resisted the urge to listen to self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) all summer long, when it was too hot in Texas to drive with the windows down. But now, finally, the temperature's perfect—a breezy seventy-five. Tonight, for the first time in too long, Douglas will be spending his commute to the night shift with an old friend, that trusty silver

CD with a girl on the jewel case and a mysterious gray shape on the disc itself.

What makes a rock album a perfect rock album? No filler, for one. Fourteen bangers, one after another. But it's more than that—it's sequencing. A perfect rock album needs an arc. It needs to take you on a journey. Each song should feel a little different from what came before, but should add an essential new element to the larger tapestry the rock band is weaving. It needs theme and coherence. Intention. Listen the next time you play self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) and notice how many times frontman Stephan Jenkins references "burn" or "burning" in his lyrics. That's what Douglas is talking about.

Tonight, in Douglas's Chevy, self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) sounds better than it ever has before, better even than it did in 1998. Douglas sings along at the top of his lungs straight from the opening refrain of track one, "Losing a Whole Year." He headbangs so hard during "Narcolepsy," he gets concerned looks from I-35 rubberneckers. But he doesn't care. He sings every word. He air guitars with alternating hands so he can always keep one hand on the steering wheel.

By the time track five starts, Douglas is already approaching the GlobalVill HQ parking lot. He considers cruising the streets of downtown Austin just to enjoy the full length of the CD in its proper, unabridged form. But he's got a nine P.M. start time, and he knows his bitch of a manager Sandra (who gets to work the day shift) keeps track of when he logs in to his admin panel each night. So Douglas slows down as he pulls into the GlobalVill parking lot, winds the curving spirals up towards the fourth-floor lobby entrance, and approaches his personal parking spot. Well, not quite *personal*—like it doesn't have his name on it or anything—but it still feels cool to get to park in the special section reserved for managers.

He savors the last few verses and choruses of track five, "Graduate," perhaps his favorite song on the entire CD. He'll always associate that one, naturally, with *graduating:* those last two weeks of college when he and his best friends transformed their off-campus frat house into an endless kegger. A glorious fortnight when, for the first and only time in his life, Douglas had sex at least twice a day.

He sings along, belting the chorus like he's won a nationwide search for the new Stephan Jenkins, narrowing in on his parking spot. And then he

notices something odd as he passes in front of the GlobalVill HQ main entrance. Bethany Peters is standing by the lobby door, staring at a black car that's double-parked off the curb. Douglas sees two people with her. They both look familiar, but he doesn't have time to process where he knows them from before one of them, a goth in white ghost makeup, points a gun through his windshield.

"Get out of the car!"

Douglas slams on the brakes. He rips the keys from the ignition, and cuts self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) off before track six can start.

"Holy fuck!" he screams. "What the fuck!"

His assailants rush the car. He puts his hands in the air. "Please don't kill me! Please don't kill me!" he cries. The goth with the gun opens Douglas's driver's-side door and drags him out onto the curb, execution style. Douglas cries and begs, and now he realizes where he knows this person from. It's that freak from Bethany's queue, the one Bethany was obsessed with, who chugged all those Tic Tacs to fake a suicide and forced Douglas to have a bunch of calls with the HR department that he didn't want to have. JulesPublicAccessAfterworld.

Here they are now, holding a gun to Douglas's head. Douglas struggles on the pavement. He cries and pleads for his life. He doesn't know what's happening. He doesn't know if he's about to die. But he knows one thing for sure: Bethany Peters has once again found a way to ruin his night.

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2

THE EVENING THAT JULES Estrada finally met their idol, it had been scary at first. They'd been abducted out of the Turbo Putt snack shack, dragged across the course, and held down under the plastic legs of hole number seven's lumberjack by two guys in ski masks. Jules had been certain then it was those asshole football kids from the high school, here to finally murk them for good. But then they saw David Sawyer emerge from the shadows. It felt almost uncanny to see their hero IRL. Jules had clocked countless hours staring at that same face on a computer screen, and now here he was: an internet urban legend, in the flesh. In *Lubbock*, of all places.

David walked over to them all cool and calm and knelt down on the hole seven green. He looked Jules in the eye that night and said, "I've been looking for you for a very long time. You might not believe me yet, but you're very special."

There had been this intense sort of glint in his eye in that moment. Passion that felt almost deranged. That look was enough to send a tingle across the back of Jules's head and neck, like one of those head massagers they sold at kiosks in the mall. The men in ski masks loosened their grip, and David told Jules about how he'd watched all of Jules's videos, read all their posts on his various message boards. *Oh my god*, Jules thought, *is this really happening?*

Of course Jules hadn't needed much convincing to blow up their life and enlist. They skipped town later that night with David and his cronies. They didn't bother calling their boss back in Dallas to quit the Turbo Putt. That slumlord would figure it out when no one opened up the next morning.

Then, for two days, they drove. David's followers in the backseat and Jules up front, riding shotgun next to their hero. In Jules's twenty-three years of life, they had never been more than thirty miles out of Lubbock.

Now they watched the American Southwest pass out the passenger-side window like ticker tape.

They were sober. Back in the clamor at the Turbo Putt, they'd forgotten to grab their drug stash from the secret shelf behind the mini fridge. Usually when they missed even one hit of their daily drug regimen, they got grumpy and mean almost immediately. But on that first drive through the desert, their withdrawal never arrived. Jules was stone-cold sober, but really they'd never felt more high in their entire life.

They asked David questions the whole way, and he was happy to provide answers. He revealed all kinds of cool lore about Public Access Afterworld that Jules had been wondering about for years, deep mythos stuff that wasn't on any of his message boards. He told Jules about GlobalVill.com's secret evil mission, and about his own efforts to find the long-fabled receiver and save his lost friend Erin Morrison.

"I think you might be the one I've been looking for," David said, turning away from the road to stare at Jules, that same look of awed fixation in his eyes. It made Jules feel like the most important person in the world. They basked in his stare. They pushed down their impostor syndrome. That queasy feeling that they couldn't quite shake, like somehow this was all too good to be true. Like they'd conned their way into their dream job by lying through the interview.

They kept reminding themself that this was actually happening. David Sawyer had finally come for them. *I'm never going back to the Turbo Putt,* they promised in their head. *The old me is dead. Forever.*

• • •

It was a two-day drive back to David's compound in the desert. Jules had read lots of internet speculation about the place over the years. The online consensus seemed to be that David and his followers had absconded to Eastern Europe in 2014 to avoid extradition. But now Jules learned that actually David had never fled the country. His whole operation had been hiding in plain sight for years, tucked away in the abyss of the New Mexico desert, out past the graveyard of Los Alamos, the place where they'd built the atomic bomb a long time ago and, according to David, conducted lots of other experiments that were still top secret.

Over their years online, Jules had downloaded tons of pictures of Public Access Afterworld fan art. Drawings of what various internet kids imagined David Sawyer's infamous headquarters might look like. In the pictures, the place had always been depicted as a supervillain sort of lair, full of big power grids, ominous switches to flip, and hulking silver machines that opened portals. But after Jules was ushered through the desert that day via dune buggy past landfills of government trash, they arrived at David's actual base of operations and discovered the reality was way different.

The whole operation was made up of about a dozen wooden cabins. Most of them didn't even have electricity. The big exception was David's surveillance center, a large shed off near the edge of camp that had been outfitted with a fleet of antennas. This, Jules would soon learn, was where David spent most of his time, always alone. No one else was allowed inside. Jules squinted through the window and caught a glimpse of a hoarder's-den-cum-bachelor-pad stacked floor to ceiling with VHS tapes and old broken TVs. It looked more sad than cool. Not so much a supervillain's lair, more like a dusty antique store off the highway.

Jules tried to headcanon it all into something that didn't feel disappointing. They told themself that David's compound was intentionally rustic, a throwback to the sand dunes of rebel alliances past. But the real truth nagged at them. David's headquarters in the desert was a series of matchbox houses just waiting to be blown over on the next windy day. It was splinter central. A shithole, hardly fit for glamping.

• • •

Immediately after Jules arrived, David introduced them to Emily, his second-in-command. He told Jules that Emily was going to run some quick tests to measure their electricity levels.

Of course Jules already knew the woman by reputation. They'd read Emily's page on the Public Access Afterworld wiki many times over, and they knew her backstory by heart. How she was an ex-marine who had once been a lonely mod on TheUncannyValley message boards. How she'd been the one to unlock David's first-ever thread about Public Access Afterworld, and then soon afterwards committed herself full throttle to the cause, saving David's research from utter obscurity. Emily was a legend. Jules felt

starstruck meeting her. That was, until they found out that in real life, Emily was a total bitch.

Jules tried to make small talk with the ex-marine while Emily took Jules's EKGs or whatever, tried to ingratiate themself by telling Emily what a big fan they were of her work. Emily acted like they weren't even in the room.

"There's no current whatsoever," Emily said to David as she read Jules's vitals. "Usually we pick up *some* electromagnetic activity, even if the subject's not technically crooked. But there's nothing here. This one's a total wash."

This one. The phrase sent Jules's impostor syndrome into overdrive. Their cheeks burned as they sat on the examination table in this shitty excuse for a sick bay. *This one.* In two dismissive words, Jules found themself immediately demoted back down from someone worth caring about to just another disposable crony, like those guys who sat in the back of the car while David lavished Jules with attention on their road trip.

David hadn't really reacted to the news. He'd just nodded all taciturn like he was used to this sort of letdown, then retired to his surveillance center to get back to work. Before he left, he put his hand on Jules's shoulder and told them that he was sorry, that he hoped they would consider staying on and joining him in his work here in the desert. That glint in his eye was gone now, though, and Jules knew they'd probably never see it again. They hadn't been the one he was looking for.

• • •

Later that evening at dinner, Jules got introduced around. David didn't bother to join the meal. Apparently he hardly ever ate with his followers, preferring instead the seclusion of his surveillance center, a TV dinner in front of his den of screens. But everyone else at the compound was friendly enough, and after dinner, a few of them showed Jules to the quarters where now apparently they were expected to live. A ratty little cabin that bunked fifteen roommates.

"Try not to take it too personally," the guy who slept above them said just before lights-out. Jules knew him from the Public Access Afterworld wiki, too. This was Edward "Eddy" Marks, a former 8chan hacker who now ran

tech ops for David. He'd been one of those masked cronies who'd abducted Jules out of their old shed back at the Turbo Putt, then rode in silence in the backseat.

"It's happened to most of us," Eddy told Jules before drifting off. "We've all been through the tests. We've all felt that initial disappointment when you find out you're not one of the special ones. But trust me, it's a blessing in disguise. The people David thinks are special never really last very long. They mostly just end up disappearing and never being heard from again."

Later, after the bunk had quieted down and a few people had started to snore, Jules slipped out of their cot and tiptoed into the night. The sand was cold on their bare feet, and the desert before them was pitch-black except for one single light: that silver microwave glow emanating from David's surveillance center across the compound. Jules longed to walk over and join him inside. To stay up late bingeing secret broadcasts with their idol, learning new lore about Public Access Afterworld. But they knew they weren't invited. David didn't want them anymore. So they just stared out into the night for a long time.

Eventually they felt a subtle twinge of homesickness. Not for the Turbo Putt, but for the place they lived as a kid. That single-room trailer they used to share with their mom until age thirteen. Their mom had been a total bulldog, more beast than maternal figure, always frothing at the mouth with anger when she wasn't lapping up whiskey from a handle of Jim Beam.

They hadn't spoken in years. Jules's mom was probably dead at this point, Jules assumed. But tonight, they found themself wondering: If their mother was still alive, what would she think about where they'd ended up? Would she be impressed? Surprised by how far in this world Jules had managed to get themself? Probably not. Jules's mother had been the first to see their essential lack, to sense just how unremarkable and incomplete they really were. She'd been sure of it as long as Jules could remember, and she hadn't even needed a fancy EKG test to prove it.

• • •

The next morning at breakfast (unsalted rice and beans, just like dinner the night before), the camp was abuzz. Apparently in the middle of the night David had picked up a transmission through the static on one of his old

analog television sets. Jules's bunkmates told them that this happened from time to time. That it was basically the only sort of excitement anyone could look forward to around here.

Now everyone had new marching orders. The name and address of the next crooked person who might just be the actual apple of David's eye. The fabled "receiver." His latest lead was a content moderator who worked at GlobalVill.com, of all places. Her name was Bethany Peters, and Emily was already putting together a rescue mission to extract her.

In that single moment, Jules understood everything that had happened to them over the past week. It had all been a case of mistaken identity. Bethany had come down to Lubbock and spread her magical electric dust all around the Turbo Putt, then David and his cronies had gotten their signals crossed. They'd showed up for Jules when really it had been Bethany they were looking for.

The realization triggered a fresh rush of humiliation. Jules felt a sudden urge to drag a razor blade across their skin, to blot out the shame with a more visceral, immediate sort of pain. But they'd left their razor blades back at the Turbo Putt on that secret shelf behind the mini fridge, along with their drug stash.

After Bethany's name was uttered there at the breakfast table, Jules did something that surprised even themself. They started to brag. Despite the private humiliation they were feeling inside, without really thinking about it, they began telling everyone in earshot about what close friends the two of them had been. How Bethany had come to Lubbock to visit Jules, and how Jules had taught Bethany all about Public Access Afterworld. How the two had become confidants, basically lovers. It was basically true, right? After all, they'd practically slept together on Bethany's final night in town.

Emily was standing across the mess hall by the sink, and Jules could tell the ex-marine was intrigued by what Jules was saying. So Jules made sure to speak loud enough for that self-important bitch to hear. They boasted that they knew Bethany Peters better than anyone else on earth. And when Emily turned off the sink and walked over to the table, Jules knew it was time to seal the deal. They told the group that they'd be the perfect candidate for the rescue mission ahead. They insisted on volunteering, and summoned all the fake confidence they could muster to look Emily in the eye and ask to ride shotgun once again in the car next to David Sawyer.

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Why had they volunteered? So as not to be left on the sidelines, of course. Jules didn't know what they wanted long term, but one thing was for sure—they weren't going to stay at this shithole in the desert and sleep in a cabin with fifteen neckbeards from the internet. They didn't want to go down in history as a crony. They wanted to stay close to the action, to find a way to keep feeling special, because they'd worked for years for exactly this honor.

Emily led Jules across camp to the compound's weapons locker. She asked Jules to wait outside as she unlocked a latch and disappeared inside, then returned a minute later with a revolver.

"Do you know how to use this?" Emily asked as she handed the gun to Jules.

"Of course I do. Believe it or not, I gave my last gun to Bethany Peters as a present."

If Emily was impressed, she didn't show it. She looked at Jules like a drill sergeant sizing up a rookie cadet.

"If you want to really be a part of what we do here," she said, "you can't hesitate, not even for a second. You'll do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, even if no one else will. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jules answered. They snapped off the safety and used two hands to aim at the horizon line. They'd seen people do this in movies, and it felt cool. They fired a quick succession of test shots at some distant sand dunes, unloading the magazine and slipping the weapon back into their hoodie pocket.

Emily didn't say anything. Jules could tell she was still unconvinced. It made them feel an almost chemical craving to prove her wrong. To exceed all expectation and show Emily and David Sawyer and everyone else how foolish they'd been to underestimate Jules. They reminded themself of their promise. *I'm never going back to the Turbo Putt. The old me is dead. Forever. No matter what.*

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3

ON THE DRIVE BACK from New Mexico to Texas, Jules's belated hangover finally arrived. Here was withdrawal, needling and hammer-like, come to collect. Suddenly the sunlight out the window was bright and scalding, a migraine-inducing lens flare. It felt worse than any illness Jules had ever experienced before, but they tried to keep it inside themself and not let David Sawyer realize how sick they were feeling. They didn't want him to see them as an undependable junkie. They worried if he did, he'd ditch them by the side of the road. So they just sat in silence in the passenger-side front seat they'd stubbornly reclaimed, stared out the window, and tried to exist from one moment to the next.

What a difference a week can make. Just seven days ago, Jules had left their home for the very first time. On that previous road trip through the desert, it had felt like life was opening before them. Now a week later, they were wrecked, sapped of all curiosity. They squinted as the Southwest's sprawl passed out the window of David's getaway car, and they tried to ignore the nausea they were feeling. They realized there wasn't anything special about travel, not really, because everything was just *this.* A whole country of Lubbocks, the same drive-thrus and gas stations, 3D printed buildings and fast food billboards over and over for thousands of miles, protruding off the skin of the land like tiny goose pimples, a million plastic bruises that hadn't yet healed.

• • •

Jules killed two people later that day.

They'd never shot anyone before. It wasn't something they'd planned on doing, but Emily's words had been echoing in their head since the state line. *You can't hesitate. Not even for a second.* The expectation made Jules anxious. They anticipated violence in advance. This must be how soldiers

felt before battle. They thumbed the tiny revolver in their hoodie pocket as David pulled up by the curb, then ushered Jules in towards the main entrance to GlobalVill's Austin campus. Jules felt their headache momentarily recede. Withdrawal gave way to the manic rush of battle.

Inside they found an old man sitting at the lobby's front desk. *Rusty,* the nameplate by the computer read, positioned next to some photos of kids: the old man's grandchildren, Jules assumed.

"What are you doing here?" Rusty asked the moment Jules and David walked through the lobby doors. He sounded more confused than suspicious. But a second later Jules had seen him reaching for something under his desk, and in the heat of the moment, they assumed it was a gun. So they followed Emily's orders and fired the first shot. It had been a good one: a single, clean bullet through the skull. The old man fell from his swivel chair as David rushed Jules past the front desk towards the building's catwalk. He smiled and nodded like Jules had done a good job, and Jules felt a brief rush of pride. Sure, the look in David's eyes wasn't adoring like that old psychotic glint used to be, but it was enough to let them know he was pleased. They'd done good killing that old man before that old man could kill them.

Downstairs Jules found their second victim in a kitchen area designed to look like an old-fashioned diner. That guy had been an even quicker and clearer kill. He'd been towering over Bethany Peters holding Jules's old handgun from the Walmart, just seconds away from ending Bethany's life.

Jules shot the tech douche before he could shoot Bethany, then watched the guy's body crumple to the floor into a pool of broken glass and wasabi peas. Jules looked to David for approval, but David was already rushing across the kitchen to Bethany's side, helping her up to her feet.

Ah. There it was again. That old psycho glint in David Sawyer's eyes. That familiar worshipful gaze, now fixed squarely on Bethany Peters.

Jules felt their hangover return. They reminded themself to stay focused. This wasn't over yet. Their life was still in danger. They rushed with David and Bethany from the lobby back towards the parking lot. Then they made a mistake. They glanced down briefly at the body of the first man they'd shot. The old guy who had been working at the front desk, who had reached for what Jules had assumed was a gun. Rusty's eyes were wide open and he was lying on his back, staring forever up at the ceiling. He was holding

something in his hands, the thing he'd actually been reaching for when Jules shot him.

It wasn't a gun. It was a small little dish of sucking candies, each one individually wrapped in little plastic bows.

• • •

Out in the parking lot, David spots another tech bro. Some unlucky guy with really bad timing, who's had the misfortune of spotting their getaway car on his way into the office.

"He's seen our plates," David tells Jules like an order. And the intonation is clear. Jules understands that they're being asked to kill their third target of the day. So they drag the dude out onto the pavement, then hold him at gunpoint as he cowers and pleads. They try to will themself to pull the trigger once again. They hear annoying alt rock guitars blasting from the open door of the guy's car, which doesn't make them want to murder any less. Their headache spreads across every synapse.

"Don't kill me!" Douglas begs. "Please don't kill me."

Meanwhile, David's busy by the curb smashing Bethany's cellphone to bits on the pavement. Then he's taking a syringe out of his pocket and stabbing it into Bethany's arm.

"They gave you a blood test when you started at GlobalVill, right?" he asks.

"What?" Bethany says. She's clearly still in shock.

"This will short out the tracking device they've been using to monitor you," David tells her. Bethany hardly understands his words.

"Please," Douglas begs. "Please don't kill me. I have a girlfriend."

Bethany turns and notices Douglas cowering on the asphalt. "That's my manager . . ." she mumbles.

"*I love my girlfriend so much,*" Douglas whimpers. "*And . . . and . . . she has a kid!*"

"*Jules,*" David says. "*Come on.*"

Jules hears police sirens whir out in the distance.

"I don't love that kid, but I like him a lot," Douglas begs, equivocating now. "And I can tell he's growing pretty attached to me. Like a cool uncle

sort of figure. So please—*please*—don't kill me."

Jules pictures those smiling grandkids on the front desk. The bowl of sucking candies in Rusty's limp hands.

"Don't shoot," Bethany says. She steps into the parking lot and positions herself between Douglas on the ground and the tip of Jules's handgun. "He's an idiot. But he doesn't deserve to die."

"Thank you, Bethany," Douglas says. "Thank you for saying that."

Jules looks at David. David looks at Bethany. The police sirens draw closer.

"*Don't kill him*," Bethany repeats. She takes a step closer to Jules's gun. "*Please*."

Jules looks to David. They notice that psycho glint in his eye again, like he's super proud of Bethany for disobeying his orders. Like this is further proof that she's the one he's been looking for. It makes Jules feel embarassed for bothering to obey orders and kill people all day. It makes their headache flare. They feel a fresh rush of anger and shame. They remember this feeling from the Turbo Putt, back when they would try to record one of their GlobalVill vlogs and it would come out like mush and make them feel so lame they wanted to hurt themself. But they don't have a razor, so they channel their anger outwards.

"Get out of the way," they shout. They point their gun at Bethany's head. "Remember this gun you stole from me? I'm not afraid to use it."

"Jules?" Bethany asks. She squints at them like she's only just realizing they're even here.

"I killed two people just now," Jules brags. "And trust me, I am not afraid to make you the third."

"Jules!" David shouts. "Just take him with us." His tone is stern, as if he's reprimanding them for daring to challenge Bethany Peters's authority. "But do it quickly, we don't have time for this."

The sirens are getting closer. Jules feels another rush of anger, but they force it down, swallow it back inside themself. They lower their gun and follow orders. They get Bethany and her stupid manager into the back of the getaway car, then they hop in shotgun.

David starts the engine, and now the four of them are off, speeding down the parking lot ramp, spiraling three stories to street level. The sides of the getaway screech against shoulder guards. Little embers spark. The night comes into view and David floors the gas, bouncing out onto Congress Avenue at three times the speed limit.

Cars stop short and lay on their horns, but David stays above it. He whips the steering wheel back and forth, cutting a wild, messy path up pedestrian alleys and side streets. As the four unlikely traveling companions make their escape, Jules steals glances at Bethany in the rearview mirror. Despite their anger, they feel a strange surge of relief seeing her sitting there.

They missed her, even if they don't want to admit it. It's a rush to see Bethany Peters again, back in real life. After Bethany left, Jules assumed she was gone forever. And despite being really pissed at Bethany for that shit she pulled back in Lubbock, despite even the fact that they just threatened to kill that self-righteous bitch not five minutes ago, there's something undeniably comforting about seeing her again. About Bethany being right here, in the backseat, in the flesh, back in Jules's life. It makes them excited, as though anything is possible. Because they know that this isn't another false lead that David's chasing down. Bethany's the special one. Not David, not Emily, and obviously not themself. Jules hates Bethany Peters, but let's be real—they're sort of in love with her, too.

David keeps his eyes on the road ahead. The capitol building passes into the distance. Soon Austin does as well.

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4

THE FOUR OF THEM drive all night. They make it to the safe house the next afternoon.

David's silent for most of the ride. Douglas begs and pleads for his life every few minutes. Eventually David takes some duct tape from the glove compartment and orders Jules to tape their hostage's mouth shut.

Bethany sleeps for most of the ride. She's still delirious, in and out of consciousness the moment she hits the backseat. About thirty minutes past Austin city limits, once David maneuvers out onto some quieter highway roads, she drifts off for good, falling into a heavy slumber, succumbing to sheer exhaustion.

Jules has no such luck. Their headache is too severe for unconsciousness to be a possibility. So they watch Bethany all night, stealing glances in the rearview as she tosses and turns against the backseat headrest. It's like she's in the throes of fever. Bethany squeezes her eyes closed every minute or two as if she's wincing in sudden, sharp pain. As if someone in her dream is digging a screwdriver into her rib cage.

"The cobwebs," she mumbles. Jules catches stray bits of sleep talk. "No. Stop it. That's not my name."

• • •

Bethany finally wakes up about a half hour after they cross the Texas–New Mexico border.

She blinks several times. The first thing she feels is the static coursing through her brain and body. It's receding, no longer fully numbing over her many bruises and cuts. The pain is starting to finally peek through.

Bethany groans. She remembers her latest wounds and where they came from. "Oh god," she says out loud. "Oh fuck."

The guy driving in the front seat looks back at her in the rearview mirror. He's got creepy bug eyes. Bethany recognizes him from somewhere, but she's still too disoriented to place exactly from where.

She knows the person sitting next to him, though. What the hell is Jules Estrada doing here riding shotgun? Now Bethany remembers seeing Jules rushing down a staircase back at GlobalVill, just moments before Kyle would have pulled the trigger and ended Bethany's life.

"Mmmph," the person sitting next to her mumbles from underneath duct tape. It's Douglas, her manager from GlobalVill. He nods to her, welcoming her back to consciousness.

Where is she? Bethany wonders. Is she dreaming? Is she dead? Probably. That's the only reasonable explanation for how and why she'd be sitting in a car with these three random people from different parts of her life.

"How do you feel?" the guy in the driver's seat asks her.

"Like I held a tech company hostage and then got shot in the head."

"You didn't get shot in the head. You're safe. You're alive."

Bethany recognizes the man talking to her now. It's David Sawyer. She remembers the famous serial killer towering over her back at GlobalVill, right after Kyle shot her.

I've been looking for you for a very long time, he'd said. She'd been sure she was dead in that moment. *You're going to help me find someone I lost a very long time ago.*

"It's too far to make it back to my compound in one day," David tells her now. "We're going to crash with a friend for the night."

"What do you want with me?" Bethany asks. "What's going on?"

"My friend can explain better than I can," David says.

Douglas stretches out in the backseat. "Mmmmph mmmm mmmmph," he grunts through his duct tape.

Bethany looks at him.

"Am I your prisoner?" she asks David in the rearview mirror.

David stares back at her. Bethany sees that rapturous, psychotic look in his eye again. He doesn't answer her question.

• • •

A few minutes later, he takes a turn off the highway. Now David drives down a road not significant enough to have an exit sign. The roads are dusted with sand, bereft of civilization. Which of course is exactly why David likes it out here. Eventually their destination comes into sight. A pink ranch house that almost looks like a tourist trap, a psychedelic Cracker Barrel or one of those hippie hotels between L.A. and San Francisco. David drives down a mile-long driveway, bumping past a procession of cacti and yard gnomes.

“Welcome to the ranch,” he says. “This is a tech-free zone. No Wi-Fi, no cell service, no electronics of any kind for miles. You’ll be able to detox here.”

David parks behind a pickup truck and orders Jules to bring Douglas inside and tie him up in a spare room. Bethany stays put in the backseat while everyone else gets out of the car. She looks at rocking chairs and potted sunflowers on the front porch.

The screen door clangs open, and their hostess steps outside. A middle-aged woman dressed in a patterned tunic. She calls to David and the others as they approach the house, speaking loud enough for Bethany to hear from the car. “Who needs coffee?”

Douglas raises his hand and says “Mmmph” through his duct tape. Jules drags him inside.

David speaks to the woman on the porch. Bethany can no longer hear the words, but eventually David turns to look at her in the car and waves for her to come join them.

She knows she’s still disoriented, still in the throes of the static in her brain, but she tries to act normal. To stay ahead of whatever new crisis this is. She gets out of the car and walks towards the porch.

“Bethany,” David says. “Meet Patricia.”

“Hello there.” The woman extends her hand. “It’s a real honor to meet you, Bethany.” She smiles and looks Bethany up and down like prized livestock.

Bethany tries to sound confident. “So this is the person who’s gonna answer all my questions?” she asks David. “The one who’s going to finally explain what the hell is going on?”

“Oh no, honey,” Patricia says with a chuckle. “Not me. You’re here to talk to my grandma.”

• • •

Patricia and David take Bethany inside and bandage her up. They tweezer little bits of glass out of her skin and disinfect her wounds. They give her some pills for the pain. She’s hesitant to accept their aid, but she lets them mend her. She can feel herself starting to think clearly again. The static cobwebs in her brain are receding. Things are slowly becoming less foggy.

After Patricia finishes dressing Bethany’s wounds, David asks Bethany if she’s ready to talk. Bethany nods, and David helps her into an armchair in the den. He takes his own seat on a little daybed by the window, crouching on his knees like a dog alert for intruders.

Bethany looks around the room. David wasn’t lying about this being a tech-free zone. There’s no electricity: no lamps or light fixtures, just a big fireplace and a dozen or so candles not yet lit for nightfall. The walls are littered with tchotchkes from half a century of craft fairs.

Patricia brings Bethany some tea on a tray. There’s a little sugar cube for her to melt in the cup. Then Patricia disappears into a room down the hall and reemerges a minute later pushing an old woman in a wheelchair.

It takes Bethany a moment to register that Patricia’s grandmother is still alive. The old woman looks more like an artifact than a person. But her eyes are open and blinking, her breaths wet enough to hear from across the room.

“This is my grandmother,” Patricia says as she parks the wheelchair in the doorway so that the old woman is facing Bethany. “Her name is Rachel.”

“Bring me some seltzer, honey,” Rachel says, springing to life at the sound of her name. She notices David on the daybed. “Hello there, David,” she says.

“It’s good to see you, Rachel!” He speaks loudly so she can hear him.

Rachel turns to squint at Bethany.

“So this is her, yes? The girl you’ve been excited about? Our *receiver,* perhaps? After waiting so long?”

“We think so,” David tells her. “Yes.”

“What’s your name, honey?” Rachel asks. Patricia comes back into the room and places a cup of seltzer on her grandmother’s wheelchair tray.

“I’m Bethany.”

“Hello there, Bethany. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Rachel picks up her seltzer and takes a long, slow sip. Half the contents of the glass spill down her shirt and lap.

“I promised her you’d explain everything,” David says. “Everything we know. Starting from the beginning.”

“All right, David,” Rachel says. “From the beginning, then.”

She puts her cup back down. Her bony hands shake from the weight of it.

“Let’s start . . .”

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5

“I WANT TO TELL YOU about my father,” Rachel says.

“His name was Dr. Randolph Horowitz. He came to this country from Austria in 1931. By the time I was born, my father was already an old man. He’d witnessed one war in his younger years, and it stole whatever youth was left in him. When I was a young girl, he felt the second war approaching. He sensed it long before most did.

“My mother—the love of his life—she didn’t believe him. She thought him not just paranoid but selfish. Career obsessed. She distrusted his eagerness to flee Europe. But my father insisted. He accepted a position at a prestigious university in America, and my mother never forgave him for it. He took me with him, left her there in Vienna with her family when I was just a small child. He didn’t begrudge her her skepticism, but he also knew he couldn’t stay. He promised to send for my mother whenever she was ready to join us. But of course by the time she realized that he had been right, it was too late.

“After we emigrated, my father began his new job. He would talk to me sometimes about his research. I didn’t understand much of it. I was just a child, and he spoke to me mostly in cryptic asides. Always late at night, because that was when he was loneliest.

“*His work.* It was subsidized by the U.S. government. He told me it involved secret things the public could never know about. He felt burdened by it. I think he spoke to me because he didn’t want to be left alone with his guilt. This was a man who believed in science, in the liberatory potential of knowledge. But not in governments, or the pursuit of power. How could he, with what he’d already seen during that first war, and with what he sensed coming from the second . . .

“I loved my father. And also, back then, I was rebellious. Young and foolish. The child of immigrants is taught to think of herself as a beneficiary

—not just an embodiment of her parents' sacrifices but a justification for them. And this duty carries with it the pressure to live *productively,* so that such sacrifice won't be in vain. I don't think my father ever actually wanted me to feel such weight. He was too smart—too self-aware—to make himself a prison guard to those he loved. Certainly I never felt any pressure from him to conform to anything other than who I wanted to be. And for that, I was lucky. A rare child of my era.

"But still I felt boxed in during those years before the war. If not by my father then by all those others around me, and by myself as well. I knew that my blood—my Jewishness—wasn't all that made me different from the other girls in school. I wasn't, as they say, 'boy crazy.' I found the men who all those other girls swooned over and pinned to their locker walls to be utterly uninteresting. *I liked women.* I never doubted it, and I never thought it a problem. This became a point of defiance. I lashed out at everyone. At my father, even. I withdrew emotionally and made myself a martyr long before I actually found a cause worth sacrificing for. That would come later. At the camp. At Los Alamos.

"After the war ended, my father lived another twenty years. It was too long. He should have passed sooner. He retired and withered into himself. Like many, he was haunted by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But what really ate at him was everything else he had personally worked on in the camps, those more under-the-radar experiments he still wasn't allowed to publicly acknowledge. When I'd first known my father, he had been a man with a vigorous appetite for knowledge. He was constantly in study. But during his last years, he could no longer muster the energy for any of it. He felt that knowledge itself had betrayed him—that he had been made to play its enabler.

"I would visit my father in the retirement home then, in the fifties and sixties, and now he spoke more openly to me about his research, about his work during the war. There were no secrets between us anymore. I had been entrenched closely enough with him at Los Alamos to see the results of his experiments firsthand. And we were both haunted by them, both ashamed at what we'd watched happen. Now he told me everything, like a man confessing. About what he'd helped the government build during those wartime years, when it felt like the world itself might end at any moment.

“Everyone remembers Manhattan. That was impossible for our government to keep quiet. But my father’s project—what they called ‘Chicago’—that was more discreet. The details of its origins were hidden even from most who worked on it. My father pieced together what he could over the years, and now he shared everything he knew with me.”

• • •

“Film and television are not the same thing. This is a fact that can be hard to remember in our present world. In this age of anxiety and addiction, when screens of all sizes have infested every corner of our gaze, have become impossible to ignore. But originally, film and television—these two mediums that would come to dominate the twentieth century—were invented for very different reasons.

“Film, as its name suggests, derived from photography. From the desire to reproduce an image. To record memories onto paper—to freeze time so one might carry with them a memento of its passing. Film. A process of *recording.* It evolved from the daguerreotype to the Bolex, from Niépce to Lumière. All it required was the correct chemical composition. A quick wash through a bath of silver iodide. No electricity necessary.

“But at the same time, Thomas Edison and his cohort were hard at work. This was the early industrial period. A time of voracious innovation. During those same decades that birthed photography and then motion filmmaking, we discovered an invention far more powerful than either. Electricity. Here, by a large margin, was the most significant discovery in human history. It wasn’t long before we’d tapped its seemingly infinite reserve to give us the lightbulb. The telephone. And eventually, the television as well . . .

“You see, as my father was always quick to specify, the invention of the film camera had been rooted in the desire to *record.* To *capture.* But electricity offered something different. Something far grander. *Transmission.* We built phone lines and electrical grids. Stretched wires from home to home, connected everything, and sent signals between nearly every inch of this still-young country. Electricity was invisible, but it was everywhere. And now we knew how to control it. With this great new power, men like my father sought to unify everything about the world that still remained dark and uncultivated. To remake it in our own image. To bend its seemingly infinite power to our will.

“It was pure hubris, of course. On an evolutionary scale, we were still just children, and we’d stumbled upon the very building blocks of reality itself. We were utterly out of our depth, and though the history books don’t tell this particular tale, soon we learned this lesson.”

• • •

“We received a visitation. This is what’s referred to in the few classified documents that David has managed to uncover, which reference it as ‘The Hourglass Incident.’ My father was never privy to all of the details. It was above his clearance level, so to speak, but over his years working on the Chicago Project, he pieced together scraps and rumors. And at the end of his life, he did his best to explain to me what he’d learned.

“At the dawn of the twentieth century, the forces we’d been tapping into sent an emissary to us in the form of static shaped like men. It made contact with our leaders, those in the highest seats of power. Though this entity didn’t have a mouth, it could communicate with us. It spoke in the voice of its master, and it told us that we had angered this entity.”

“I’ve seen them,” Bethany says. “The static men.”

“Yes,” Rachel says. “I expect you have. They come for those like you—the ‘crooked ones.’ But we’ll get to that. For now, let me continue telling you about this first visitation. During that meeting, the static told us what you might call a creation myth. How it served an all-powerful master. A figure we referred to as ‘God,’ but that they referred to under a different alias. ‘The Distant Seer,’ the static called it.

“This master, it claimed, had created our world. Created *us.* And not just us, not just this earth. Not even just the entire universe. The static claimed that their master had created many universes. An infinite number of possible realities. Some similar to ours, some so unknowable—so horrifying—that our senses could never hope to comprehend the contents of those worlds. But all of it was natural, the static said, because everything was natural. All of those unfathomable, horrifying realities existed parallel to one another, side by side but never touching.

“This harmony was a delicate one, and we had intervened. By discovering the hidden force underneath the construction of reality, we had broken a seal. This had happened before, the static told us. Happened to

other worlds like ours who had discovered electricity, who had pierced the veil that separated their world from all the others, and then had foolishly attempted to harness the building blocks of the universe towards their own ends.

“There was no going back from this. The toothpaste, so to speak, had been squeezed from the tube. And every single time such a discovery had been made before in similar realities, the static told us, it hadn’t been long before chaos descended. Before all we held dear would be annihilated.

“My father never found out exactly what happened during the so-called Hourglass Incident. But as the legend goes, it only took sixty seconds for our country’s highest officials to become utterly convinced that the static’s warning had been no bluff. That there was no going back from this. That now that we’d invited this electricity into our homes, our meager little world would soon be swallowed up like the whale swallowed Jonah.

“‘Please spare us,’ we begged. The most powerful men in the world—great titans of industry—groveled at the static’s feet. ‘There has to be another way. Please consult your master. Tell him we’re sorry. O Distant Seer, please tell us how to stave off the coming destruction.’

“‘No,’ the static responded. ‘This is the way it has always been.’

“But we kept negotiating. Our best and brightest minds were enlisted for the great debate.

“‘Yes, we understand,’ we reasoned with the static. ‘But if everything is natural like you say, there has to be some way to stop this. Even if it has never happened before in all the infinite worlds your master has created, it must be possible because you said yourself that *everything* is possible.’

“At this, the static seemed intrigued. It went away for a while and conferred with its master. When next it materialized, it told us that it had found our offer intriguing. It was willing to see if what we suggested might be possible. And then it offered us the terms of a partnership in the form of a gift. One it claimed might hold the great destruction at bay, at least for a time.”

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“Here now, finally, we arrive at the birth of television. The static created a tool for us, one it promised would be powerful enough to re-quarantine

our world from all those terrible forces that we had meddled with.

"*The screen.* It was meant to serve as a dividing line. A one-way mirror on the other side of which all those other possible realities could bubble up to the surface, could strain against the inner wall, but ultimately would remain sequestered, prevented from breaking through into our reality.

"These days, we think of the screen as a source of entertainment. News and politics, advertising and music videos. But its true purpose has always been far more crucial. It is the outer wall of their system. It sequesters all that might swallow us whole. Keeps it held safely behind glass."

"They haven't shown music videos on MTV in a long time," David says.

"This was my father's life work," Rachel says, ignoring David. "What the government called the Chicago Project. The television screen, you see, is the outermost ring of a complex system, one that stretches far below our own reality. The static provided us with the blueprints for this project, even collaborated on its construction. It was a more ambitious undertaking than anything humankind had ever embarked on before. Together with the static and a whole lot of government funding, my father and his fellow scientists constructed a vast new system, one they hoped would hold our world in balance for eons to come.

"There was a price, of course. One that the static demanded. A fuel on which this system had to run. This part of the bargain was quite simple, poetic even. *The static needed people.* Certain people with something inside them that could keep the gears of the new system turning smoothly. And Bethany, well . . . it was *you.* The people like you. The so-called crooked, who carry the fuel within them on which their entire screen system runs."

"What kind of fuel?" Bethany asks. "And why do I have it when others don't?"

"My father believed it was actually quite random," Rachel says. "Though statistically women seem to carry it more than men. It all revolves around electrical currents. The science is complex, and I can't say I ever fully understood it myself, though my father tried to explain it to me many times. But the gist of it hinges on a fact that you probably learned in high school—electricity powers everything in this world. Every one of us. It quite literally gives us life, like in an old mad scientist film—it jolts the brain into functioning. So already from birth, the electricity is inside us, powering us, *creating* us. But there are some in our world, it seems, more flush with this

electricity than others. The people like you—the crooked, so to speak—your currents are far stronger than the rest, more pronounced. You, the static told us, could not remain safely on earth, for you were the gears necessary to keep their system running smoothly, to keep it from collapsing in on itself. The entire system my father built depended on people like you to . . . well, not quite disappear, but to go somewhere else. To serve another purpose. To leave this layer of reality behind and travel far away. Somewhere *new,* to the final place in the static's blueprints. The deepest level of this system we built with them. *The world beneath all other worlds.*"

"Public Access Afterworld," Bethany says.

"Yes," Rachel says. "This is the name that some have come to know it by. My father always called it simply 'the septic tank.' A place to put all that we must keep below."

"Content moderation," Bethany says. "It's the place banned videos go after you click the red button."

Rachel nods, though it's unclear if she understands. "Ultimately, this became my father's legacy," she continues. "He helped our government and the static build their system to protect our world. And he did a good job. The system has held for over a century now. We've sent thousands of people down to Public Access Afterworld, probably more. And apparently this has kept our reality protected, quarantined from all the destruction those men feared so deeply. Great efforts have been made to hold it all together. Much money spent. But of course the system is fragile. It always has been, and it's getting worse. The static warned us of this from the beginning. That the electricity's nature was to burst forth, to spill outwards. We've taken great strides to keep it contained, to accommodate the strain. Like an addict doubles his dose to chase the same high, we've invented more and more screens. Different screens. Screens of all sizes and types. The television screen. The computer screen. The laptop. The iPod and the cellphone, the electronic billboard and the . . . what was it you told me about recently, David? The 'smartwatch'?"

"Yes," David says.

"Disgusting," Rachel replies, then spits on her wheelchair tray. "You'll find nothing of the sort in my home."

“She’s had this anti smartwatch fixation since I told her about them last year,” David says. He shrugs at Bethany as if he doesn’t quite get why it bugs her so much.

“No screens here,” Rachel says. “No electricity of any kind. Except for you.”

She extends her bony finger at Bethany.

“Me?” Bethany asks.

“Yes,” Rachel says. “*The receiver.*”

• • •

“The men who built this screen system, they had the hubris to think that all could be organized. They dreamt of stability. Of peace. The end of all wars—of all history, even. But of course the system they built was unstable. And you . . . you are its worst nightmare. There have been many crooked before you, Bethany. Those who have been, as you say, *moderated.* Sent away. Sacrificed to the other side of the screen. None of them have ever returned. For all whom the static men come for, who enter the video store and descend to Public Access Afterworld, it has been a one-way ticket. But we believe you might be different. That you might be more powerful than their system. That it might not be able to hold you in place.”

“Okay,” Bethany says. “But can I ask an obvious question that it seems like everyone’s always skirting around whenever they start waxing poetic about Public Access Afterworld? *What is it?* Not, like, what does it represent, why does it exist . . . but what is it, literally? What happens down there? What kind of food do they serve in the cafeteria? What does it actually want from me?”

Rachel and David exchange a hesitant look.

“No one knows,” Rachel says. “I’m sorry. This unfortunately is left for you to find out if and when you make it to that place. We don’t know because no one has ever returned from Public Access Afterworld. All we’ve gleaned from those we’ve lost are the vaguest of signals—what we call *disturbances*—stray transmissions blinking through the void, carrying subtle psychic pleas. Messages in a bottle floating to the surface sporadically, onto the screens of our world.”

“I can show you tapes,” David says. “Disturbances that I’ve experienced personally.”

“My father believed these disturbances were evidence of the system’s natural instability,” Rachel says. “Small expressions of strain from those trapped. But a brief glitch on a decommissioned analog feed, a misplaced name in the end credits of an old TV show, these are mere blips, pebbles hurled at a Great Wall, far too inconsequential to cause any real damage.”

“But you think I’m different,” Bethany says. “That I’m powerful enough to topple it.”

“This is our hypothesis, yes. My father often spoke about ‘the receiver.’ It was a pet theory of his. Perhaps a way for him to cope with his guilt. He believed that though the odds were slim—one in ten billion, by his best estimate—that there might someday be born a person whose electrical currents were so strong that the system couldn’t hold them in. Someone capable of causing a disturbance so severe it would be impossible to quarantine. That would spread like forest fire across all of our screens until it had burned the whole system down.”

“How do you know it’s me?” Bethany asks. “And what happens to the world if I do go and break their system?”

“You’re going to have to talk to David about all that,” Rachel tells her. “I’m tired, and overdue for my evening pills. So I believe that’s all the story I have in me for tonight.”

“Okay,” David says. “Thank you, Rachel.”

Rachel turns and shouts down the hall.

“Patty! We’re finished here! I need my pills. Pills and seltzer!”

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6

DAVID ASKS BETHANY IF she wants him to continue where Rachel left off, but Bethany shakes her head and tells him no. That was plenty for now. She feels like she's been up all night cramming for some fucked-up satanic history test. She needs a break.

She wanders down a long hallway towards a door that leads out to the back porch. She can feel David's eyes following her, keeping track of her movements. But he doesn't try to stop her. She steps onto the porch, then walks barefoot into the sand behind Rachel's house.

The sky's a milky pink, the color of a faded Easter egg. There's a storm in the distance. Bethany squints out into the desert, watching as every so often a lightning bolt cuts a scissor shape across the sky.

Bethany plays Rachel's story back in her head. It's insane, obviously. But she wonders to herself, *Is it worth believing?* On the one hand, Bethany experienced enough crazy shit back in Austin to convince her that what she's been dealing with these past months is something genuinely supernatural. She isn't just paranoid. There are real people in real positions of power out to get her. And Rachel's story seems to fit with all that she's been experiencing. But that doesn't mean David Sawyer and his acolytes can be trusted to tell her the real truth about anything.

Still, Bethany can't help but feel charmed by Rachel. There's something refreshing about the old woman's no-nonsense demeanor. She comes from a different time, and it makes Bethany want to trust her. But as Bethany stands outside watching lightning in the distance, she reminds herself that trusting people has been getting her into a lot of trouble lately. She remembers Kyle. This could all just be another trap.

Now Bethany realizes she's thinking more clearly than she has in weeks. The "detox" of Rachel's ranch seems to be working, slowly clearing the static from her brain, just like David said it would. She's coming down from

the carnage back in Austin, from her Screen Sickness and the last remnants of the kombucha drug cocktail swimming through her system.

She thinks back on the events of the past week. Marching into the CEO's office and holding him hostage. Dodging certain death and men made of static. There had been a sort of high to it all as she lived through it. It was exciting to narrowly avoid each trap laid out for her as if she was starring in her own personal action movie. But out here in the desert, in the slow return to sobriety, Bethany now realizes how insane it all was. How unlikely it is that she survived any of it. In the cold light of the detox at Rachel's ranch, Bethany's survival these last few weeks suddenly feels less like cunning and more like pure dumb luck. Everything since Lubbock, she now realizes, has been the biggest, most dangerous bender she's ever been on. And Bethany's been on some pretty legendary ones over the years.

She's crashing. She feels a wave of pessimism wash over her. The static's finally vacating her brain, but its absence is making room for an old friend to move back in: depression.

It's a feeling Bethany knows well. Back in her early days of transition, her whole life felt like this. Manic episode followed by crushing comedown, forever on repeat. Back after the hospital when she first arrived in Austin, she was convinced the cycle was going to send her to an early grave. These days, there are interdimensional video stores and evil CEOs. Higher stakes, maybe, but the same general phenomenon: nonstop crisis. Perpetual precarity. Survival as adrenaline rush.

It's a cruel joke, Bethany thinks. When she was trapped in Harlingen, and then when she was with Abel, she felt comfortable but empty, like an android staying at a four-star hotel. It was only during periods of great crisis when she ever felt full—ever felt something approximating an actual purpose in life.

No. Not just a purpose. *An identity.* "Bethany" herself was born out of that first manic-depressive spiral almost a decade ago. And as twisted as it sounds to admit, in the previous couple weeks, Bethany has felt more alive, more out of her head and in her own body, than she has since those early days of transition. For better or worse, she's no longer on autopilot.

The realization scares her. Are her options in life simply one or the other: crippling mundanity or all-out manic episode? Is Bethany only herself, only "Bethany," when she's charging headfirst towards the void?

She knows this isn't how others live, but she also doesn't know how to be like them. Even without the evil tech company trying to kill her, she's not sure there's any end to this toxic cycle. Could she ever really feel stable without also feeling trapped? Fulfilled without being minutes away from death?

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"I hate to break it to you," Rachel says. "If you're thinking about making a run for it into the desert, good luck. You're likely to die of thirst before you find civilization."

Bethany turns around. Rachel is sitting in her wheelchair on the back porch. Someone must have parked her out here while Bethany was staring into the distance feeling sorry for herself.

"Come," Rachel says. She lifts a bony finger and beckons Bethany to the porch. "There's one last thing I need to show you."

Bethany walks over. Rachel unzips a little fanny pack hanging off the rim of her wheelchair. She digs around inside and fishes out a small black-and-white photograph. It's smudged and torn, nearly disintegrated. Rachel holds the photo out so Bethany can see.

"This is Willa," she says.

Bethany squints at the person in the picture. She's pretty but too skinny. The woman—Willa—smiles nervously for the camera, wearing a summer dress.

"I know her," Bethany says. "I saw a video once. In my queue, back at my job at GlobalVill. She had . . ."

"Spatulas for hands," Rachel says. "Yes. I've seen this video. This was a *disturbance*."

Rachel taps the picture of Willa.

"She was the first. The first human test subject to ever be sent to Public Access Afterworld. Her own family sacrificed her to build their fortune. That CEO you worked for is her grandson. He still reaps the benefits today of all the terrible things they did to her. I knew her. I loved her, too. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever loved anyone else in all the years since. But the last time I saw this woman, I betrayed her. Now listen to me. Come here."

Rachel beckons Bethany close. Bethany leans in. She can smell stale seltzer on the old woman's breath.

"I believe that pretty soon, there's a good chance you're going to find yourself on the other side of the screen. In that place we all keep talking about but only you can access. It is my hope and belief that this woman is still down there. Though we don't know the specifics of what happens in Public Access Afterworld, David and I believe that time doesn't work the same way in such a realm. It's not linear like in our dimension. This is how a disturbance from Willa can break through the static on our television sets fifty years after she disappears. How a girl's name can end up in the credits of a TV show created before she was even born. This gives me hope that perhaps my Willa is still alive down there. And if I'm correct, if you do make it to Public Access Afterworld, no matter what else you do, I want you to find her and tell her something for me."

"What's that?" Bethany asks.

"That I'm sorry about that morning in the square. That I wasn't ready then. That I wouldn't be ready for years after that. And that not a day goes by that I don't regret my cowardice."

A final lightning bolt stitches across the sky, then fades down to black. Rachel tucks the old photograph of Willa Fischer back in her fanny pack, careful not to bend it any more than it's already been over the years. It's her most prized possession.

"She's the one I lost," Rachel says. "And David has his. But there are so many of them. A century of screens, and so many women lost."

• • •

Back inside, Patricia's made veggie fajitas. She's set a tray out on the stove, buffet style. Bethany spoons veggies and beans onto her plate, then eats alone in the den. Once she's done, Patricia reappears and shows her to her room at the end of the hallway.

"There's a shower if you want to wash up," Patricia says. She says it gently, but Bethany senses her host is really hoping she takes her up on the offer. It's been over a week now since Bethany last bathed, and she realizes that she must smell pretty rank. During the worst of her Screen Sickness, she'd been incapable of showering, afraid the collision of water against her

skin might be enough to trigger another static episode. But she's finally feeling a little better.

Bethany closes the door to her guest room and strips off her clothes. She runs herself a hot bath, then dips into the tub once it's full. Her skin prickles up as steam surrounds her. She lets her weight go, lets herself dissolve into the warmth of the water. It feels amazing. She savors the sensation and wonders if they have bathtubs in Public Access Afterworld. If she'll even still have skin down there.

Bethany's heard enough now from Rachel and David to have a pretty good idea of where all of this is headed. What the ask they're working up to is going to entail. They want her to be their superhero. They're going to try to convince her to willingly reinfect herself with Screen Sickness, to make herself insane again so she can travel to Public Access Afterworld and attempt to liberate the place. But what if Bethany doesn't want to go? What if she's done putting her life at risk? What if she decides she's been through enough as it is?

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After her bath, Bethany towels herself off. She finds a fresh pair of cotton pajamas waiting for her in the dresser (Patricia, the ever consummate host). She puts them on, then brushes her teeth with the new toothbrush and travel-sized toothpaste that's been left out for her by the sink. Then Bethany sits down on the edge of the bed and waits for the knock on the door she knows is coming.

It arrives about five minutes later. She gets up, unlocks the latch, and finds David Sawyer waiting for her out in the hallway.

"Listen," she says before he has a chance to speak. "No offense, but I'm kind of mythologied out for the night. I don't think I can hear any more about secret World War II experiments right now."

"I understand," David says. "I didn't come to lecture you. I just wanted to answer your question from earlier."

"My question?"

"You asked me if you were my prisoner, and it's important to me that you know. *You're not.* You're free to leave this place any time. I can't promise there's anything good waiting for you back in the world. That GlobalVill's

forces won’t catch up with you. But you’re not my prisoner. You’re free to go if that’s what you choose.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Bethany says, then rolls her eyes. “Glad to hear I’m not grounded.”

David lingers in the doorway. Bethany can tell he’s hoping that their conversation isn’t over. He wants to tell her all about her big, exciting destiny, to sell her a timeshare to a hell dimension.

Bethany doesn’t take the bait.

“All right,” David says eventually. “Good night.”

He turns to walk away. Bethany closes her bedroom door, then listens to David’s footsteps down the hall. She tries not to submit to her nagging curiosity. It doesn’t work.

“Hey—” she calls. She opens the door back up and steps into the hallway.

David turns around.

“The receiver. How do you know it’s me? How do you know I’m the one?”

“Well . . .“David says.” *It all started during World War II* . . .” He grins at her.

“Funny, I didn’t know Ted Kaczynski had a sense of humor.”

“I prefer Charles Manson,” David tells her. “Just stay away from Ted Bundy. John Wayne Gacy. I don’t eat dead bodies, okay? I check my mentions and there are some really mean rumors about me on the internet.”

Bethany turns to step back into her bedroom and shut the door.

“The real answer is: We don’t know,” David says. “Not for sure, at least. We know GlobalVill thinks it’s you. That you’re not just another crooked person for them to trap. They were trying to send you to that place, but then they panicked at the last minute and decided that actually they needed you dead before you ever reached your destination. There’s only one explanation for that—they think you’re dangerous. And I’ve heard something similar from my own sources. They’re confident that you’re the one, but they’ve been wrong before.”

“You’re hedging,” Bethany says. “All I want to know is, how certain are you that it’s me?”

David thinks for a while.

“Seventy-five percent,” he says. “If you’re asking me for a clear answer, I’d estimate it at seventy-five percent.”

“Cool,” Bethany says. “No big deal if you’re wrong. I just get trapped in some unfathomable hell dimension for all eternity.”

“But if I’m right—if *we’re* right—you might have the opportunity to change everything. Think about the lives you could save. The people you might be able to free.”

“Here’s what I think,” Bethany says. “I think you’re pretending to be my friend because you and that old woman want me to risk my life so you can get your ex-girlfriends back.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you to do anything,” David says. “I told you, you’re free to leave. I don’t want to make you go to that place if you don’t want to. “He pauses for a long time.” I’ve only ever sent one person to Public Access Afterworld against her will,” he admits eventually. “And I’ve regretted it every day since.”

Bethany stares at the cult leader as he looks down at the ground. He’s a good actor. She can’t tell if he’s actually feeling penitent, or if it’s a performance he’s putting on to get her to do what he wants.

“Is there anything else?” Bethany asks. “Any way we might get that seventy-five percent number up a little bit? Anything that might make you more certain it’s really me?”

David thinks for a while. “Have you ever felt any kind of connection to something on television?” he asks. “Like a TV show or a commercial or a movie on cable that it felt like you had a psychic link to? As if somewhere, deep down, you maybe even had a hand in making it? I know it sounds crazy, but it could be a sign.”

Bethany thinks about television. About her endless nights with Abel on the couch watching *Game of Thrones* rip-offs. About the dull opiate of a never-ending binge watch.

“I don’t like television,” Bethany says.

She walks back into her bedroom and shuts the door, leaving David alone in the hallway, retiring for the night to her very limited options.

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7

DOUGLAS HAS BEEN LEARNING all kinds of new things today. Like for instance how hard it is to get a good night's sleep in a bathtub. Of course everyone else in the getaway car got nice room assignments at the safe house. A fresh towel and a comfortable mattress. Meanwhile Douglas got his arms, legs, and mouth duct-taped, and then dropped into an empty bathtub to writhe around all night like a turtle stuck on its own back.

Life is different now. It's been only twenty-four hours, but it already feels hard for Douglas to remember how simple things used to be before his kidnapping. Back when his biggest problem was not getting to listen to the back half of self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*) before his work shift started. God. What he'd give right now to be cruising around Austin, singing along to "How's It Going to Be."

He tries to push away his woes so he can fall asleep, but it doesn't work. The bathtub's just too uncomfortable. So he stays up all night feeling sorry for himself, lamenting the raw deal no one even warned him he was getting when he took his job at GlobalVill.com.

Sure, he hadn't been completely innocent. He knew there was some weird shit going on at the streaming platform. His bitch manager Sandra made it very clear that the most important element of his job was to keep an extra close eye on Bethany Peters. He knew that Bethany was part of some secret special project, that the CEO's nephew Kyle was undercover and involved in it too. But Douglas didn't know it would lead to something like *this.* If he had, he would've just kept his old gig at the Men's Wearhouse. Retail sucked, but cult leaders don't kidnap you at the Men's Wearhouse. Plus you get to work day shifts.

Douglas misses his girlfriend. He misses his growlers of homebrew and his fantasy baseball team. And most of all he misses his bed, his big soft bed that was also, conveniently, *not a fucking bathtub.* He tosses and turns.

He groans loudly, then gets really fed up and stretches out. It's a spur-of-the-moment thing, not a premeditated escape attempt, but to Douglas's surprise, the strain is enough to loosen the duct tape around his wrists. Once he realizes what's happening, he keeps working at it, stretching against his binding until his wrists come all the way loose. He slips his hands free, then rips the duct tape from his mouth.

He takes a big, surprised gasp of air. He can't believe his luck. He keeps working now, untying the remaining binds around his legs. And then he's totally free. My god, he's free. What should he do?

Douglas listens for sounds in the house, but he hears nothing. Everyone's asleep. It's probably around three A.M.

Douglas realizes he has a clear path of escape. Just a short trip tiptoeing out of the bathroom, then down the hallway and out the back door to freedom. It's probably a long journey to civilization from here, but all it would take is one car on the road, one cellphone he could borrow. Then he could call his manager Sandra and tell her about everything that's been happening to him. Or maybe he'd just skip those creeps at GlobalVill entirely and call the goddamn police. He could be home by sunset tomorrow, back to his fantasy baseball team and his growlers. Back to the second half of self-titled (*Third Eye Blind*).

Once he's finished ripping off the last of the duct tape, he stands up slowly, trying his best not to make a sound. He tiptoes from the bathtub, then waits by the inside door for a full minute to make sure there's no sign of anyone awake outside. He peeks his head into the darkened hallway, confirms the coast is clear, then officially begins his escape attempt.

But as he creeps down the hall, heading towards the screen door leading out into the backyard, something unexpected grips him. He slows to a stop. He changes his mind. He gets cold feet.

It's a decision Douglas isn't sure he understands. Maybe it's based around a fear of what David and Jules will do if they catch up with him. Probably kill him for sure. Or maybe something else is causing Douglas to hesitate, something deeper down. Maybe he simply can't imagine his old life anymore. Even though it's only been a single day, maybe he knows on some level that the old him is gone, forever.

"Hey!" he shouts, loud enough that the whole house can hear. "Hey, I need help!"

David’s bedroom door opens immediately. Jules’s too. They both rush into the hall. Jules carries their handgun.

“Don’t shoot!” Douglas cries. He puts his hands in the air. “My duct tape came loose in the tub, and I—I just need you guys to retie me.”

Jules looks at Douglas like he’s insane. They confer quietly with David while Douglas waits. Eventually Jules grabs him and drags him back towards his bathtub prison.

“See?” Douglas says to David as he’s dragged away. “I didn’t try to escape. I’ve got—what’s it called—Stockholm syndrome. So maybe . . . like . . . you don’t need to duct-tape my mouth anymore.”

• • •

Jules reties Douglas’s arms and legs in the bathtub. He tries to make small talk with them.

“I feel like you and I got off on the wrong foot. But I actually think we might not be as different as you might assume. Sure, you’re a goth and I’m more of a regular person, but—”

Jules rips a large strip of duct tape from the roll and fastens it once again over Douglas’s mouth. “Mmmph mmmmph mmmmph,” he mumbles, failing to finish his sentence.

• • •

After their hostage is resecured, Jules leaves the bathroom and walks back down the hall towards their bedroom. They wonder if maybe they should have shown that idiot a little mercy and left his mouth ungagged like he was asking for. But Jules is still feeling grumpy. They’re in the throes of withdrawal, still unable to sleep. They’ve been awake most of the night, sweating and anxious, playing their recent interaction with Bethany back in their brain. The one in the parking lot at GlobalVill, when Jules threatened to kill her.

They can’t stop thinking about it. They regret being so harsh. It was total self-sabotage, because they know that deep down they want to be on good terms with Bethany. They were just hurt and angry, so they lashed out.

This is what they do. A survival tactic, and hardly a new one. Their temper—their ability to stand their ground and hold a grudge, it's basically the only reason they survived their childhood. But Bethany is different. The time they spent together down in Lubbock—though only a few days—was probably the best, most exciting time in Jules's entire stupid life.

They see the light still on in Bethany's bedroom. She's probably awake. Jules wonders if maybe she's up late thinking about them like they're thinking about her. Maybe she's feeling bad about their argument, too.

Jules knocks on Bethany's door. There's no answer. And by the time Jules knocks again, they're fairly certain what's waiting for them inside.

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A minute later, David wakes up to pounding on his own bedroom door. He hops out of bed, rubs the sleep from his eyes, then finds Jules Estrada waiting for him in the hallway.

"We've got a problem," they say.

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8

BETHANY HAD DITCHED THE safe house a few hours earlier, shortly after everyone else went to bed. David told her, after all, that she wasn't a prisoner. That it was her choice to stay or go. And she decided to take him up on it.

Bethany knows that leaving is probably a dumb idea, likely akin to suicide. That just as David warned her, it would only be a matter of time before Fisch's forces caught up with her. But Bethany doesn't care anymore. She doesn't have a plan, and she can't think of one that feels realistic. She just wants to run. To forget about all of it: Public Access Afterworld and the destiny that everyone keeps insisting she has. To forget about herself, even. She wants out of life as Bethany Peters, that person she once longed to become who has brought her nothing but emotional benders and near-death experiences, an endless cycle of self-destruction.

Maybe Bethany could find an off-the-grid town where she could lie low for a while. Change her name and keep her head down like a do-it-yourself witness protection program. Become someone else one last time. But probably not. Bethany suspects that towns like that don't really exist anymore, at least not outside of movies. Deep down, Bethany feels pretty sure that she's simply out of good options. That all she can really hope for at this point is to run as long as she can, until eventually she can't run anymore. Until they find her.

Before leaving the ranch, Bethany had the foresight to steal a flashlight from the kitchen. Now she's using it to light her path down a long sandy road. She spots a highway sign for I-40 eventually and decides to head in that direction. Why not?

A couple trucks pass by. One eventually slows to a stop in front of her.

"You need a ride, miss?" the driver asks as he rolls the window down.

“No thanks,” Bethany says. When she looks up, she can tell the trucker has clocked her from the deepness of her voice.

“Oh Jesus,” he says. He shuts the window and peels away, leaving Bethany alone to keep walking down the road.

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Shortly after dawn, she approaches the first real sign of civilization she’s seen since the safe house: a 24-hour self-serve laundromat with a single gas pump outside.

The building’s dark. Bethany squints through the glass and spots a few vending machines. She decides to grab some snacks, maybe sleep for a while on the floor. She fishes a few crumpled bills from her wallet and walks inside. As she does, the lights flicker on. The place comes alive.

At first, Bethany assumes it’s motion sensors picking up her movements. But as she feeds her first dollar bill into the vending machine, she hears a strange rumbling sound from behind her. She turns around to find a fleet of dryers powering themselves on, one by one. Each machine begins a new empty cycle down the line, without anyone paying.

Bethany takes a few steps towards the dryers. As she does, the laundromat continues to hum to life. It’s as if anything that’s plugged into a wall socket is suddenly flirting with her. The washers fill with water, bubbling up the remnants of old detergent. A few dryers in the far corner are still turned off, so Bethany walks over to them. And as if confirming her theory, they switch themselves on as she approaches.

It’s her. She’s doing this. Her “receiver-ness.” *Man,* she thinks. *What an appropriately crummy superpower*. She’s gained the ability to control washer-dryers at the fucking laundromat.

An old TV mounted up above the washers turns itself on, too, joining the parade. The cable box flips between channels of its own accord, passing a commercial for *The Wolves of Birmingham* (“*Only two episodes left!*”), then past all the 24-hour news networks. Bethany spots a photo of herself on one of them.

“Stop!” she says. “Go back to CNN.”

She momentarily feels crazy for giving orders to a television. But lo and behold, the television listens. It skips a few channels back to CNN.

There’s an old photo of Bethany on the screen, from way earlier in transition. She and Abel at one of his friends’ backyard barbecues, smiling with their arms around each other.

“Volume up,” Bethany says. The TV turns its sound all the way up so that Bethany can hear the news anchors talk about her.

“. . . has also been linked to the death of her boyfriend Abel McDowell. And that’s in addition to the two employees who lost their lives during the brutal shooting at GlobalVill’s Austin campus late Tuesday. Co-workers say the suspect had been exhibiting unstable behavior in recent months, making frequent public scenes at work. And records just acquired show a history of mental illness dating back to her teenage years when she was briefly institutionalized in a facility for—”

Bethany watches the screen as the dryers and washers tumble behind her. More photographs of her appear, many of them pre-transition, from back when Bethany was still Noah. The anchors continue to speculate about how deranged Bethany is, encouraging viewers to be on the lookout. She’s still at large. Armed and very dangerous, they warn.

A video statement from GlobalVill CEO Anthony “Fisch” Fischer plays next. It’s been posted on the streaming platform’s home page in the wake of Bethany’s apparent “attack” on the tech headquarters. Fisch is wearing the same sweater-vest he had on the night before, back when Bethany held him at gunpoint in his corner office. Now he’s safe at home in his very big house, broadcasting in front of a bookshelf in his massive living room. His tone of voice is expertly calibrated to sound both shaken up and resolute, like a wartime president.

“As we mourn the lives lost in this senseless tragedy, my heart goes out to everyone in our GlobalVill community. But most of all to my beloved colleagues and their families. We all just want to live in a world where everyone feels safe, and as the proud CEO of a B Corp, it makes me sick to my stomach that our trust has been so violated by this very troubled . . . *person.* I don’t know what else to say.”

Fisch shakes his head. Bethany glares at his image on the screen. For a second, she thinks the television might burst into flames just to please her.

“I’m being told we have another update,” the news anchor says once Fisch’s video statement ends. “Bethany Peters, the prime suspect in the deadly GlobalVill.com shooting, has now been linked to three more

murders. Earlier this morning, the bodies of Mona and Lily Rogers were found in their Austin, Texas, home, along with the couple's four-month-old baby."

"Oh my god," his co-anchor declares. "That's horrible."

"Police say the suspect had been staying with the couple on and off for several months, and one neighbor reports seeing Bethany outside Lily and Mona's home just hours before her devastating attack on GlobalVill's Austin campus."

Bethany keeps listening but the words start to lose their meaning, regressing back into sound. She feels sick. The ground moves under her feet. Lily is dead. Sweet Lily who'd reached out to Bethany a decade ago over the internet after watching one of her pre-transition cry-for-help videos on GlobalVill. Lily who'd been her surrogate mother during those early days in Austin—who'd accompanied Bethany to her first HRT appointment and held her hand in the parking lot afterwards as she took her first-ever dose of estradiol. Lily who'd settled down with a house in the suburbs, a stable job, and a cis wife, who'd worked so hard just to have a regular existence, to assimilate into society, to be as unthreatening as a trans girl possibly could be to all the "normal" people around her. Sweet Lily, dead before her fortieth birthday.

And now Bethany knows what she's going to do about David and Rachel's pitch. Of course she's not going to run away to some nameless town and wait for the same people who killed Lily to find her, too. She's going to do exactly what David's cult wants her to do. She's going to play the superhero, travel to Public Access Afterworld, and hope like hell that their hunch that she's the "receiver" turns out to be right so she can blow up the place.

It's not that she wants to go. It's not that she's suddenly fueled by some heretofore untapped reserve of righteous anger. It's not even that she thinks she's actually the one they think she is. Seventy-five percent, yeah right. Bethany wasn't born yesterday. She's fairly certain she's not "the receiver." How could she be when she feels this powerless? This drained and defeated?

No. The actual reason she's going to play along with David's mission is because it's the one option left available to her where, even if the chances are slim, she might end up as something other than just another victim.

• • •

Outside the laundromat, Bethany uses an old pay phone to call her parents and say goodbye. She dials her phone number back in Harlingen. She still knows it by heart. Her parents pick up on the first ring. They've been watching the news, obviously.

"Oh my lord," her mom says. "*Honey.* Thank god. Are you okay?" Even in crisis, Bethany notes how skillfully her mom manages to avoid saying her name. "The police were here earlier. Daddy is with me. Your sister, too. We've been up all night watching the news. What did you do? What on earth did you do?"

"It doesn't matter," Bethany says. "That's not why I'm calling." She tries her best to sound calm, to hide the panic and devastation from her voice. For some reason, it feels important to her to come across as dignified on this final call. She wants her mom to know that even now, even at the end, she isn't the deranged lunatic her parents always thought she was.

"Hold on, honey," her mom says. "Daddy wants to talk to you—"

Her father grabs the phone on the other end of the line. "Listen to me," Bethany's father says. "You need to turn yourself in. You're going to end up dead."

It's the first time Bethany has heard her father's voice in over a year. She realizes she'd forgotten how it sounded.

"I know, Dad. I just need you to listen to me."

"Don't forget, your brother-in-law is a cop. He's already offered to talk to the police. To advocate for you personally, to tell them you're—"

"Dad—" Bethany cuts him off mid-sentence. "Hold the phone out so Mom can hear. Can you both hear me?"

Her dad doesn't respond.

"I don't have much time," Bethany says. "Can you both hear me?"

Her mom chimes in eventually. "Yes, honey."

"Listen to me. I just wanted—I mean, I *needed*—to call and say goodbye. To let you know that I'm not scared, and that no matter what you think, I'm not crazy."

"Honey—"

“Mom, stop. Just listen to me. I’m not crazy and I’m not delusional. I never have been. Everything that I thought was happening to me was happening to me. It was real. And I’m not. I mean—”

Bethany realizes she sounds like a stammering mess. She tries to stop herself from crying. She stifles her tears and forces her voice back to an approximation of calm.

“I’m not scared,” Bethany tells the phone. “I want you to know I’m okay. I’m not crazy, and I’m not scared, and I’m not a victim. You should be proud of me. I swear that you should be proud of me.”

“Honey,” her mom says.

“I know that after I came out, it felt like you lost me. And I want you to know that I don’t blame you. Or maybe I *do* blame you, but it wasn’t just you. I was lost, too. I think I always was. I never really belonged in this world. I understand that now.”

“Please just tell us where you are,” her dad says. “You’re scaring us. You sound like a lunatic.”

Bethany feels ashamed. She knows her father is right. She wanted this to be cathartic, but here she is, rambling and crying, failing to make her parents understand. Humiliating herself before them, once again, one last time.

“I’m sorry,” Bethany says. “I’m sorry I wasn’t the person you wanted. I love you. Goodbye—”

“Noah—” her mom says, sounding like a scared child herself.

Bethany hangs up. She stands under the awning of the laundromat, nearly certain that she’ll never hear those two voices again in her life.

• • •

She sits down in the gravel, and she waits. She suspects David and his cultists are already out searching for her. And sure enough, a few minutes later, she hears footsteps approaching from up the road.

Jules Estrada walks into the parking lot. They’re carrying their gun, the one Bethany stole from them back in Lubbock. Jules spots Bethany sitting alone in the empty parking lot, then slows down. They look at Bethany with their usual middle-distance stare. They blink a bunch of times.

“It’s okay,” Bethany says. “You don’t have to kill me. I’m ready to do what you want.”

Jules looks down at the gun in their hand.

“Oh, no,” they say. “It’s not like that. This was just for protection.”

They tuck the handgun into the waistband of their jeans, then walk across the parking lot.

“David’s looking for you in the car,” they say. “I took foot patrol. We just wanted to make sure you’re safe. That’s all.”

Bethany doesn’t respond.

“I’m glad I found you first,” Jules tells her. “Before David gets here. Because I . . . I wanted to say . . . I’m sorry that I threatened to kill you before.” They keep shuffling in place and blinking a lot. “I don’t want to kill you. Actually, if I’m being totally honest, I was super bummed when you left Lubbock. I know I got angry and threw golf balls at you, but that’s just because I have a short temper.”

Bethany looks up at Jules. She starts to sob. There’s no build-up to it. Just big wet cries, out of nowhere. It sounds like Bethany’s coughing up a hairball. It catches Jules off guard. They worry that they’ve said or done something wrong.

“No,” they tell her. “Don’t cry. I wasn’t trying to be mean.”

But Bethany’s fully lost control. Her crying turns loud and guttural. A dam that’s finally burst.

Jules feels super stressed. They didn’t mean to upset Bethany. They want to fix this latest problem they’ve somehow managed to cause. They kneel down in the gravel and rub their friend’s back, trying to calm her down. Their touch is cautious, as if they’re bracing for an inevitable recoil. But to Jules’s surprise, Bethany doesn’t pull away. She doesn’t really acknowledge them, either. She just keeps sobbing.

Jules wishes they knew how to make her stop crying like that. They don’t want Bethany to cry. They lean in closer and wrap their arms around her. Bethany doesn’t pull away, and Jules waits a few more seconds to make sure she doesn’t change her mind and decide she doesn’t want to be touched. Then Jules lowers themself down to the gravel, pulling Bethany gently along with them. They play big spoon, lying with Bethany in the same position they briefly cuddled in during their final night together back

at the Turbo Putt, on their little twin-sized mattress in the office shed after Bethany taped their magazine clippings up on the wall. Jules holds Bethany on the ground in the parking lot, and they try to comfort her.

“It’s okay,” they say. They rub Bethany’s back, pretending they’re petting a scared animal. They can feel Bethany’s vocal cords vibrate inside her body as she weeps.

“It’s going to be okay,” they say again. They’re not sure if they’re helping or hurting. But eventually, to their relief, Bethany starts to calm down.

Jules keeps petting their friend, even after Bethany stops crying. Neither of them talk, and Jules savors the time they have together down in the dirt of the laundromat parking lot. Because they know that David will be here soon, and then, almost certainly, they’ll go back to being the third wheel, a side character in this saga that no one pays much attention to. But for now—for a little while longer—it’s just Jules and Bethany, lying in the gravel. Broken but together, holding each other.

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A FEW MINUTES LATER, just as predicted, David pulls up. When Bethany sees the getaway car, she slips out of Jules's embrace without a word. She gets up and brushes dirt off herself.

"Okay," she says to David. "I'm ready."

She walks towards the car, leaving Jules alone in the dirt. Jules feels their anxiety return. It was gone briefly while the two of them were cuddling. But now they worry that maybe Bethany misinterpreted their whole apology. Maybe she thinks all that stuff Jules said before David showed up was a "good cop" routine. A way to get Bethany back in the fold. To convince her not to ditch David's mission.

But no. It wasn't like that at all. At this point, Jules couldn't care less about David's whole stupid Public Access Afterworld game. They just want Bethany to know that she's the one they care about. That they're in this for her. But Bethany's already getting into the front passenger seat of the getaway. She's already talking to David.

Jules lingers alone outside the laundromat. They slowly collect themself, then walk over to the car. And because Bethany's now claimed shotgun, they get into the backseat. They don't bother to mention the demotion, and no one else does either. But it's clear that this is the proper order of things. Bethany in the front with David. Jules in the back, where the cronies and hostages sit.

"Mmmph," Douglas says from the spot next to them. He nods at Jules, trying to say good morning from under his duct tape. Jules hesitates a moment, then removes the tape from his mouth, ungagging Douglas, granting his wish from the night before because, what the hell, they're feeling sentimental.

“Whoa,” Douglas says. He looks at them with surprise and appreciation. “Thanks, man.”

• • •

In the front seat, Bethany talks to David.

“Drugs speed up the process. Is that right? That’s why they were feeding me hallucinogenic kombucha at GlobalVill: to send me to Public Access Afterworld faster. Am I understanding that right?”

“Yes,” David says. “Correct.”

Bethany puts on her seat belt. “Well, then, phone ahead and tell your people I’m going to need as many drugs as they can gather on short notice. LSD. Magic mushrooms. Ketamine, too. A lot of ketamine.”

David nods. He turns the keys in the ignition and starts the engine, ready now for the final leg of their road trip.

“One last bender,” Bethany says. “So let’s make it count.”

• • •

The trip’s another six hours in the getaway, then the four unlikely traveling companions walk together into the New Mexico desert. It’s one more hour on foot to the rendezvous point where, just as planned, Emily scoops them up in a dune buggy for the last leg of their journey to David’s compound in the desert. Jules remembers this part of the trip from a week ago, back when they still harbored some hope that they were the special one heading for an amazing destiny.

Their caravan passes the government trash left out in the sand. David told Jules about it on their last drive here, gave them a whole history lesson because he still thought Jules mattered enough to tell stuff to. He said that it had all been here since World War II. That the government just dumped it when the war was over because they didn’t know what else to do with their garbage.

Jules eavesdrops on Bethany as she gazes at the trash heap for the first time. Sand whips around the buggy, and Bethany spots the broken wooden sign, the centerpiece of the rubble poking out from the pile like glorified firewood. Jules remembers it. Remembers how exciting it felt just one week

ago to read those words written on that sign and imagine it was written just for them.

The wood is all rotted and decayed. The sign's got three monkeys painted on it, covering their eyes, ears, and mouth, respectively.

WHAT YOU SEE HERE, the sign reads.

WHAT YOU DO HERE

WHAT YOU HEAR HERE

WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE

—Let It Stay Here—

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EPISODE EIGHT

LIST OF FILMS IN THE *CHIMOTERA* MEDIA FRANCHISE (DISAMBIGUATED)

Note: This list only includes feature-length films produced by One Universe Studios featuring the proprietary character Chimotera. Parodies, unlicensed fan films, and other media appearances are not included. For information about the anthology television series *Chimotera's Nightmares* (1981–1985), click here.

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CHIMOTERA!
(1944)

LIFE BEGINS WITH A logo. It makes as much sense as anything because nothing makes sense yet. A black-and-white water tower illuminates stars in a black-and-white sky. You hear the trample of a string section. A timpani roll like a curtain opening on existence.

And then you are here, though by the end of your first film, you still haven't figured out exactly what either of those words mean. *You* and *here*. Deceptively straightforward. Utterly incomprehensible. But you know things, and other people do, too. About yourself. About the world. Like that you were a man at first. That your name was Wilhelm, though you can't quite remember who named you that. Did you have parents? It's blurry.

And then there was the accident. And then you became a monster. And then, finally, another timpani roll, and after that you were nothing again, flayed on the floor of your laboratory, returned to the same void you'd burst forth from. The whole thing took a lifetime. And yet it was over in less than ninety minutes.

You can feel the fire still. It all hurt so terribly. Those villagers who stormed your lab seared your skin and fur, knotted your hair with flame until it burned in clumps like hot glue in the sun. It felt so real, until it didn't. And then the pain was gone, and you were gone, too.

And yet you're still here. How is that possible?

You're a scientist. You should be able to figure this out. It's a simple question, really. Who are you?

• • •

You were born a man. Dr. Wilhelm Arnold Stratford, of German descent. You know you had parents who raised you, yet you cannot conjure their faces or names right now.

Your childhood was . . . happy, you believe. There's not much accessible about your childhood. It exists as a fact, but it lies outside the margins of actual experience, as if it happened to someone else. As if a truer birth occurred long afterwards. Just ninety minutes ago, with that logo lighting up the sky.

You think of Marcela's smile on a picnic blanket by the river outside Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It feels like your first real memory. You can see it now, like a flashback or creation myth. You've seen it several times in these past ninety minutes. Marcela's freckled cheeks, her boyish smile. Mustard seed dripping from her chin down to her summer dress.

"I'm mortified!" she cried, clasping her little hands over her eyes. You were gallant then. You rushed to dip your handkerchief in the river so your bride-to-be could wipe herself clean.

Marcela made you feel alive. Like a part of existence. That day by the river, you didn't need anyone to explain to you that you existed, how and why there was something rather than nothing. It was self-evident. And then you ruined it with your obsessions. You had wanted to be great, to push at the limits of what might be possible, to make of your life something grand, something that would last ages, that would change the course of history. After school you moved to a small village outside of . . . you're not sure. The details of the place are inaccessible, as if whoever created the town where you built your lab forgot to give it a name, forgot even to locate it on a map. But it was a peaceful place nestled outside of time, full of simple people who left you alone to your experiments. You built your laboratory on the hill, and you kept to yourself. You told no one of your postdoctoral research.

Marcela stayed behind in Cambridge. Her father was overjoyed at first at the prospect of your upcoming nuptials. But then he heard rumors about the fringe obsessions that had occupied the final phase of your postdoctoral research. Stem cells. Interspecies fusion. Those unimaginative fools at the university had called your work an affront to God.

Marcela’s father traveled from the city, confronted you in your laboratory. He gave you an ultimatum: Either give up your research and return to Cambridge, or he would forbid a union between you and his daughter.

Fools! All of them, fools! You were so close to a breakthrough. And they had the gall to call you mad. On that final night, perhaps you were mad. But you had been pushed to that point, rushed in your experiments like no scientist should be. And it had led to your downfall.

What had caused the accident? Here, oddly, your memory branches. In one world—the black-and-white world where you actually lived—you simply slipped on a puddle that you hadn’t had time to clean up, freeing the bat from its cage. But then there was the other version of events—like a dream in colors you didn’t know existed until that point. In this version, there was something else that caused your slip. Not just the puddle, but a voice, a signal calling to you from your little radio on the table.

“*Find a screen,*” it said. “*Find a screen, Wilhelm.*”

But the radio was turned off, so how was such a thing possible? And how could you have two memories at once? There was no voice from the radio. And yet there had been one.

You were so startled that you slipped and collided with the cage where you kept your prized specimen. That creature you’d fused with brain cells from human cadavers. It flew free and bit you right on the arm, and you knew immediately that your fate was sealed. You were infected. Now you were your own experiment.

The world went fuzzy, and when you regained consciousness, you felt a hunger greater than any you’d ever experienced before. You stumbled across the lab floor, knocking over equipment like a newborn learning to walk. When you finally caught your reflection in the mirror, you bellowed out a great cry.

You were horrific. A monster. No longer Wilhelm. No longer human, but something else. *Chimotera!* Half-man, half-bat, replete with stem cells that granted you an utterly unprecedented strength and appetite. A bloodlust that, though new to you, felt powerful. You were an abomination. Everything was natural.

When Marcela’s father visited to demand an answer to his ultimatum, you pounced. You pawed and minced and devoured the man until he looked indiscernible from a plate of liver. You roared to the heavens, your lips dripping with blood, feral at the desire coursing through your strange new body.

The townsfolk of your village soon became suspicious. Those who dared investigate the moans bellowing from your laboratory on the hill never returned. A mob prepared to storm the castle. That same night, as fate willed it, your precious Marcela appeared at your doorstep. When you didn’t answer, she let herself in. You tried to keep hidden in the shadows. You told her to go away, shouted that you were an abomination now. But Marcela was stubborn, her love persistent. She begged you to show yourself.

“I could never be frightened of you,” she promised.

A flaming bottle crashed through your window. The villagers toppled your entryway door. And in the clamor of the mob, you stepped from the shadows. The moment Marcela saw you, she cried out in terror.

“You’re a monster! You’re not Wilhelm! You’re a monster!”

As the mob stormed your castle, you lunged at your bride. You were trying to protect her, but you still didn’t know your body’s strength. Your claws shredded her face to bits, that face that had once smiled so bashfully by the river in Cambridge. You could have sworn in that moment that you were transported there again. A brief flashback to that perfect day so long ago by the river outside Harvard Square.

And then your love lay lifeless at your feet. The mob set your lab ablaze. You sank to your knees as the flames overtook you, as you bellowed to the heavens and burned. And then it was the end. You could even see the words there above the final frames of your life, next to a copyright stamp: “THE END.”

It should have been as such. That should have been all.

So why are you still here?

• • •

Can you open your eyes? Do you still have eyes?

Yes.

You open your eyes, and you're back on the ground in your destroyed laboratory, in the very same spot you burned. Except you no longer feel pain. You're alive again.

You search your lab for Marcela's body, but she's nowhere to be found. The villagers who stormed your lab are gone too. All of them, erased.

You hear a faint voice. You explore your ransacked lab and find the radio fallen from its stand, huffing out a distant signal.

"*Find a screen,*" it says. There's that voice again. The voice that beamed through the radio from a deeper, more vivid reality. As you reawaken to your senses, you consider if this is the same reality you've woken back up into. You realize you too have entered a world of full color, of finer resolution, one that feels deeper and more vivid than the old black-and-white existence you've always lived in. Even the air you breathe tastes different, as if it's no longer a cheap imitation of itself.

You survey the remains of your laboratory, then don a trench coat and walk out into daylight. You hope to be anonymous, to descend the hill unrecognized. But as you enter the village below, you realize that your caution is needless. The township has been emptied, as if everyone but you was raptured away the same moment those big letters declared THE END.

You walk cobblestone streets. You approach Murray's Old General, the quaint local shop where you used to buy science supplies. You find the store closed and abandoned, just like the rest of the village. But there's a fleet of radios in the front window display, and they broadcast the same voice you heard earlier in an electronic chorus. "*Find a screen, Wilhelm. You need to find a screen.*"

You stare through the window, confused and angry. How is it possible that the radio knows your name?

You walk past the town's saloon, past the sheriff's post and the inn where your late father-in-law once booked a room. At the end of the street, you find the Grand Paramount, that picture house where the townsfolk gathered on Friday nights to watch the latest silent pictures.

The marquee is empty of letters. No one sits in the booth to take your ticket. You pull the glass door off its hinges and step into the lobby. You've never been inside before. In your past life, you never had time for trivial pleasures like moving pictures. You were far too busy with your studies.

But now, you pause to appreciate the space before you. It's as elegant as any opera house. You enter the sprawling, empty palace, then walk down the aisle towards the massive screen at the front of the room.

It's blank. You take a seat in the front row and stare up at it, waiting for something to happen. You close your eyes and allow yourself a moment of calm. And eventually you feel the lights dimming around you, as if a picture show is about to begin.

When you open your eyes back up, there's something on the screen. The massive image of a man. He's staring at you in black and white, sitting at a desk in a small, unremarkable office. Like all motion pictures in the time, when your life took place, there's no sound. Title cards interrupt the moving image every so often to fill in the absent words.

"There you are," the first card reads.

The man smiles. His clothes strike you as absurd, beyond the wildest fashions worn in Paris or New York City. His vest has a logo on it that reads "RadioShack." He keeps speaking in the silent movie.

"Hey, buddy," the next title card reads. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

You glance around the empty theater.

"Me?" you ask the screen.

"Yes, you," the next interstitial card reads. "I gotta say, I don't usually get starstruck, but this is very cool for me. I've been a fan my whole life."

"Who are you?" you ask the screen. "What is this vile sorcery I'm experiencing?"

"My name is Anthony Fischer, but you can call me Fisch." The man on the screen speaks silently some more, and then another card appears.

"And you . . . you are Wilhelm."

Your expression darkens.

"That's not my name anymore," you say. "Not since the accident."

"Yes," the man named Fisch says. "Well, I'm here to talk to Wilhelm. The man, the scientist. I need his help."

"But I'm dead," you tell him. "How can I possibly help you? I'm lying on the floor of my laboratory, in my final resting place."

"Final's not all it used to be," another title card reads. "Listen, Wilhelm. I come from a different world. A more vivid world than yours, a few rungs up

the interdimensional ladder, so to speak. And if you agree to work with me, I promise you that your fate can change. I can make this happen. Make it so that your life doesn't need to be over. That it can be only just beginning . . ."

"Are you the devil?" you ask.

Fisch laughs silently.

"Ha ha ha," the next interstitial card reads. "No. I'm Vice President of Product Development at RadioShack."

"And you claim you can bring me back to life?"

"Definitely. Easily. Many times over. If we work together, you'll still just be at the beginning of it all. You can have so many adventures, go to so many places—see wonders and spectacles that you can't even imagine." You stand up from your seat. "For instance," the next title card reads, "how would you like to see Marcela again? Your bride-to-be. I know how much you love her, how important she is to you. That flashback with the mustard seed plays like eight times in your first movie. Well, how would you like to see her again? How would you like to *marry* her?"

Your breath catches. The man knows the very contents of your heart. Exactly how to tempt you.

"Impossible," you say. "She's dead. I killed her with my own hands."

"Buddy, when are you gonna catch on? That's not a problem here. Just go lie back down on the floor of your laboratory and close your eyes. And when you wake up, you won't remember any of this, but it will already be in progress."

"And what is your price?" you ask, because you know there must be a price.

"Let's call this one a free sample," the man named Fisch tells you. "All you need to do is promise me that after it's over, you'll come see me again. Talkies should be invented by then, so we won't need these stupid title cards to speak."

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THE BRIDE OF CHIMOTERA! (1946)

LIFE BEGINS AGAIN WITH a logo. A black-and-white water tower casts light across the night sky. Have you seen this before? And if life were only just beginning, how could that be possible?

You don't have time to ponder the questions. The logo dissipates and a great burst of lightning shatters the sky, cascading through a hole in the ceiling of your ruined laboratory right above the spot where your lifeless body rests.

You feel the lightning reignite your heart, power you back to life. You awaken with a violent gasp, and then you're back in your body, back in your black-and-white life.

Your resurrection feels a bit unlikely, and yet you don't really question it. Of course you've been reawakened. You are the great Chimotera. The fact that a puny mob thought they could end your life is laughable. You're revitalized. Hungry. You have much work to do.

You don your shawl and descend from the lab on the hill. You terrorize the village without remorse. Before long, schoolchildren and town leaders all fear your name anew.

And yet a melancholy hangs over your rampage. Something is missing. You drink blood like an alcoholic drinks wine. You eat vital organs when really you're just eating your feelings. You miss Marcela, your bride-to-be. Her body still lies on your laboratory floor.

You work diligently. Fix all the broken equipment. You become a scientist again. For seven days and nights, you disappear back into formulas and experiments. By the fourth night, you've constructed a new skin graft. On the fifth night, you inject Marcela with bat DNA. And finally, on the seventh night, you position her corpse under the hole in your ceiling. You

wait for the next lightning strike to cascade down and shock your bride-to-be back to life. It arrives in tandem with the midnight chime. The congruency must be fate.

She returns to you. Bless the power of science. But she is no longer Marcela, no longer the freckled innocent from your schoolboy days. No. She's something else now. *The Bride of Chimotera!*

You want her more than ever. The wedding can't wait an instant. You elope later that night, vowing to terrorize the countryside together for all eternity. But soon you discover that Marcela's bloodlust is not the same as your own. The townsfolk invade your castle once again. In the calamity that follows, you fight with vigor, ripping apart all who seek to sever your unholy matrimony. And then you lock eyes with your bride. She's picked up a burning torch from the hands of a man whose throat you just ripped out. She brandishes the flame above her head.

"It's not natural," she declares. "We are not natural creatures. We should never have been born into this existence."

You rush across the room and attempt to rip the torch from her hands. She wraps her arms around you and lights you both up in a shared effigy. The angry mob ransacks your lab as the two of you burn together, twin monstrosities, then skeletal remains, seared together on the laboratory floor.

"THE END," another title card reads.

• • •

When you awake, you're no longer just bones. Your bride, the mob, all of them are gone. You're back in full color now. Back in that other, more vivid version of reality.

As was prophesied, you forgot all about this place after your resurrection. But now that you've returned here, you remember it all. The man on the screen named Fisch, and the devil's bargain he wants to strike with you.

You think back on all you just experienced in that lesser black-and-white world, and now much of it strikes you as absurd. You were resurrected by a bolt of lightning through a hole in your ceiling. What are the chances of that? And another angry mob burning down your lab? Really? Again? Try as you might, you still can't even conjure the name of the village you live in, as if GOD himself forgot to name it. When you were experiencing that

life, none of it felt out of the ordinary. But here, in this deeper plane you've returned to, your home world's insufficiencies seem self-evident.

You stand up, brush yourself off, and walk over broken glass. You don't bother to don your hood as you step outside into the morning light. You know you'll be alone here. You descend the hill to the town below, then walk the empty streets of your village. You're eager to return to the movie palace. You know the man named Fisch will be waiting for you.

But as you turn onto Main Street, something catches your eye in the window of Murray's Old General. The storefront display has been switched since your last visit. The radios are gone, and now you stare through the glass at a single little television set, fresh out of the box.

Television. TV. You turn the words over in your brain. You weren't aware of the invention until the moment you saw this, but now the knowledge of it floods your memory as if beamed in from some galactic encyclopedia. A sign hangs in the window display. "TAKE A BRAND NEW TELEVISION SET HOME TODAY!"

You look at the device. It pales in size and scope to the screen waiting for you in the grand movie palace down the road, but its mobility impresses. It's dexterous and portable. The screens of this world are evolving. *Mutating.* This little set turns itself on quite suddenly, as if the television senses your presence. You're mesmerized by the sheer brightness of the glow. It feels hotter than the sun. It burns your irises, sends a tingle down your spine. It's a pure and ecstatic experience. You feel yourself losing control.

"It's 11:58 P.M., June twelfth, 2009. And this is the biggest moment in television history since the Man on the Moon. The Fall of the Berlin Wall. Or when JFK got shot by someone who was definitely not Lee Harvey Oswald."

There's a skinny boy on the television screen wearing clothes as absurd as the man named Fisch's. The boy's voice is nasal and irritating. Everything about him is unremarkable. You immediately know that he is not the source of the glow that's so overwhelmed your senses.

"It's the end of analog broadcasting," a girl's voice speaks from behind the camera. It sends a fresh chill through every inch of you.

It's her. The girl behind the camera. You know immediately that she is the true source of the glow.

"It's over, baby! RIP!" the irrelevant boy says. He rambles on about something called "Sex and the Fucking City," but you are no longer listening. A new energy is coursing through you, a fire lit by that girl's voice from behind the camera.

You love her immediately. More than you ever loved Marcela. Because Marcela was just black and white. But this girl—she shines. Shines far brighter than anything you've ever experienced before. Brighter than even this full-color world you've awoken into.

You need to touch her. Need to be closer to that light. Your whole body shivers as fever takes hold. You gasp for air as a surge of virulence awakens the monster inside you.

And then suddenly you're somewhere else, transported to a world even more vivid than the one you've just left. You're on the floor of a . . . rest stop bathroom? You're still not fully in control of yourself. You're clawing at a body below you. You realize it's the same girl whose voice you heard on the screen a moment ago. And now, suddenly, you know her name, too, just as you'd known the word *television* the very moment you laid eyes on one in the shop-front window.

You claw and growl at Erin Morrison, unable to control your passion. You worry you might kill her, and the thought steals you from your reverie. And then you're gone from that place just as quickly as you arrived. You're back in front of Murray's Old General, staring at that annoying boy on the television screen as he dances around his basement like a jester.

Wherever you just went was a brief flash, a momentary escape. You feel guilty for the violence you just unintentionally inflicted on that beautiful girl who glowed so bright. You catch your breath outside the general store, still coming down from the rush of being in a world that felt so vivid, so real. You will never forget the feeling for the rest of your life, no matter how many times you're born and killed.

• • •

When you enter the movie palace, the screen is not yet lit. You settle into a chair in the front row and close your eyes. You clear your mind and

wait for the lights to dim. And once you're confident that you've summoned the screen to life, you open your eyes back up and gaze at the towering image before you of the man named Fisch.

"Welcome back," he says. Though he still appears in black and white, now at least you can hear his voice. He's sitting somewhere different. A bigger office than before. The ceilings in this new space are high and the walls are built from exposed brick rather than old white cement. There are awards up on the mantel behind him that weren't there last time. "Disruptor of the Year," one reads.

"How are you doing, Wilhelm?" Fisch asks, speaking as if the two of you are already old friends.

"I am racked with melancholy," you say. "You promised me that I would find love in my resurrection. That I would be married."

"And it happened, didn't it?" Fisch asks.

"For a moment. And then it was ripped from me."

"I know," the man on the screen says. "I'm sorry. I saw everything that happened, and it was tragic. But even a moment of perfection, it's more than most get."

"*Perfection?* That is what you call perfection?"

"But it was, wasn't it?" Fisch asks. "*The Bride of Chimotera!* is perfect. It's a master class in horror. It's remembered even more fondly than the original. It's in the BFI Top 250!" As usual, the man named Fisch speaks in riddles, as if he's purposely trying to confound you.

"What I'm trying to say is, it's legendary. The love you shared with your bride is one of the greatest romances of all time. It will live on forever."

"And will I see her again?" you ask. "Tell me, because you seem to know the future. Will my bride come back to life once more?"

Fisch hesitates, then shakes his head in apology. "I'm sorry. No. The actress who played Marcela dies in a boating accident before production begins on the next sequel."

"I think she was right to crave death," you say. "She and I are not natural creatures. We should not exist."

"We have a term for that kind of talk where I come from," Fisch tells you. "'Internalized shame.' Wilhelm, you must go on. Don't you want to

meet your son?”

“My . . . son?” Another prophecy.

“He’s coming soon,” Fisch assures you. “He’ll be here before you know it. But listen to me, I need to ask you something first.”

Here, finally, comes the catch. You knew there would be a price, a bargain to strike with this dark sorcerer.

“In your time here in this place where we talk to each other,” Fisch says, “in this meeting ground between your world and mine, have you seen anyone else? On screens, I mean.”

Immediately, you think of Erin Morrison. You try to play dumb. But your expression has already betrayed your answer. The man named Fisch has read you like a book. Of course he has. He comes from that brighter, realer world you briefly experienced in a rest stop bathroom.

“Listen, Wilhelm. I need you to tell me who you saw. Cards on the table: This is what I need your help with.”

“Fine. Yes. I saw someone. She was . . . majestic. There was a boy there, too, but he didn’t matter.”

Fisch grabs for a notepad and pen on his desk. “I understand,” he says. “And what was her name?”

You hesitate before answering. You think of the damage to that poor girl you surely unleashed on that bathroom floor. You feel another pang of “internalized shame.”

“Erin Morrison,” you say. “I worry she’s in trouble.”

“Great. That’s great.” Fisch jots the name down in ink. “And where does she live?”

“She resides at 140 Darwood Place. Hartsdale, New York 10530. How do I know these things? It seems impossible.”

“It’s not impossible,” Fisch tells you. “It’s innovation.”

“Innovation?”

“I’ve conjured this place as a space where the two of us can talk,” Fisch says. “It’s a new process I’ve engineered with the help of my team here at the company that I run in my world. You must have sensed by now that we come from different realities, Wilhelm. Yes? Well, this is a meeting ground between our worlds. A disturbance, as we like to call it. It’s got a little bit

from your world, and a little bit from mine, all mixed together momentarily so we can speak."

"Your world . . ." you say. "It's more vivid than mine. More *real*."

"In a sense, that's true," Fisch says. "But don't put your world down. Sure, I know things about what happens there that you can't see. But the same is true for you about my world. This is why I need you, Wilhelm. Why I sought you out. Because if I saw Erin Morrison walking down the street, she'd appear to me as just another girl. Unremarkable and camouflaged. Blended in with everything else. But because of your vantage point, she beams to you clear as day, her glow unmistakable."

"Why?" you ask. "Why does she glow for me?"

"Because she doesn't actually belong here in my world. So to you she sticks out like a sore thumb, transmits across realities like radar. It's very important that I locate all of the people like her, Wilhelm. I know you don't understand exactly, but this is what I need your help with. You've been chosen to provide a sacred service to both of our realities."

Fisch picks his pen back up, holds it at the ready.

"So tell me, have you seen anyone else who glowed like Erin Morrison?"

"No," you say. "She was the only one."

"Great," Fisch says. "Fantastic." He stands up from his desk. "Then that's all for today. We're done here, and you get to go meet your son."

He smiles at you, then puts his hand up as if there's one more thing he forgot to add.

"Oh, fair warning. This next entry's kind of a slog. Not the best in the franchise. But there's some really fun stuff coming up in the next few afterwards, so just stay tuned, okay?"

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SON OF CHIMOTERA! (1948)

LIFE BEGINS WITH A logo, and it feels familiar. Shouldn't the dawn of one's life be a time of wonder? Why does everything seem so immediately rote?

Another bolt of lightning strikes through the hole in your ceiling, resurrecting you once again.

You're back. You immediately set to work trying to resurrect your bride. But alas, her body is burned beyond repair. Luckily, though, before Marcela's death, you managed to extract samples from both of your loins in hopes of someday producing an heir. You don't actually have a memory of this happening, but apparently it did, so you just go along with it.

"Behold," you say as you flip a switch and power your progeny to life. "*The Son of Chimotera!*"

Lightning strikes yet again, and the boy awakens on your operating table. His name is Marshall, and he totally sucks. It's as if your son has been born with a preternatural ability to be really fucking annoying.

"Hello, Father!" Marshall says as he shuffles up from the operating table. "It's a true *fright* to make your acquaintance."

Why is he speaking like that? And why does everyone around you suddenly treat your son like he's the most fascinating person in the world? He chews scenery like he's at the buffet, hogging the spotlight. You begrudgingly accept that during this latest resurrection you're destined to be more of a supporting player in your own story. It's the Marshall show, through and through.

The boy, it occurs to you, is doing a bad impression of other, more iconic teen angst performances, sort of a C-rate monster version of Montgomery

Clift, but without any of the sex appeal or charisma. He's always going on long rants about how tormented he is. Every time you try to get a word in edgewise—try to get things back on track by going out on a hunt or brutalizing a train car of nuns—the boy cuts you off for another long monologue about his inner torment.

You know this overacting teenager is your blood and kin. Or at least that's what you've been told. But you find it hard to muster any emotion around him besides intense irritation. He sucks so bad. Your son is the most annoying person you've ever met.

Eventually the boy hatches a scheme to build a device to turn everyone in the village into monsters so they too can know his pain. Which strikes you as kind of a dumb plan, but by now you've learned not to argue with Marshall. You don't want to be subjected to another of his arduous monologues, so you kind of just go along with it.

On the eve of the device's unveiling, a mob of townsfolk break through your wooden door, knocking it off its latest set of hinges, and you almost want to tell them thank you, to ask, what took them so long.

"You infernal Homo sapiens!" Marshall growls as the mob torches your lab. "You will never know the burden I've carried through this life. Remember me. Remember Marshall, the Son of Chimotera!"

Everything goes up in flames. Sure, it hurts to die, but this time you withstand the anguish and wait for The End to finally arrive. Just before your last breath, you silently pray that if you do happen to be resurrected once again, that next time your son be left on the charred laboratory floor.

• • •

Fisch had been right. Your latest resurrection was, as he put it, "a slog."

Now you're back on the floor of your lab, back in full color. Marshall is gone. Which, thank god for small favors.

You pick yourself up and walk down the hill to the general store. As you approach, you find the establishment under new management. A recent expansion has more than doubled its size. A banner draped over the building reads "Grand Opening! Macy's Department Store."

In the window display, you spot several new television models for sale. "COLOR TV! YOU HAVE TO SEE IT TO BELIEVE IT!" There are about

a dozen sets sit in the window, each one tuned to a different channel, each one shimmering with its own broadcast. You remember that overwhelming feeling Erin Morrison's glow inspired in you the last time you peered through this window, how her mere presence sent you far away to the floor of a rest stop bathroom in another reality more vivid than you'd ever experienced before. *Fisch's reality.*

You look at the different screens in the window display. Each one plays a recording of a different glowing person. But none of them glow nearly as brightly as Erin Morrison did. As you look from screen to screen, you discover that just like last time, you can conjure the names and locations of each new person you see, as if the information becomes available in your brain the moment you glimpse each face.

"You're watching Pink Eye TV," the voice from one screen says. And the moment you see her, you know it's Chloe Edmonds from Allen Park, Michigan.

You memorize all of the names and addresses of the faces on the screen. And then you continue down the road towards the grand movie palace. You keep the knowledge you've just acquired top of mind. You know Fisch will ask for it, and you understand your role in this arrangement better now. *You're his informant.*

• • •

"She lives in Michigan. Forty-four Lake Drive Place in Allen Park. Her family is religious, but she doesn't believe in any of that. Her eye . . . her left eye is quite red. Likely from conjunctivitis."

Fisch listens to you. He takes notes on a keyboard ("keyboard," "computer," more new terms flood your brain the moment you see the invention for the first time).

"This is good intel, Wilhelm," Fisch says. "And did she have a glow to her?"

"Yes. Not as bright as the last one, but bright. The brightest of all those I saw on this trip."

"Perfect," Fisch says as he finishes typing. "This is perfect."

You notice that Fisch is seated in a new leather chair today. He's changed offices once more since the two of you last met. He tells you he has a new

job title now—that he's started his own company. Your work together has been so successful, he brags, that now he's a "CEO."

He speaks to you as if you're old friends. You are feeling less enthusiastic about him. Fisch senses your distance almost immediately. He can tell that something has been eating away at you.

"What's wrong, buddy?" he asks you.

"It's nothing," you say.

"It's Marshall, isn't it? I'm sorry. I tried to warn you. Your kid was a dud, but there's a lot to look forward to coming up, just as I promised."

"No. It is not my oaf of a son that is troubling me."

"Then what?" Fisch asks. "Come on, Wilhelm. You can tell me anything. I'm here to help you, just like you're here to help me."

"Erin Morrison," you say. The name lingers in the air.

"I see."

"I just . . . I want to know, what happened to her? Did you find her?"

"Yes. Thanks to the information you provided, we were able to locate her and get her the help she needs. She's safe now."

You remain silent. You think about the violence you rained down on that girl in the rest stop bathroom.

"It was a very important tip, Wilhelm. You've helped us a great deal. And you've helped Erin Morrison, too. I promise."

"I don't think so. In fact, I fear it's quite the opposite. I believe I massacred her."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"There's something I didn't tell you," you admit. "The last time I was here in this place where we meet, when I saw Erin Morrison's face on the screen, I went somewhere else. For just a moment. I think I went . . . to your world."

"What?" Fisch asks. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," you say. "I was overtaken with ecstasy by the brilliance of that glow, and I was transported to some kind of . . . highway rest stop bathroom. Erin Morrison was there, and then my animal instincts took over. I attacked. I fear I might have killed her."

“Fascinating,” Fisch says, then catches himself. “She did survive, Wilhelm. Don’t worry. She’s fine. I promise.”

You stare up at the man. You feel unsure whether to trust him.

“But this is fascinating,” Fisch says. “Kind of unprecedented, honestly. What you experienced, it must have been a disturbance between worlds. I told you about those, right? You actually willed yourself across realities. It sounds like you weren’t quite corporeal, but otherwise you fully crossed over into my world, even if just for a second. That’s hardcore! I honestly had no idea you had that in you.”

You rise from your seat.

“Before this goes any further,” you demand, “I must know the truth. You tell me I’m helping the universe by giving you this information you ask for, but you’ve revealed nothing to me about how or why. I must know more if you want me to keep serving as your accomplice. What do you need these names for? Why must you locate the people who glow?”

Fisch looks around his office. He bites his lip, then nods at you.

“Okay. Fair enough. You’re right. I’ve asked you to help me, and you deserve to know why. It’s a long and boring story, but let me think how I can . . . are you familiar with string theory?”

Your confusion is plain to see.

“Okay,” Fisch says. “Not invented yet. That makes sense. Let me think . . . how about this: Have you ever played with crayons?”

“Crayons?”

“Yeah. Crayons. Crayola’s been invented by now in your world, right?”

“I know crayons. Though I’m not sure I’ve ever personally played with __”

“But you know what happens when you mix crayons together, right?” Fisch asks. “Like for instance if you had a red crayon and a yellow crayon and you colored one on top of the other, what color would it make?”

“Orange . . .” you say. “Is this a trick?”

“No, that’s right, that’s exactly right. Red and yellow mixed together make orange. But now picture a big Crayola box filled with tons of crayons. All of them different colors.”

“How many?”

“It doesn’t matter. A thousand. No, let’s say a million.”

“That’s too many crayons to fit in a single box,” you protest.

“Calm down,” Fisch says. “Calm down, buddy, just go with me here. Can you imagine a million crayons? Just try.”

“Yes,” you say. “Though the thought displeases me.”

“Well, that’s how many different worlds there are. More, even. There’s my world. Your world. And all of these different worlds out there, like a million different crayon colors. Are you following me so far?”

“I believe so.”

“Well, sometimes these crayons mix, right? Like red and yellow make orange, or when my world bumps up against your world, we get this meeting-ground world. We’re making a new color, get it?”

You nod.

“It happens all the time, and usually it’s harmless. Let me think of another example. Have you met Abbott and Costello yet?”

You’ve never heard such foolish names in your entire life. You shake your head.

“Right, right,” Fisch says. “That makes sense. They’re still to come. But you’ll meet them soon. And when you do, try to remember—that’s another distortion between worlds. Another example of two colors mixing together in the crayon box. And there will be others. You’ll meet Dracula and the Wolf Man soon, and it’ll be the same deal. Harmless fun. A few crayons blended together in a way that’s perfectly safe. Now, though—” Fisch’s expression darkens. “Imagine that someone took every single crayon out of that giant box and colored one on top of the other, a million times over. Do you know what would happen? Do you know what color you’d get?”

You remain silent. The question perplexes you.

“You wouldn’t get orange, that’s for sure,” Fisch says. “You wouldn’t get purple or green or pink. Eventually, if you mix enough of those crayons one on top of another, you’re going to get the color brown. A dull, murky brown. And you know what else, Wilhelm? No matter how many other crayons you add to the mix after that to try and change it, that brown isn’t going anywhere. Once you get the color brown, there’s no going back.”

“Okay,” you say. “I understand. But what is the point you are trying to make?”

“The point is, if you don’t feed me the names of the people you see glowing on those screens—if I don’t find them and bring them to their proper place—then pretty soon, the boundaries between all those worlds will start breaking down, and before you know it, the whole entire universe will become the cosmic equivalent of that murky brown color. Your world. My world. And a million others, too, all smooshed on top of one another into the same brown. And there’s no going back from that, because once you get brown, it’s all you’re ever going to get.”

“How do you know this? The scientist in me must know, what is your proof?”

“I’m sorry,” Fisch says. “This I can’t tell you. There are some things that I’m not allowed to share, for all of our security. But please trust me. What I’m telling you is very real, and I’ve been shown the kind of proof with my own eyes that would make a true believer out of anyone.”

You think for some time. Your expression softens, but you’re still not sure that you can trust the story this man named Fisch is telling you.

“Perhaps this brown you speak of is the natural state of all things,” you say. “If it requires intervention to stop from occuring, perhaps it is natural.”

“Come on, Wilhelm,” Fisch says. He leans across his desk. “I know you don’t mean that. That’s your internalized shame again. Look, *Son of Chimotera!* stunk. I’ll be the first to admit it. I hated Marshall. Everyone hated Marshall. He’s worse than Scrappy-Doo. But your franchise course-corrects quickly, retcons him fresh out of existence. You never have to see him again. I know you’re a creature of destruction, but trust me, not this kind. Not what we’re talking about here. I know that deep down you don’t want everything to end. I know you want to live again.”

“Then tell me,” you say. “Tell me what’s next. What else is there to look forward to in this life that’s already ended three times before?”

“So much,” Fisch says. “So many incredible things. Wonders and thrills the likes of which you’ve never imagined. I’ll tell you, and then you’ll see for yourself. *Feel* for yourself. But first . . .” Fisch settles back into his seat. He stretches his fingers out over the keyboard of his computer console.

“I need you to tell me. Was there anyone else? Do you have any more names and addresses I should know about?”

CHIMOTERA! MEETS ABBOTT AND COSTELLO
(1949)

THE CURSE OF CHIMOTERA!
(1953)

DRACULA AND THE WOLF MAN MEET CHIMOTERA!
(1955)

CHIMOTERA VS. THE ROAD RAGING MOTORCYCLE GANG
(1956)

THE HOUSE OF CHIMOTERA
(1958)

CHIMOTERA: HEIR TO TERROR
(1960)

CHIMOTERA'S EUROPEAN RAMPAGE
(1963)

CHIMOTERA!: THE FINAL CHAPTER
(1964)

CHIMOTERA!: A NEW BEGINNING
(1967)

THE BRIDE OF CHIMOTERA RETURNS!
(1968)

CHIMOTERA'S VELVET LABORATORY
(1971)

THE DEATH OF CHIMOTERA!
(1973)

CHIMOTERA: REBIRTH
(1978)

CHIMOTERA JAPAN
(1982)

CHIMOTERA: ORIGINS
(1986)

CHIMOTERA TAKES MANHATTAN
(1988)

CHIMOTERA IN SPACE!
(1993)

THE MAN NAMED FISCH had not been lying.

Your adventures are numerous. Your reign seemingly endless. Soon you lose count of the number of times you have died.

Your journey cuts across eras. Your origin story is invented then reinvented over and over again, growing convoluted and ever more complex. It's impossible to keep track of the details, even for you who are living through it.

At one point, a witch reveals to you that you are Satan's grandson. You go to hell and meet the devil. It's red and fiery down there, but in a cheap, straight-to-video sort of way. And then, after another death and subsequent resurrection, suddenly this entire far-fetched episode is forgotten, as if it never even happened. You're just Chimotera again, back to basics. No witch, no Satan's grandson, just a former scientist turning into a half-bat, half-man like the good old days.

The most frustrating part of it all is that as you live through each new chapter of your life, you can never grasp the complete picture, the true circumstances of your continued existence. You always forget the bargain you've made with the man named Fisch when you're not in the meeting-ground world you share with him. Only there, in that liminal space you return to between each chapter in your endless existence, can you see your many lives for what they really are: a jumble of contrivances.

Life begins to feel like an overlong play that's haphazardly written and rewritten between acts. You meet your bride again eventually, but just as Fisch had warned, she's not the same. When you look at her now, you see no resemblance to the Marcela you once knew. The two of you remarry, then kill each other again, then do it once more just for good measure. You rehash your former glories, but the initial flame is long gone.

Even your hunts begin to feel joyless. You feast on blood, shred vertebrae, because that's what your body knows to do. You terrorize the countryside (several countrysides, too many countrysides), but you can't even take joy in killing these days. You're phoning it in. You can no longer conjure the passion that defined your younger years. Its absence torments you.

Through it all, you continue to feed the man named Fisch the information he desires. You tell him the names of the glowing people you see outside Macy's each time you return to your meeting ground between realities. There are hundreds of faces you've seen now. You always know their names and their addresses just by looking at them. You rattle the information off like an informant, an interdimensional spy. You don't put up a fight.

Fisch continues to talk to you each time you meet like the two of you are old friends. He can tell you're growing more withdrawn with each visit, and he takes it upon himself to try and cheer you up. He asks you questions about your most recent resurrection. He always knows exactly what's happened to you back in your own world between your meetings. He even seems to find your misadventures entertaining. All the while his office grows bigger, the accolades on his mantel more numerous.

You nod politely and feed Fisch the names he requires. Because despite what this man might want you to think, you know that the two of you are not actually friends. That at the end of the day, all the man on the screen truly wants from you are those names and addresses. You begin to suspect that he's keeping you alive just to get them. That it's the only reason you even still exist.

You grow depressed. Everything feels familiar and rote, yet none of it makes sense. Your life is a sequel to a sequel, a copy of a copy, eternally growing ever more distant from its original spark.

• • •

Who are you? There's that question again that has been eating at you since your very first death. Since you became sentient enough to pose it.

You were a man. A scientist. And then you were a beast. A fearsome monster. And that's what you still are today. And yet . . . you're not the same you. You're constantly changing. Now when you gaze at yourself in your cracked laboratory mirror, you're filled with a sense of dread at your appearance. Were you not thinner during your last life? Didn't you once have a British accent?

This isn't just the normal ravages of age. No, the changes you're experiencing are deeper, more disorienting. You feel like an unconscious shapeshifter, like you're tumbling through a series of different bodies, like you've become a succession of new actors inhabiting the same worn costume.

Your world is changing, too. At first it seems a blessing. Sometime after you meet Abbott and Costello (oafish jesters), you wake back up on your laboratory floor, back in your own world, and everything is in color rather than black and white. But this color lacks the same richness as that meeting ground you share with Fisch. Even as you evolve from Technicolor to 4K, even as your life's resolution increases in vividness, the memory of Fisch's reality continues to vastly outshine your own. You find yourself thinking constantly about that brief unfiltered glimpse of his world you experienced a long time ago, in that rest stop bathroom when you attacked Erin Morrison, the very first person you saw glow on the screen.

In that place where Fisch lived, reality wasn't written and rewritten on a whim. A man could always remember the name and location of the town where he lived. Could recall his childhood as it actually happened, not as an incomplete series of flashbacks and vague vignettes. There was no 1080p or 2040p fidelity. There was no film or digital. Color or black and white. There was just *reality.* Sensuous, indelible reality.

You long for this other place—for Fisch's world—for a level of real you only experienced for a few seconds a very long time ago. Each time you walk into the electronics section of Macy's now, you hope to glimpse a transmission as bright and effervescent as Erin Morrison. You pray someday to return to Fisch's realm, to be transported out of this purgatory of

abandoned department stores and endless resurrections. Perhaps, next time, for good.

• • •

A great jealousy begins to consume you. Why does the man on the screen get to live in that brighter world when you're only allowed to sample a diluted taste of it every so often in this meeting-ground between death and resurrection? It feels unfair. Resentment brews. After a particularly joyless outing in the Italian countryside, you finally dare to bring the question up to the man on the screen.

"None of them burned too bright," you tell Fisch after you feed him the names he requires. "They never burn as bright as that first person I saw. As Erin Morrison."

"Beginner's luck," Fisch says. He seems pleased you're engaging in conversation today rather than sulking in your usual melancholy. These days he's been broadcasting to you from home, from a personal movie theater he's had built specifically so he can talk to you without commuting to the office.

"Not everyone is going to emit as powerful a signal as Erin Morrison. That's a rare occurrence, and honestly, it's for the best. You don't have to worry about it. If someone's transmission is bright enough to make it all the way to your world, trust me, they're powerful enough to help our cause."

"Yes, but . . ." You look down at the ground, trying to hide how important this conversation is to you. "Do you think I'll ever see someone as bright as Erin Morrison again? Or . . . even brighter, perhaps?"

"Wait," Fisch says. He grows immediately alarmed. "Have you? Wilhelm, did you see someone brighter than Erin Morrison?"

You shake your head. "No," you tell him.

"You're not lying to me, right?"

"No," you say again. "It's just a question that's been on my mind for some time."

"Okay, well, listen. And I hope it never comes to this, but if you do ever see someone that bright again, I need you to run right here as fast as you can and tell me. Erin Morrison, she was . . . honestly, she was risky. Almost

too bright. I would have handled her differently, but my brother got to her first. If you do ever see someone brighter than that, it could be very dangerous . . .” Fisch slows down. You realize you’ve never seen him frightened before. “It could be you’ve discovered someone we here in the office call *the receiver*,” Fisch says. “This is tantamount to our shared mission, Wilhelm, that a person like this be identified immediately. The fate of both our worlds—of every single world—depends on it.”

Good, you think to yourself. *Burn them all. Your world, my world, every world in this wretched universe. If this is existence, let it burn. Light it on fire like an angry mob in a laboratory.* But of course you don’t say any of that to the man on the screen, this man who claims to be your friend but whom you’ve come to understand more as your prison warden. You simply nod in feigned obedience.

“I understand,” you say. You get up from your seat and leave the theater.

• • •

As you walk back to your laboratory on the hill, you reflect on how much this meeting-ground world you share with Fisch has changed. How little it bears any resemblance to the quaint village you first arrived in many eons ago.

The grand movie palace where you used to meet Fisch closed between *Chimotera!: The Final Chapter* and *Chimotera!: A New Beginning*. It’s been replaced by a multiplex. There are eighteen screens now. The romance of the place traded in for cartoon stars on the carpet and blue Icees behind the concession.

Macy’s recently closed as well, just like Murray’s Old General before it. In its place, your town has built a shopping mall called the Galleria. Now you have to take two escalators up to the third floor then walk past Hot Topic and Auntie Anne’s to see the faces on the screen that Fisch requires from you. They’re always waiting in a dungeon called Circuit City. Screens stacked on top of one another. Yellow and green price tags everywhere. Labor Day and Memorial Day sales, Presidents’ Day sales and *oh my god get me out of here.*

This meeting ground between worlds, you realize, is depressed, just like you are. You’re both caught in the same cycle of slow deterioration. An

endless descent with no final destination, regenerating over and over again into the same essential form, but drained a little more each time of whatever magic might have existed once long ago at the origin point.

Everything on a loop, cascading down towards an absent bottom.

• • •

There is just one hope you're holding on to that powers you through these endless cycles. *Erin Morrison on a rest stop bathroom floor.* That brief taste of Fisch's world you experienced a long time ago. A world of true sentience.

If you could be reborn there, just once, after so many deaths and resurrections, you would truly, finally, be able to live. To experience something real, not just a bad replica of reality.

So you push forward, sleepwalking through your artificial life—through *so many artificial lives*—in the hope that one day you might once again glimpse a face so bright it steals you away.

And then, finally, after a very long time, your wish comes true. Her name is Bethany Peters.

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CHIMOTERA! ’99
(1999)

A GROUP OF ALTERNATIVE rock fans buys your long-abandoned laboratory and converts it into a youth-hostel-slash-music-venue. They find your remains in the cellar and decide the bones would make a really cool stage decoration. They inadvertently resurrect you via an amplifier malfunction during a set by the band Coal Chamber. You make quick work of them all. Soon the ceiling is dripping with blood and black mascara.

Whatever. It doesn’t matter. It’s already forgotten the moment it’s over.

• • •

When you return to the meeting-ground world, you discover that Circuit City has closed.

The mall has fallen into disrepair. It too is deteriorating, just like everything else before it. Just like everything here eventually does. You wouldn’t be surprised if it’s entirely vacant by your next visit, finally put out to pasture by the signs you’ve seen on kiosks advertising “e-commerce.”

You search the mall directory for a suitable replacement. You settle on a place called Best Buy. You suspect before long it too will be foreclosed, just like all the other stores before it. But for now, for your purposes, it will do, because surely there will be plenty of screens.

You never make it to Best Buy, because as you step off the escalator, you discover that the advertisements up and down the corridor have been updated since you were here last, from posters printed on paper to electronic video screens. The screens are everywhere now, spreading like a cancer, transmitting moving picture advertisements up and down the

walkway like a shrunken version of those billboards you remember from your rampage through Times Square in *Chimotera Takes Manhattan*.

Today, this morning, every single screen in the mall is broadcasting the very same video. You stand by the escalator, mouth agape. You are Moses glimpsing the burning bush.

It's *her.* The one you've been waiting for. The one who glows with a brightness that might shatter the bounds of every screen in every world. You know her name and location the moment you set eyes on her transmission.

She's Bethany Peters. Her voice echoes through the empty mall.

"*I'm telling myself the story of my life,*" she says. "*I'm telling myself the story of my life.*"

The glow emanating from each screen is blinding. It swallows you like a fire in your lab. You let it overtake you.

This is the moment you've been waiting for through so many arduous eras. As you feel yourself finally leaving this meeting-ground place, you train your mind on one single goal. You try to commune with the power of Bethany Peters's glow. "Take me there," you beg. "Take me to the other place. The real world. Fisch's world."

You think of him then: your self-appointed master. Fisch with his faux humbleness, his small talk, and his home theater, his barely concealed pride in that CEO title. You think of it all, and you feel a great anger rising in you.

You realize too late that you've made a mistake. In shifting your focus from the glow in front of you to the man who's held you hostage for so long, it's as if you've redirected your pathway. As the glow fades and you're transported to new surroundings, you realize you're suddenly on top of Anthony Fischer himself, clawing and tearing at his clothing, ripping the man's insides out, fangs bared, lifetimes of bottled-up rage pouring out like a burst hydrant.

"Buddy!" Fisch says, his tone smug even while you gut him. "Buddy! This is a disturbance. You're having an episode."

The words are enough to break the spell. And then just like last time, you're gone as quickly as you arrived. You leave Fisch's world behind once again having sampled only the briefest taste of its glory. Its realness.

And then you're back in the mall. The screens that a moment ago broadcast Bethany Peters's message now transmit advertisements for

Levi’s.

You’re still trapped. You’ll always be trapped.

• • •

You promise yourself that you’ll never tell Fisch what you’ve seen. On your walk from the mall to the multiplex, you vow to keep Bethany Peters and her brilliant glow your own personal secret.

When you arrive at Regal Cinemas, you discover that recent renovations have installed luxury chairs, 4DX motion sensors, even dinner tables built into each seat. Now you can eat fried chicken and drink liquor-infused milkshakes while you talk to your prison warden.

“See? Was that so hard?” the man on the screen asks you. “Thankfully, you’re still not quite corporeal in this realm. At least not enough to actually disembowel me. But I’ve gotta say, my feelings are a little hurt. Is that what you want to do to me, Wilhelm?”

“I’m sorry,” you say. “My reveries—sometimes they get the best of me, and then the monster inside takes command.”

“Wilhelm, what happened?”

“What do you mean?” You try to play dumb.

“You haven’t had a disturbance like that since you saw Erin Morrison. What triggered it this time?”

“I don’t know,” you lie.

Fisch studies your face. You try not to break.

“Wilhelm,” Fisch says. “Tell me what you saw. This is very important.”

You clench yourself tight. You won’t say a word. You prepare to withstand any interrogation or torture the man on the screen might devise.

“Did you see someone who glowed as brightly as Erin Morrison? Did you see the person we talked about once? Did you see *the receiver*?”

There is alarm once again in Fisch’s voice. You remain silent in your leather chair.

“Wilhelm,” he says, “I’ve always been straight with you. I’ve answered every question you’ve ever asked me truthfully. I’ve treated you like a friend, done my best to guide you . . . to be there with you through your

journey. And the work we do together . . . I know perhaps you've grown disillusioned with it. I've noticed your mood. But this is not a drill. What we do here matters, and if you don't tell me what you saw, the ramifications will be colossal. Utterly permanent."

"And so what?" you say, rising from your seat. You didn't intend to reveal your anger, but you can't bottle it anymore. "So what if it was all to end? No more resurrections, no more angry mobs lighting me on fire. Perhaps I am ready for an end. *A real end.*"

"You did see someone," Fisch says. "The one who burns brighter than any other. The receiver. You saw them. Wilhelm. I need you to—"

"I believe I'm done doing what you tell me I need to do," you say. "I don't know if you've noticed, but this reality—*my* reality—it's pretty much sucked for a very long time."

"Is this about *Chimotera! '99*?" Fisch asks. "I know that one was a misstep. And *Chimotera in Space!* was . . . well, a big miscalculation as well. But don't blame me. Blame the straight-to-video market. That won't be a problem anymore. It's the streaming era now. The studio is putting together a whole new Dark Universe with all the classic monsters, and you're up first. It's going to be high-end. Guillermo del Toro directing. I've read the script, and it's a return to form. A reimagining of your origin story for the post-MeToo era. Jessica Chastain is going to play your bride, and—"

"STOP IT!" you roar. "For decades now, centuries, you've been promising me that things will get better. But it never happens. Everything just stays exactly the same, except somehow it also gets a little bit worse."

"Is that how you really feel?" the CEO asks. "You really want this all to end? Our arrangement? Our friendship? Both of our worlds?"

"We have never been friends," you tell the CEO.

He doesn't speak. He seems hurt.

"I didn't know this was how you felt," he says eventually.

You remain quiet. You hold your gaze. You remind yourself not to break.

"I chose you," Fisch says. "Did you know that? I'm not sure you remember—you were very young then—but I told you once, the first time we met. My father used to show me your movies when I was just a child. He loved them when he was young. He first saw them during the war, and then he passed them down to me. That's your legacy, and it means

something to people. It means something to *me*. I was just a child when I saw you for the first time, and it felt magical. *You* were magical."

Fisch taps on his armchair. You sit still, a hostage withstanding questioning.

"You're hardly the most famous of the classic monsters," Fisch says. "You have to know that, right? You've met Dracula and the Wolf Man. You probably know about the Mummy and Frankenstein, too. Your franchise is . . . it's a relic, second-tier IP. I think anyone would agree with that. And yet thanks to me, you're going to kick off the new Dark Universe! Do you know why? Because I am a very powerful man. I could have tried to form a connection with Dracula, or with Frankenstein, but I chose *you*. I gave *you* sentience. I lifted you up above your station and offered you a mission that actually means something. I tried to be your friend because I cared about you."

Fisch stands up.

"But fine, I can tell when I'm not wanted. And I can grant your wish. Easily. I can erase you from the slate by the start of business tomorrow with just a few phone calls. If that's what you really want, consider it done. And there will be no more angry mobs. No more origin stories, no more anything. You'll be erased, permanently. From the cultural memory, from existence, from *everything*. Dead IP. Dormant property. *My* dormant property. Is that what you want, Wilhelm? Is that what you're asking me for? Because I really am your friend, and I'm happy to grant you that wish, and then I'll find another monster to help me who isn't such a sad fucking sack."

You sit in your armchair and breathe the stale stench of popcorn, old Dr Pepper grown sticky on the floor. You don't doubt the man's threats. Everything Fisch has ever told you has come to pass, so you have no reason to believe that now, suddenly, he's bluffing.

Fisch is offering you exactly what you've wanted for so long. The great man has accepted your resignation, and now very soon, perhaps as soon as your connection severs and the lights in this multiplex come back on, you'll be gone. Really, finally gone. And not in the temporary way you've been gone so many times before. Gone for good.

The CEO moves to depart his home theater. He flips on the lights on his side of the screen. Your heart races, because you now realize these will

likely be your final moments of existence. You remind yourself that this is what you've always wanted, that this is what you begged for just minutes ago: an end to endlessness, to all the remakes and reboots that failed to recapture the spark of the original. It's time. It has to end eventually. You're overdue, ready finally to really die.

Then you think of Bethany. Of Erin. Of Marcela on her picnic blanket by the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts, giggling on a day that maybe only ever existed in a flashback. Nostalgia floods your body like fat clogging an artery.

You're a coward. You know it, and Fisch, the man on the screen, of course he knows it as well. You don't actually want to die. Not forever. Not like that. He saw it in you before you had any clue. Just like always, Fisch knew you better than you knew yourself.

"Wait," you say.

Fisch pauses by the door. He turns around.

"I'll tell you who I saw. Because I am weak. I'll tell you, so that things might go on."

Fisch waits a few moments. Then he sighs.

"I'm sorry, Wilhelm. It's been a stressful week. Board meetings and all that. I don't like talking to you this way. I really do care about you."

He dims the lights to his home theater back down, walks over to his chair, and smiles his CEO smile.

"Now," he says, "tell me what you've seen."

You do what the man on the screen asks. As you tell him everything, you sense that your life is only just beginning. You're a franchise, and you're not going anywhere. You'll be rebooted and remade, resurrected and killed again for decades to come. Centuries. Millennia. Forever.

You tell the man on the screen the name of the girl who glows brighter than any before her. The girl who finally might have delivered you somewhere real if you hadn't botched the opportunity. And as you tell him everything, you accept your fate once and for all.

You are never getting out of this place.

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EPISODE NINE

ONE-WAY MIRROR

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2:49 A.M.

ON NIGHTS IN THE desert when he can't sleep, David Sawyer likes to consider this one morbid thought experiment. What if, long after death, his mind kept on living inside his body? Even once his heart stopped, after his physical brain functioning had ceased, what if, somehow, David remained inside himself? The same person, still conscious, still perfectly coherent, just now trapped forever in a broken vessel, stuck in endless, irreversible paralysis.

David imagines how it would feel. Trying to call out to the coroner from the table in the morgue, longing to shout to his pallbearers as he was lowered into his grave. *No! Please don't leave me! I'm still here! I don't want to be alone.*

But it wouldn't work. Because David would finally, really be powerless, his mind no longer capable of moving his lips. Then the people who loved him most would bury him in the soil, and he'd be down there forever. An eternity stuck underground, locked inside the most solitary of confinements.

How many years would it take before David forgot his own name? Before he went completely insane trapped in that box? A hundred years? A thousand? Or would it happen immediately? The very moment he realized the secret fate that had been waiting for him all his life—how after death he wasn't going anywhere. Because there'd never been any heaven or hell, not even an ending like the atheists were banking on. How, actually, all there was to look forward to after death was a final, never-ending *being alone.*

What then? What if, even after decomposition, after the coffin's pine began to break down and blend back into the earth, David was still inside himself? Still perfectly awake, his body now a decomposing box inside another decomposing box, lacking the ability to ever truly cease.

He imagines how deeply he would start to fetishize his time above, those brief glory years before his eternal paralysis began. Back in that era when

he'd been too naïve to realize that what he was experiencing in life up above was the shortest of anomalies, the most extreme case of beginner's luck possible. Back when, for a little while, David had been capable of moving his arms, shouting words that someone else might actually hear and understand, touching skin to someone else's skin and feeling a shared sensation.

They say youth is wasted on the young. Well, in David's morbid little thought experiment, life is wasted on the living. And how has David spent his? Staring at screens. Sending girls to hell.

• • •

Late tonight, after everyone's settled back in from Austin, after Douglas is tied up in the barracks and Bethany's locked away in her pantry, David slips through the window of the night out into the desert. The coming hours will be crucial, and this might be his last opportunity to grab some alone time. To set foot outside his surveillance center, zoom out, and take full stock of the battle to come. He walks about half a mile through the sand, enjoying the sensation of a million tiny grains passing between his toes. He puts distance between himself and his bunker, watches as his little home in the desert shrinks into the distance, becomes a small white glow against an otherwise endless darkness.

Tonight, David doesn't just want to think about his thought experiment about what might happen after death. He wants to *feel* it. To convince his brain, even just for a second, that it's true. It's a masochistic impulse, but David suspects that if he can trick himself into really believing it, the shock will be stabilizing. Kind of orienting in a horrific way, like those old fantasies he used to cling to in high school about his life turning into a horror movie at any second. It's a way for David to push back against the anticlimax of a reality that's always felt disappointing. His morbid fantasy is comforting precisely because of its discomfort. *Take down your smoke screen, world. Show me your true nature, because I know it can't just be this.*

Once David's walked far out enough into the darkness, he closes his eyes. He tries to forget his body. To grasp how this particular form he inhabits, these specific surroundings—his little den of screens out here in

the desert—how it's really all just a mirage. A brief rest stop on the highway to permanent darkness. To eternal confinement.

He imagines himself as the only soul alive for a hundred miles. Then as an astronaut flung to the coldest reaches of deep space, marooned on the surface of a dark, distant planet. He feels the claustrophobia. He imagines being truly subsumed into darkness. And soon he becomes that corpse underground, unable to move or shout or make contact with anyone else ever again.

It works. For just a second, he tricks his brain into believing the fantasy. He feels the fear as if it's real, the unfathomable powerlessness. It's a momentary catch of panic that overrides everything else. A loss of control, like the first drop on a roller coaster after a long, clanking journey upwards. The feeling is startling, no matter how much David's anticipated it. Because for just a moment, he really believes himself to be permanently trapped. Alone, buried under the magic lantern of the night. *Lost somewhere in the cinematic universe,* as Erin Morrison once put it.

And then David calls himself back to his body. He reminds himself that this was all just practice. Just a morbid thought experiment to recenter before the battle ahead. His life isn't over, not quite yet. At least for a little while longer, David's still aboveground tonight, still in control of this vessel, still connected to a larger grid.

He lets the calm of actual reality restabilize him in his body. He loves this feeling, but only because all of the other feelings that come before it suck so bad.

He walks across the sand back to his surveillance center, his little outpost on the edge of the American West, out past the graveyard of Los Alamos, where those scientists built their bombs and ran their experiments back during the war. David returns to his flickering lighthouse in the desert. He lets the familiar swell of static and white noise usher him inside.

There are thirty-two screens in here total. Screens of all sizes and types, including the biggest one, that special flat-screen wired underground to tap into the faraway Conductor, one of those scientists' old experiments buried miles underneath the sands of Los Alamos. The static on that particular screen has always blared a little brighter than all the rest. The fidelity comes through a little crisper. It's the screen where David is most likely these days

to catch a glimpse of Erin Morrison's static apparition. A disturbance on the analog airwaves.

There's a little mattress on the floor in the center of the room where David likes to sit and feel surrounded by static, where he can get really pummeled. To David, such an onslaught feels like the exact opposite of his little thought experiment about being trapped in an eternity of darkness. In here, there's only pulsing light. A nonstop, eternal everything. He remembers a riddle Fran once asked down in the basement of his old high school. The AV dungeon back in Hartsdale. *What never stops moving but always remains static?* And then, the answer, of course: *static itself.*

David perches on the mattress and crosses his legs. He picks up the smallest screen in the room, the little laptop waiting for him there. The only screen in his surveillance center not currently blaring empty fuzz.

Tonight David knows he won't be sleeping. He has far too much to do. GlobalVill will surely be making contact soon, finally forcing the long belated crescendo of David's lifetime of anticlimax.

He lets his eyes refocus on the pixelated image on his screen. Bethany Peters in her locked pantry across camp. It's not an ideal hiding spot, but it's the best David's team could whip up on short notice. A nondescript windowless cell that locks from the outside. Where hopefully very soon, the girl he brought back with him from Austin will cease to exist. And if she doesn't? If Bethany Peters still hasn't crossed over to Public Access Afterworld before morning? Well, then GlobalVill.com will almost certainly come knocking, and David and everyone else here at his compound will finally get to find out once and for all if his morbid little thought experiment has any basis in reality.

Please, David thinks, psychically channeling his urgency to Bethany through the screen. *Please hurry up. They'll be here soon, and then all of this—my life's work—will have been for nothing.*

He keeps watching the girl on his laptop. Static ping-pongs all around him, bouncing off the thirty-one other screens in his surveillance center, whispering to David in a language that, even after all these years, he still doesn't understand.

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2010

DAVID TOUCHED DOWN AT DTW on a snowy November night.

He'd never been to Michigan before. He felt crazy actually coming here. He almost couldn't believe he'd done it, bought a plane ticket and flown all the way to Detroit. But he'd promised himself to *make it real*, just like Erin had said once in her transmission.

He told his parents he was going to meet a friend from the internet. Which in a sense was true. They didn't ask too many questions. He suspected they were just happy to see him getting out of the house, turning off that old analog television set he'd moved permanently from the attic into his bedroom. Or maybe they were just relieved to have him out of their hair for a couple days. A short reprieve from life inhabiting the same four walls as a suspected murderer.

Erin had been gone for over a year now. Recently, there was a candlelight vigil at the gazebo in the park to mark the one-year anniversary of her disappearance. David attended, even though he knew he probably shouldn't. He lingered at the back of the crowd and tried to make himself inconspicuous, but he could still feel eyes on him the whole time. He knew how it looked—him showing up all unshaven and disheveled to mourn the missing girl most people in the park that night were convinced he'd killed.

Erin's body had never been recovered. But it was no secret around town that David was the primary suspect. Entire websites were dedicated to compiling evidence against him, positing an accumulating timeline of David's certain guilt: his fight with Erin in the hallway at school the week before homecoming, those bruises on his neck the night of her disappearance. And of course, his ongoing internet uploads, those deranged screeds about supernatural television broadcasts and secret alternate dimensions.

The evidence had all been too circumstantial for an actual arrest to be made. But the court of public opinion was another matter. It was near unanimous online and off: Whatever horrible fate had befallen Erin Morrison, former future valedictorian, David Sawyer was certainly to blame.

• • •

High school ended. David barely noticed. He attended graduation just to get his diploma. Someone in the crowd shouted, “Murderer!” as he crossed the stage, but he didn’t take it personally. He just wanted the ceremony to be over so he could get back home, back to his analog television, back to monitoring the static.

“Jim Davis” was gone. David had tried to explain the man’s role in everything to the police, and they had almost laughed him out of the interrogation room. O. J. Simpson had a more believable patsy. All traces of Jim had been scrubbed from the internet. The school where the man had once worked as a guidance counselor had no address on file. “Jim Davis,” whoever he really was, was long gone. Probably in another town somewhere else, searching for his next victim. The next tape in his collection. The next photo on his wall.

Those nightly static broadcasts from Public Access Afterworld had stopped the moment Erin disappeared. For months after the homecoming dance, David couldn’t catch any trace of a signal on the analog feed he monitored each night. Public Access Afterworld was shuttered. It had been beaming through the static for Erin’s eyes only, just as Jim had told them. It wasn’t interested in David. It swallowed up the person it really wanted, and then it moved on. Just like the Auxiliaries, all graduated and off to college after senior year. Just like “Jim,” whoever he really was. Just like Erin, lost to that faraway realm where David couldn’t ever hope to follow.

He kept watching. He kept the faith because it was all he could do to calm his guilt: the aching part that missed his best friend, and the rotten part, too, that felt responsible for her fate.

Public Access Afterworld might not be interested in him, but David refused to be deterred. He was going to track down the signal, if only by sheer force of will.

He spent more time online now, laptop balanced on his belly in bed. TheUncannyValley web board was mostly vacant these days. It was 2010 and the internet was changing, evolving once again. The social media era had arrived, and now David launched his own web presence. Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, Tumblr posts, all pointing to private forums. He moderated these hidden spaces, banned the trolls who were convinced he was a murderer, and focused on his true believers. *On his work.* He built an audience, uploading hours of recordings to public sites like YouTube and GlobalVill, vlogs where he shared evidence about what had really happened to Erin. He proselytized to anyone willing to listen.

David wasn't proud of the audience that flocked to his channels and message boards. They were mostly fringe conspiracy theorists. Online loners perpetually dissatisfied with what others referred to as "reality." He sensed a deep anger in all of them. Even in Emily, his first and most dedicated acolyte. She, like the others, had given up on real life long ago. Now she chased any sufficient excuse for radicalization. A cause not so much to live for, but to provide sufficient cover for withdrawal.

David wasn't in a position to be choosy. He treated his followers like friends. He had so much work to do, and he would take any help he could get.

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He monitored the static every possible moment. Recorded it to tape while he slept, then played the recordings back in the mornings on fast-forward to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

The summer after senior year brought another heat wave to Hartsdale. Now David stopped going outside entirely. He emerged from his room only to microwave the frozen Hot Pockets his mom kept stocked in the fridge for him, one of the small ways she showed that she still loved him without having to actually get too involved in whatever horror show his life had become.

And then, finally, long after David had assumed he'd never see another broadcast from Public Access Afterworld, it happened again. The disturbances started up in earnest once more, as if forced by sheer will

power to reveal themselves to this obsessive kid so desperate to catch a signal.

They blinked forth subtly at first, usually late in the night after David had spent hours staring into the fuzz, right as sleep nearly overtook him. He would be zoning out on the static, and then he would feel a little zap in his brain. And at that same moment, he'd see the zap on the screen. A flicker, the barest hint of life. But *something.*

All that appeared those first few times was a momentary glitch, a skipped heartbeat. But David honed his skills. He learned to remain in that fragile state of half sleep that seemed to conjure the signal. He learned to commune with it, to help it grow. To keep calm and stop the feed from shorting out before a message could properly transmit.

And then, finally, *he heard her.*

"Hello . . . ? Hello . . . ?"

It was Erin. He recognized her voice immediately. She was still out there. Calling to him from very far away.

He wanted to shout back. To apologize for his part in what had happened. To break open the glass of the screen and shake the TV until Erin tumbled out. But he knew the signal only pointed one way, like that mirror in the police station that was actually a window.

He listened. Concentrated. David let Erin speak. Eventually her messages grew longer.

"I don't know where I am, and it's hard to think . . . But I saw them. I saw someone glowing in the airwaves."

David watched the tape over and over, uploaded it online. He tried and failed to glean anything productive from his friend's words. He kept tuning in, waiting for more.

Then, two weeks later, he picked up another transmission. Erin still sounded confused and half vacant, but this time she had a name and an address to share.

". . . *Chloe Edmonds,*" she said. "*Forty-four Lake Drive Place in Allen Park, Michigan. I saw her on Pink Eye TV. I think she might be bright enough to save me.*"

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David googled the address. Along with the help of his new online friends (many of them experts at online stalking), he confirmed that a sixteen-year-old girl named Chloe Edmonds did indeed live at that address with her family. David found Chloe's GlobalVill channel, and once he started watching her videos, it immediately became clear why this was the person Erin had sent him in search of.

"You're watching Pink Eye TV, and this is an episode for whoever's out there listening," Chloe said at the start of each of her uploads. Her left eye was inflamed with a bad case of conjunctivitis that rendered the area red and puffy. She was a small, frail kid, so the infection seemed to stretch across half her face.

In that first video David watched, Chloe narrated an episode of a TV show. It seemed as if she was making it up as she went along. The show was about a grizzled detective named Officer Sunday who investigated serial killers on the streets of 1960s Los Angeles. In the episode David listened to Chloe narrate, the teenage girl summoned flawless hard-boiled dialogue, unfurling a Raymond Chandler–style mystery across four fake act breaks. It was a strange spectacle, and not unlike a real detective show that would have aired on black-and-white TV before cable was invented.

David binged all of Chloe's videos. Most of them were variations on this same form. In each, Chloe welcomed viewers to Pink Eye TV, then narrated another episode of her fake show, staring into the camera, trying to explain it all in a way that would help someone else perfectly picture the imaginary broadcast she could see so clearly in her mind.

The more David watched, the more Chloe's show began to strike him as familiar. He realized that he vaguely remembered certain plot twists and characters before Chloe introduced them. But he couldn't quite place from where. He sent Chloe's videos to his most dedicated followers and asked them for help researching it. And sure enough, his followers worked their magic once more. They solved the riddle in minutes.

David's initial instinct had been correct. *Sunday's Best* was an actual detective show that had aired on the CBS Network between 1959 and 1965.

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Chloe seemed flattered when David messaged her. He didn't mention the circumstances under which he'd come to discover her channel, but he told her he had noticed something in her uploads that he needed to discuss, that he was part of an online community investigating supernatural phenomena, and that he was curious if she'd ever heard of something called Public Access Afterworld.

She hadn't, but she did her research after receiving David's message. She wrote him back the next day, saying she was honored that a genuine internet celebrity had seen something in her videos. Most of them had fewer than twenty streams total, while David's own uploads had view counts approaching seven figures. She'd watched them all, and listened to the many theories he'd shared on his channel about the impossible broadcasts beaming through the static, about his lost friend, and about the many alternate worlds that existed on the other side of the screen.

"I love your videos," she wrote in a private message. "I know they might freak some people out, but I love mysteries. Maybe you can tell I've always been a sucker for detective stories, noirs, and conspiracies. The ideas you talk about in your videos, it's like stuff I've known about all my life, but that I never had the words to express."

Chloe's message gave David an erection, even though he knew it shouldn't. He told her he wanted to come visit her. To meet and talk more. He told her he believed she was very special.

• • •

And now here he was. An hour after his plane touched down at DTW, David was sitting across from Chloe Edmonds at a diner by the airport, watching her scratch idly at her swollen undereye. Snow fell in big white clumps out the window.

"This isn't even bad," Chloe said, gesturing to the puffy crust around her inflammation. "This is the aftermath of an outbreak from a couple weeks ago. When my allergies are really acting up, I can't even open my eye. I have to wear an eyepatch to school. I'll give you one guess how the other kids in the eleventh grade react to that kind of fashion statement."

"I'm sorry," David said. "That sounds really hard."

He tried to make himself sound as empathetic as possible. He warmed his hands over his mug of hot cocoa, and a minute later he noticed Chloe doing the same thing, imitating him.

“That’s why I call it Pink Eye TV,” she said. “It’s like an inside joke with myself. Kids have been making fun of my conjunctivitis outbreaks since I was nine years old, so I figured . . . hey, if ‘everyone deserves a TV channel of their own’ like the say in those GlobalVill ads, I might as well name mine after the same thing that makes me a pariah, right?”

“Why do you do it?” David asked. “Why do you make videos narrating episodes of that TV show?”

“It helps me,” Chloe told him. “Putting myself in the shoes of a hard-boiled detective who can solve any mystery. I guess it helps me feel like I’m in control. Like I don’t have to be myself anymore. It’s an escape.”

“That makes sense,” David said. “But what I meant was, why *that* TV show? Why *Sunday’s Best*?”

Chloe was silent.

“*Sunday’s Best*,” David said again. “It was a black-and-white detective show from the 1960s. You must have seen it.” Chloe didn’t speak. She looked confused. “Some of the stories in your uploads are beat-by-beat recaps of real episodes,” David told her. “You knew that, right?”

Chloe warmed her hands over her mug of cocoa again. “I’ve never even heard of it, in my entire life” she said.

• • •

Now David laid all of his cards on the table. He told Chloe everything. How Erin had been tricked. How she’d been sent to that place where Jim Davis had claimed only very special people can go. He played her Erin’s blurry video transmission—the one where she spoke Chloe’s name and address out loud through the static. David recounted for Chloe how it had all gone down: how Erin had watched that old sitcom episode that she’d shared some psychic connection with, and then pretty soon, how she’d left this world behind.

Chloe seemed scared. Scared, but excited.

“I don’t want to pressure you,” David said. He said this part several times, mostly to ease his own conscience. “Really, I don’t want to pressure you, but I think you have a destiny, and it feels like my job to tell you this. I’m pretty sure you’re one of the special ones, like Erin. The ones who can travel there. Maybe you can even save her. I think this is what she was trying to tell me in her transmission.”

It felt important to David to give Chloe a choice. To just share the information he knew, and then to leave. He wasn’t Jim Davis. He wasn’t some sicko who got off on tricking innocent girls into a fate they couldn’t comprehend.

David paid the bill. He withdrew a small photo from his wallet.

“I want to give you this,” he said. He handed her Erin’s yearbook photo. “Please study her face. Her name is Erin Morrison. She was seventeen years old. If you do end up going there, please, I’m begging you: Try to save her. Try to bring her back.”

Chloe looked at the picture for a long time.

“Does it hurt?” she asked. “What they do to you down there?” She sounded more curious than scared.

“I don’t know,” David said. “There’s no way for me to find out.”

Out in the parking lot, Chloe kissed him.

David pulled away quickly, an automatic survival response. “That’s not why I’m here,” he told her firmly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just—I don’t have a lot of people to talk to, and . . . this is all so exciting. That you think I’m special. That you believe I have a destiny.”

David reached for his car keys. Snow collected on the upper neon of the diner.

“My flight’s early in the morning,” David said.

Chloe took a step backwards. She sucked in her lips and spread her arms out wide. “Nothing ever happens here,” she complained. “Nothing ever happens.”

• • •

A week later, David got one last message from Chloe on GlobalVill.com.

> I've been researching 1960s detective shows since we met. Watching old episodes of Sunday's Best and Dragnet and Mannix. I know this might sound kind of insane, but I'm pretty sure I made them all . . .

Two days later, David's Google Alert served him a news article. Chloe Edmonds from Allen Park, Michigan, had disappeared. No note. No anything. She'd been missing for three days.

David recorded the pertinent details in one of his spreadsheets. He made a post about it on a few of his private forums. Then he waited for something to happen. For something to change. For Erin to return.

Nothing of the sort ever occurred. Because Chloe hadn't been the one. She hadn't been quite powerful enough to claw her way back to earth with David's lost love in tow. So he returned to his previous routine, continued monitoring the static, waiting for Erin's next transmission.

Erin had been his first. The first girl David had helped send to that place. And it had been so painful, he almost couldn't go on after she disappeared. But Chloe had been his first, too, just in a different way. His first that felt easy.

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5:31 A.M.

BETHANY PETERS LIVES IN a walk-in pantry now, though she knows it's only temporary. This will be her last in a very long history of waiting rooms. If all goes according to plan, she'll be leaving this locked room soon, her body and the world along with it.

The décor in the windowless pantry is pretty simple. There's a laptop on a small desk. A bow-wrapped gift basket of pills and powder left by David Sawyer's followers, just like she requested. And a yearbook photo of David's ex-girlfriend push-pinned to a corkboard on the wall, a handwritten message scrawled on the back. *If you can save only one, make it her.*

There are also cans. Shelves and shelves of cans. So many cans of beans and vegetables and fish products just a slim cut above cat food, quality-wise. The cans are all comically oversized—far larger than you can buy at a normal supermarket. Cans made for preppers, by preppers. Special-ordered from one survivalist encampment to the next.

Bethany knows it's likely the small nation of hallucinogens currently coursing through her system, but in certain moments during the long night, it feels as if those cans have eyes, as if they're watching her, growing impatient for the grand finale Bethany's desperately trying to conjure. She imagines the cans as the old men from *The Muppets*. *Come on, little girl. It's time to hurry up and disappear already. We've got a dinner reservation to make. Ha ha ha!*

Bethany snaps back to herself and realizes she's imagining giant cans as Muppets. She's not exactly sober. Over the past several hours, she's ingested enough drugs to power a mid-sized EDM festival. But that's not the only thing making her feel crazy right now. *The static is back.* Clouding her mind, working its magic, stealing her away from herself. It's as if Rachel's ranch never flushed Bethany's system, never offered her a temporary cleanse from the Screen Sickness that almost separated her from

her body back in Austin. She can feel the static back inside her brain, spreading anew. In fact, it's one of the only things she still can feel. Those old cobwebs metastasizing once again, that numb faraway feeling making it hard to think. The static whispering to her in its same old voice. *Pretty soon we'll have enough strength to take shape once again. To open the door to the video store for your long-deferred departure.*

Bring it on. Bethany has no further interest in resisting. She's accepted her fate. She's ready to travel to Public Access Afterworld, and hope like hell she's got the magic juice necessary to blow that place to kingdom come.

She can feel David Sawyer watching, tuned to her every movement like it's Must See TV. He's borrowed an extra pair of eyes. Bethany can sense him blinking with the red light from that security camera mounted to the ceiling. She resents David's invisible gaze. It makes her feel even more powerless. It's like a one-way mirror in a police station through which David gets to see her, but she can't ever see him. It makes her feel like a specimen in a petri dish. It reminds her of the hospital, that other windowless room where once a long time ago she was trapped like she is now. That West Texas facility her parents shipped her off to in her teenage years.

There, like here, the door to Bethany's cell was locked from the outside, offering her no chance of escape. There, like here, her guards fed her a cocktail of pills that made her numb and far away, that served only to separate her from her body, mind, and individual autonomy. There, like here, she was constantly monitored, watched twenty-four seven by all-powerful, invisible eyes.

She feels the static flare inside her as she remembers the hospital. It pushes against the inner wall of her skull, threatening to escape. Bethany can sense it growing more powerful, emboldened. Clearly, the static likes Bethany feeling powerless.

• • •

A little later, Jules Estrada brings her some breakfast. Rice and beans cooked from the same cans lining the shelves of the pantry. When Jules enters, they're careful to leave the door slightly ajar so they don't get locked

in along with Bethany. They leave their tray of food by the door. They look at Bethany like she's the most beautiful painting they've ever seen. Like she's hanging on the wall in a museum.

Bethany stares past Jules, sneaking a glance at the slim crack in the pantry door that leads to the outside world. It offers her a sliver of reorientation. She catches a small glimpse of the mess hall where David and his followers eat their meals. It's almost morning now. Dawn shines through the windows of the cafeteria, reaching all the way to the pantry. Bethany wonders if it's the last time in her life she'll ever see actual sunlight.

"David's getting a little worried about time," Jules says. "I told him that I might be able to help speed things up, help with your crossing. Because, you know, I've done all the message board challenges."

Bethany is too lost in her static reverie to pay attention. She sits in the chair at the computer desk and nods with disinterest, her back turned to Jules. Jules ambles around the pantry, walking between the many shelves of cans like a dog begging for a tennis ball to chase.

"If you wanted, we could watch videos of static together," they suggest. "Or I could bring you some Tic Tacs and you could pretend to kill yourself. Or—we could brainstorm Pink Eye TV episode ideas. Remember? I told you about Pink Eye TV back in Lubbock? How it was the final challenge on the final message board? How apparently everyone destined for Public Access Afterworld has a special psychic connection to something on TV that helps them get there?"

Bethany doesn't respond. Jules sneaks closer towards her, then spots the stockpile of drugs on the computer desk, just sitting there in a bow-wrapped gift basket.

"Whoa," they say. "Do you mind if I grab some of these? There's so much in there, I doubt you'd miss it." They stare into the basket filled with acid tabs, mushroom stems, and ketamine vials, They stare down at the bounty, their mouth basically watering.

Bethany glances at Jules, not really listening, mostly just wanting them to leave.

"Sure," she says. Jules grins like a kid on Christmas and grabs a handful of drugs out from the haul. They stuff their bounty of acid tabs and

ketamine vials into their hoodie pocket, and then, they just stay there, lingering by Bethany's side.

"So how can I help?" they ask. "I really want us to do this together. I want to be there for you on your journey."

"Listen," Bethany tells them. "I think I just need to be alone. Tell David that I can feel it starting to work. I just need another hour or two before I'm ready to depart. Three, max."

Bethany can tell that Jules feels disappointed, but that finally they get the message.

"I believe in you," they say. "I knew it from the first time I met you. You're the real deal. Hey: I've got a secret that only you can know about."

They lean down to wrap Bethany up in a hug. They squeeze their friend's limp body in their arms and they whisper softly into her ear so there's no way David Sawyer's security camera can pick up the words.

"I'm coming with you," they say. They wait for Bethany to react, but she just stares blankly ahead at the yearbook photo of Erin Morrison pinned up on the corkboard behind the computer desk.

Jules leaves, reluctantly turning around and walking back past the aisles of cans, heading out of the pantry. The door closes, and finally, Bethany's locked inside again, alone, with no chance of escape, which is exactly how she needs to be for what comes next. Bethany knows she doesn't need Tic Tacs or fake suicide attempts or any long, boring videos of static to get her where she's going today. All she needs is this. Isolation. Powerlessness. The sensation of being really, truly, eternally *trapped*.

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2012

AFTER CHLOE EDMONDS, there were others.

Angela from Des Moines, who insisted that she shared a body with the cast of Bravo's *Real Housewives* franchise, and had subsequently been diagnosed with schizophrenia as a result. Dee from Tampa, who experienced recurring nightmares that bore an uncanny resemblance to classic episodes of *The Twilight Zone*. Lester in Queens, who could recount the entire fifty-year history of *General Hospital*, even though he'd never seen a single episode. Mary in Decatur, whose family had been so freaked out by her tendency to lapse into dialogue from old *Saturday Night Live* sketches that they'd hired an exorcist.

"*I saw them on Pink Eye TV,*" Erin would say, nestled beneath the static on those nights when David was able to tap into her signal. "*I think this might be the person who can help.*" And then she'd share a new name and address, like an interdimensional scavenger hunt that they were both participating in.

It usually wasn't hard for David and his followers to track down each new candidate. Like his own flock, the people Erin sent him after tended to be loners and social outcasts, which also meant that usually they were very online. David would private message each new lead and fly himself to wherever they were. Money was no longer an issue: David's following was growing, and a few of his most dedicated fans were independently wealthy and very excited to help.

Then, once David made contact with each new potential candidate, he sent them a PDF of his welcome guide. ("You probably won't believe me yet," the first sentence read, "but you might have created your favorite TV show.") He'd tell them all about his best friend Erin, about Chloe and Pink Eye TV. He'd be honest in his answers to every question they asked, would insist that he wasn't trying to pressure them to do anything they didn't want

to do. And then, once it was time to say goodbye, he'd leave them with a copy of Erin's yearbook photo, always with that same handwritten message on the back.

After he got word about each new disappearance, he'd feel a little sick. Sometimes he worried that he was crossing a line by making contact with each candidate. But in the few instances when he hadn't been able to track down the names Erin sent him, he'd still receive a Google Alert eventually about another disappearance. He told himself that these people were leaving his world either way. He might as well arm them with information. Maybe someday one of them would turn out to actually be the one Erin was searching for. The glowing face in the "airwaves" Erin spoke of, who was bright enough to actually save her.

Sometimes the guilt would become too much, and he'd wonder, was this obsessive quest just an excuse? A way for David to stave off hopelessness? To ensure that his role in this ugly story wasn't over? That someday Erin might return to him and everything would finally make sense, like a long-belated but deeply satisfying series finale?

Without Public Access Afterworld, what would the rest of David's life even look like?

• • •

Three years out from graduation, David returned to high school. He ran into Ms. Walsh at the bank one afternoon during a rare excursion out from his bedroom. He was surprised when she greeted him warmly.

"It's just not the same down in the basement without you guys," she said. "Stop by and visit sometime. There's a whole new group of losers."

David never expected he'd want to go back to that place. High school had sucked, even before Erin's disappearance. But now he found himself craving the familiarity of the AV dungeon. The fanaticism of his online following was really starting to freak him out, and he longed for a break from it all. So he started showing up at school again. At first he kept his visits to once a week, but before long the comfort of nostalgia took hold and he was down in Ms. Walsh's AV pit every single weekday before first period.

He felt calmer down there. If he turned his brain off, he could trick himself into believing he was just another kid waiting to wheel televisions and slide projectors to science classrooms. Sometimes he'd even catch himself looking over his shoulder at the door, expecting Erin to walk in like she always used to before first bell each morning.

The only Auxiliary left from David's own high school years was Gerald, Ralph's younger brother, now a senior himself. But even though the faces had changed, the vibe was essentially the same down there. Gerald had gathered his own little clique of outcasts over his four years of high school, and they all bore an uncanny resemblance to David's old gang, as if the actors had switched but the roles had stayed the same. Kailee was the new Leslie. Irwin the new Ralph. Gerald was the new David. The synchronicity lent the space a certain uncanniness, but mostly David found the repetition comforting. It was like a *Degrassi* reboot where only a few of the original cast returned.

Public Access Afterworld came up often. Gerald was obsessed, and would try to steer the conversation towards the topic at every opportunity. Ralph's little brother had been close enough to the tragedy, to Erin's disappearance and the mysterious broadcasts, to feel a proprietary sense of ownership over it all. David suspected the kid lurked his private message boards, probably even posted under a pseudonym. And soon Gerald had indoctrinated his friends as well. The new Auxiliaries took any opportunity they could to prod David about his latest online theories. They treated him like a celebrity.

David didn't mind the attention. Sometimes he even liked it. But he mostly kept things church and state between his online life and the real world. Down in the AV dungeon, David wanted to be just another Auxiliary, albeit a little older than the rest. Ms. Walsh seemed happy enough to have him around. Sure, she made fun of him less these days, but he could tell that the warmth he'd sensed at the bank remained. That she still cared about him, still felt some sense of loyalty towards him and Erin. That unlike the rest of the town, Ms. Walsh knew David well enough to know that he was and always would be a harmless doofus, not the cold-blooded murderer everyone else seemed convinced he was.

He began to make himself useful around the office. He helped Ms. Walsh print out schedules, even wheeled some TVs through the halls to his old

teachers (the ones who didn't seem too uncomfortable in his presence).

He started to harbor a fantasy about becoming Ms. Walsh's mentee, and soon this became his new secret endgame. A satisfying character arc he could daydream about. He'd save Erin from Public Access Afterworld, then the two of them would settle down together in Hartsdale. And someday, when it was time for Ms. Walsh to retire, she'd hand David the reins to the AV Club so he could keep the Auxiliaries going for many seasons and reboots to come.

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About six weeks after David showed back up in the high school basement, Ms. Walsh caught up with him in the back parking lot after school.

"Hey, David," she said. He could tell immediately from the way she said his name that she'd been dreading this conversation.

"You know I've appreciated your help with the AV Club these past few weeks, right?" She was straining to sound warm. "And I . . ."

She trailed off, then shook her head.

"Fuck it. I'm sorry. I'm no good at being polite. David, you can't come here anymore. Parents have been complaining. Teachers, too."

David stared at her. "Oh. But I was just trying to help out," he said. "You invited me to stop by, and I thought maybe you needed some extra hands."

"I was just being friendly, David. I didn't think you would actually . . . Look, you don't work here. You graduated three years ago. You're not my employee."

"Totally," David said. "I know that. I guess it also . . . it helps me, you know? It helps me to be here. So maybe there's some way I could still come? Just less? Like maybe once a week?"

"I'm sorry," Ms. Walsh said. "Gerald and the other kids—they're coming home talking about alternate dimensions and missing girls. Phantom video stores. They're not . . . going to parties and getting drunk and doing normal teenager stuff. They're staying up all night watching static on TV. It's not healthy."

David stared past Ms. Walsh at the football field beyond the parking lot, the same field where Erin had disappeared on a foggy night three years earlier. A gaggle of varsity players were running drills, oblivious to the tragedy that had occurred on the hallowed ground they were now playing on.

“I’m not making it up,” David said. “And I’m not a murderer. You know that, right? You’ve seen it yourself. My tapes. The broadcasts. For years now. Since before Erin even disappeared . . .”

Ms. Walsh just stared at him.

“And it’s not just Erin,” he said. “There are other people on the internet who this is happening to. People with psychic connections to television. Victims who are trapped like she is. Erin . . . she’s still out there. I have the tapes to prove it. She’s calling to us for help. She needs us . . .”

“David . . .” Ms. Walsh said. And in her voice, David could now hear that really, she didn’t believe him either. She thought he was crazy, just like everyone else.

“You knew her,” David said. “I thought you cared about her.”

“I do. I did care about her. I cared about all of you. But David, Erin is dead.”

“No, she isn’t,” David insisted.

“Anyway,” Ms. Walsh told him, “this is not a conversation. You can’t come here anymore. You need to move on. That’s it. It’s not my call to make, but to tell you the truth, I don’t disagree. It’s creepy. You’re being creepy.” She shook her head.

“And of course I cared about Erin Morrison. I care about you too, David, despite my better judgment. But I’ve got a job. And a family. Two kids at home and a mother in assisted living who only remembers my name on good days. I don’t have time to be your therapist on top of all that. But please,” Ms. Walsh said, “please hear me when I tell you that you need one.”

• • •

A month or two later, the first true crime documentary about David’s still-unresolved case aired on HBO. It featured interviews with the outraged

families of Erin Morrison, Chloe Edmonds, and several of the others whose disappearances David had already been tied to. The show quickly became a viral sensation, and ignited a broader public outcry for David to face justice. All winter long, David's name trended on Twitter, and soon rumors began to circulate that the FBI was getting involved. By early spring, David's lawyer warned him to brace for an imminent arrest.

Luckily, David had been planning ahead, preparing for this moment with his online followers. He made a quick post on one of his secret message boards notifying the faithful that it was time, then packed some clothes and VHS tapes in an overnight bag and slipped out of his childhood bedroom window. He didn't bother saying goodbye to his parents. They'd given up on him a long time ago.

A few days later, he arrived in the desert.

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8:11 A.M.

DAVID WATCHES BETHANY ON his laptop screen all through the night. In the morning, there's a signal on the horizon.

He closes the computer and steps out onto his porch, then squints up at the slim ladder of smoke climbing the sky. He knew this was coming. He knows who this is. GlobalVill has arrived in the desert. After all these years, Fisch and his forces are finally here on his doorstep, making their presence felt, letting him know that his suspicions about today haven't been ill-founded. The battle is imminent.

David stares at the smoke for a few seconds. Then he returns to his den of screens and lets his eyes readjust from morning light to television glow. He sits back down on his mattress and picks his laptop up. He returns to his work staring at Bethany Peters on the smallest screen in his den. Because nothing else matters now except what's happening with her, across his compound, inside that walk-in pantry.

On the screen, David watches Bethany as she stands up from the computer desk and starts pacing the floor. She seems crazier than ever. She's mumbling to herself now in a voice too quiet for David to hear. At one point, she picks up the bowl of rice and beans that Jules Estrada dropped off earlier, takes a single disinterested bite, then spoons the rest into a little trash can. Then she glances up at the security camera bolted on the ceiling. David feels his heart skip a beat, because it's almost like Bethany's making eye contact with him.

Can she see him there? Can she sense how closely David's watching? The thought makes him momentarily uncomfortable, though he isn't sure why.

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Around nine A.M., Emily knocks on David's door. She's carrying a cup of instant coffee, a flimsy excuse to check in with her boss even though she knows he doesn't want to be bothered. When he's in his surveillance center, everyone at the camp knows that David prefers to be left alone with his static. In all her years working for David, Emily's only been inside David's den of screens a handful of times. But today is a special occasion. There's a massacre heading their way.

Emily lingers on the porch for a full minute. When David doesn't answer her knock, she gently creaks the door open, allowing a little sliver of sunlight to slip in. She calls to him.

"Did you see the smoke?"

"I did," David says. He doesn't look up from his laptop screen. He seems annoyed at the intrusion. "Well, if you're here," he says eventually, "I guess you better come inside."

Emily steps into the room. She lets her eyes drift around this fabled space she so rarely gets to see. It's a hoarder's nest. A complete mess because David doesn't clean up after himself and he doesn't allow her and his other followers inside to play the maid. There are old, dusty televisions blaring white noise and glowing fuzz in all directions. VHS tapes stacked in near-mountainous piles, hand-labeled in idiosyncratic code that only David understands.

Emily sets down her cup of instant coffee by David's mattress on the floor. She eavesdrops over his shoulder, spying Bethany Peters on the laptop screen.

"It's GlobalVill," Emily says. "They're calling for a parley."

"I know," says David. "It's good news. They want to negotiate, which means they aren't sure exactly where we're keeping her. If they did, they'd just storm right in and take her."

David doesn't look up at his second-in-command. Emily watches him watch the object of his fascination on the screen, the blurry live feed of the girl Emily's pretty sure they're all about to die for today. In her pantry, Bethany paces around. She looks skittish and unfocused.

"Or maybe they want to resolve things peacefully," Emily says. "Maybe they're not looking for bloodshed."

"Maybe," David says. He keeps watching.

“I could put together a greeting party,” Emily offers. “Drive out to the location of the smoke signal so we can at least hear their terms . . .”

“No,” David tells her. “We make them wait. We do nothing. Because once they realize we’re not interested in negotiating, they’ll storm the place, kill us all, and that’ll be that.”

Emily tries to keep her gaze free of emotion or doubt, like any loyal soldier would.

“Actually, you know what?” David says, and for a moment Emily thinks he might be reconsidering. “Let’s start getting everyone armed and into position for when it comes to bloodshed. A tight perimeter around the front of the compound, but not so tight it tips our hand to where we’re hiding her.”

Emily pauses. She nods.

“Yes, sir,” she says.

She turns to leave. David doesn’t say goodbye. He never takes his eyes off the laptop screen.

• • •

A few minutes later on the livestream, Bethany sits back down at the computer desk, and something finally begins to happen.

At first, David assumes it’s an issue with the video connection, with the crappy feed his tech guy Eddy installed. The picture jumps and distorts. Skips a few frames. Stretches and scatters.

David leans in, trying to watch closer, and a minute later it happens again. Another skipped beat, like a hypnic jerk. The glitch is more severe this time. And when it ends, a subtle hint of static remains on screen, clouding the margins of the frame.

David squints and studies the image. He picks up his remote control and presses mute on all the other TVs in his den, quieting the hum around him. The silence feels intrusive, because usually David leaves the static on twenty-four seven, a white noise machine he long forgot was even turned on. It hasn’t been this quiet in his surveillance center for years.

He gives all his focus to Bethany on the screen. There’s another glitch on the video, and now David’s convinced it’s not the camera that’s the

problem. Not Eddy's homemade livestream, but something happening *in* the feed. Something willing itself into the room with Bethany Peters.

Static blinks and wobbles. It radiates off Bethany's blurry image at the computer desk, orbiting her as she faces away from David's gaze. Can she see it? Can she sense what she's conjuring into the pantry?

As if answering his question, Bethany turns around and glances up at the security camera near the ceiling. Like last time, the moment Bethany makes eye contact with him, David's heart skips a beat. It's jarring because of course he's forgotten that Bethany knows he's watching. It makes him feel suddenly naked, exposed.

"I'm ready," she says, as if speaking directly to him. "I figured it out. I understand my psychic connection to television now. This body is a TV show."

David leans in even closer. He holds his breath as Bethany stares up at him. And then there's another glitch on David's laptop screen, but unfortunately this time it's not Bethany Peters causing the interference. David's computer shuts down without warning. The screen goes dark.

David jumps to his feet, jarred by the interruption like he's been woken too quickly from a dream. He looks around the room in panicked urgency, desperate to locate the source of this unwanted intrusion. His laptop boots itself back up. The screen blinks from start-up logo to desktop, and before David can retake control of the mouse pad, a new application opens. Microsoft Teams.

What the hell?

David's never used Microsoft Teams in his life. He's pretty sure he doesn't even have it installed on this computer. But there it is. The mouse moves around via remote desktop. A video call begins, connects of its own accord, and then a friendly voice greets him from the other side of the chat.

"Hello, David," Anthony Fischer says. "It's an honor to finally meet you, though I wish it could be under better circumstances."

• • •

"I've followed your work for years," Fisch continues, sitting in his big corner office in Austin. "I hope it goes without saying that all of us here at GlobalVill HQ are big fans of yours. Perhaps you've long suspected that

we've been watching you. That we've known your exact location since you first moved out to the desert. Listen, David, I've tried to be an ally to you from afar these past years. To protect you as best I could. To keep the authorities off your back so you could continue doing your vital work without interruption. This shared mission we've both dedicated our lives to."

David hovers his fingers over the laptop trackpad. He wants so badly to take control back, to return to Bethany's feed on the livestream. But he also knows that hanging up this call would not be the wisest tactical move. His job now is to stall.

"And now," Fisch says. "I need *your* help. I won't condescend and assume you aren't fully aware of the situation we find ourselves in. But please know, I want to settle this peacefully. I want you to be the hero of this story. Listen to me, David—this isn't about Erin Morrison. I wish I could give you your lost friend back. But the stakes here are far bigger than one girl. I won't try to appeal to your sense of patriotism. I won't bore you with the metaphysics you've probably already studied. But please hear me when I tell you that the fate of reality rests on your shoulders this morning. If Bethany Peters is allowed to complete her crossing to Public Access Afterworld, I fear the most terrible consequences. Let me try to explain. Have you ever owned a box of crayons? Just imagine—"

David can't help himself. He hangs up the call, cutting off the CEO mid-monologue.

He works fast to return to the broadcast. He opens a new browser window and toggles back to his live feed of Bethany in the walk-in pantry. She's still sitting at the computer desk, her back turned to the security camera. Since David saw her last, she's opened the laptop up. She appears to be recording a video. She speaks into the Photobooth application and stares at her own image.

"I'm telling myself the story of my life," David can hear her say.

The glitch in the pantry has gotten worse. Static crowds the feed, flanking Bethany in every direction.

"I'm telling myself the story of my life," Bethany says again.

David holds his breath. Until the inevitable happens and he's interrupted once again. His laptop reboots. He loses control of the trackpad. Microsoft

Teams reopens, and there's Anthony Fischer on a video call once again, back in control. Back at the negotiating table.

• • •

"I'll get down to business this time, because clearly you're a busy man. David, this is your last chance. If you hang up this call again, I won't give you the courtesy of another dial back. I'm sure you saw our smoke signal this morning. I'm sure you know we're nearby. My head of security Shailene is waiting just off-site with a small army of her best men. Waiting for me to give her the kill order. And let me assure you, David, these are vetted professionals. The best in the business. It won't be a long battle. It won't really be a battle at all. This is Waco, Texas, at your doorstep, David, and it will be over within the hour. You and everyone there with you will be dead. A breaking news story for people to talk about on my platform. Or—we can settle this like adults, and you can hand over Bethany Peters."

David keeps his expression intentionally blank. *Stall*, he reminds himself. *Stall.*

"David," Fisch says. "I'm not bluffing. Either you hand over Bethany right now or I hang up this call and give Shailene the kill order."

"Okay," David says. "Okay." He nods, playacting fear, drawing out the silence. "Just let me think . . ." He pauses for a long while, trying to buy Bethany any remaining time, even seconds. He can feel Fisch's patience starting to wane on the other side of the screen.

"How about this?" David says. "I've got an assistant manager from your Trust and Safety team in my barracks. I'd be willing to hand him over to you, no questions asked, if you agree to—"

"No, David. This is a conversation about Bethany Peters, and Bethany Peters only."

"Okay, okay," David says. "You drive a hard bargain." He pauses again. "Are you sure you don't want to discuss the other prisoner I've got stored in my barracks? I'm surprised you never contacted me before today about your older brother. You must really hate the guy to not even try to liberate your own flesh and blood from my—"

"You're stalling," Fisch says. "You have no intention of cooperating."

“Yeah,” David admits. “I really don’t.” He grins at the camera, then raises a middle finger to the screen. “But it’s been nice to finally meet you, Tony.”

“Okay, David,” Fisch says, shaking his head. “Have it your way. I wish it didn’t have to end like this, but you’ve left me no other option.”

The Microsoft Teams meeting ends. This time Fisch is the one who hangs up.

• • •

***Don’t panic,* David reminds himself.** *Fear won’t help anything. Remember that you saw all this coming, years in advance. And now, finally, you’ve found the receiver. You’re fulfilling your life’s work, and your only job left is to see it through to the end.*

He toggles back to the browser window. Bethany’s feed resumes. David squints at the frame. It’s grown even wilder since he last tuned in. Good.

The air around Bethany shakes and vortexes. She’s creating an indoor lightning storm at her computer desk. Her head is tilted downwards, as though she’s meditating. The static drips around her, flanking her like bodyguards.

David watches it take shape. Watches two distinct streams of light pour and form. Watches the static sprout arms and legs, heads and torsos, until soon they’re fully formed, hovering above the ground on Bethany’s left and right in the borrowed shape of men.

The chaperones have arrived.

David holds his breath. It’s a beautiful sight.

Out in the distance, he can hear the faint trample of boots across sand. The first warning shots of gunfire on the horizon.

OceanofPDF.com

2018

FIVE YEARS AFTER HE arrived in the desert, David finally caught up with the man he'd once known as "Jim Davis."

Erin's latest transmission had beamed through the static on the biggest flat-screen in his surveillance center. This time, Erin's message sent David to Los Angeles in pursuit of a guy named Randy Mills, a twenty-eight-year-old who'd been posting online about a psychosomatic disease he'd self-diagnosed as *Gossip Girl* dissociative disorder.

"As long as I've lived," Randy wrote in one of his Reddit posts, "it's always felt like I've been halfway somewhere else. Moonlighting in a past life as a group of sexy young New York socialites. I know all the details. I've known them since childhood, since long before *Gossip Girl* was a gleam in anyone's eyes. But I've never left L.A. County. I grew up poor as shit. What is happening to me?"

Randy worked at the In-N-Out Burger in Huntington Park. David's meeting with him was largely unremarkable. He followed the usual script he'd developed over the years, approaching Randy at the register, ordering a burger and soda, and saying all the right things to get the guy to join him at a corner booth during his post-lunch break. Then David told Randy all about his destiny. About how that feeling that he didn't belong in this reality wasn't just in his head. How there were others like him. Others who had a special psychic connection to television. How David was certain that Randy had the ability to travel through the screen, and that soon, probably, he would be doing exactly that.

Randy seemed unimpressed. It wasn't that he didn't believe David, or that David's words weren't resonating. It was just that he'd heard it all before.

"This is crazy," Randy told him. "But a guy was in here last week telling me the exact same thing, trying to be my best friend. Do y'all work

together?”

David sat up straight. He tried to sound as nonchalant and calm as possible as he asked his tablemate to tell him more about the man who had visited him.

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Forty-eight hours later, Randy was gone, disappeared like all the others. But before the end of their meeting, Randy left David with a small but crucial memento. A business card with the name “Jim Redmond” written on it.

It seemed that David’s old friend was moonlighting these days as a computer salesman. A company name was listed on the business card below Jim’s new last name. And, most important, there was an address, too.

David called Emily and a few of his best men to Los Angeles the next morning. By nightfall, they’d broken into Jim’s home in Studio City and installed a webcam so David could watch the oncoming assault. That night, right when Jim got home from work, David tuned in and watched as Emily and her men overpowered the former fake guidance counselor in his living room.

David had thought about this moment for so long, had played out so many theoretical confrontations with Jim in his mind over the years. Imagined all the badass things he would say once he finally caught up with the man who had tricked him into helping send his best friend to that place he couldn’t hope to follow. But now that the moment had finally arrived, David couldn’t bring himself to confront Jim in person. Instead he watched remotely as his operation played out on the screen in front of him. As Jim Fischer struggled and begged for mercy.

“Do you know who my brother is?” he shouted. “David! If this is your doing: we’re not enemies! We’re allies! For god’s sake, I’m a top backer to your Patreon!”

By nightfall Jim was subdued, and Emily and her team were on the road with a hostage locked in their trunk. The camp’s barracks had been built years earlier with this exact acquisition in mind. David stayed behind in L.A. for an extra day. The emotionals of the operation had overwhelmed him more than he’d expected it to.

He’d resisted the urge to confront Jim directly because he was scared. He preferred to watch the abduction like a TV show, from a safe distance far away. But it wasn’t just timidness that kept David from facing Jim. Rather, he knew that revenge wasn’t his to take. He told himself that soon he’d bring Erin Morrison back, and then he’d let her decide what to do with the man who had ruined both of their lives.

• • •

Before he left LA, David paid a short visit to Jim’s vacant home in Studio City. It felt safer to enter the space now that it’d been emptied of its owner. As David walked down the dimly lit front hallway, it felt like he was entering a time machine. Jim’s newest temporary home was a near-identical replica of the man’s old cabin outside Troy, New York. It was as if Jim had packed the entire place up in a box and shipped it from one coast to the other. David surveyed the shag carpet and retro movie posters. He tiptoed past plastic-covered furniture, then opened a door that led down to the basement. He stepped onto the first creaking stair, and it felt as though he were stepping back into that night almost a decade earlier when he’d donned a homemade hazmat suit and watched his best friend undress in front of the glare of the television screen.

Down there in Jim’s latest basement, David saw tapes. Thousands of tapes labeled and piled high in unwieldy stacks, tilting like Jenga towers. Here was Jim’s infamous VHS collection. It all felt so familiar to David. And not just as a reminder of Jim’s old basement back in Troy. No. Now it reminded David of his own home as well—the surveillance center he’d built himself in the desert, where these days he piled stacks of VHS tapes up towards the ceiling himself. Where he ate and slept and stared at the static all day and night, like Jim’s little sidekick. A real chip off the old block.

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9:41 A.M.

JULES ESTRADA TAKES THEIR time putting on their ghost makeup.

They crouch in the camp's outhouse between a water basin and a literal shithole, and squint into the smudgy mirror. They lather face paint slowly, covering themself in a cool layer, delicately rubbing white into their cheeks, giving their face and body more attention than they have in years. It's a farewell ritual. Goodbye, flesh and bones. Goodbye, shithole cult in the desert. Goodbye, whole entire planet earth. Because today is the day Jules Estrada's life is finally going to change. Today they fulfill the promise they first made themself when they started playing David Sawyer's Public Access Afterworld online game. *I'm leaving my body behind. I'm never going back to the Turbo Putt. The old me is dead.*

Their plan is simple: hitch a ride out of this reality with Bethany. Wait those few final hours their best friend said she needed to succumb to Screen Sickness, then once Bethany's opened her portal to the video store, walk arm in arm with her through the entry way doors.

They've accepted it now: Bethany is the special one. The only one who's ever been worth really believing in. Unlike David Sawyer and his cult of neckbeards. Unlike everyone back in Lubbock, everyone in all those other towns they've now passed through that are exactly like Lubbock. Bethany is the one person who matters on this dumb planet. The only one who hasn't let them down.

And as for Jules? Well, Jules has accepted their own place in things. They're not the special one, but they'll take the consolation prize. If it gets them out of this reality, they're willing to be Bethany's faithful second-in-command. The Emily to Bethany's David. The Sam to her Frodo.

They think of Bethany just a few dozen feet away, locked in that drab pantry trying to conjure herself an escape portal. Poor Bethany, she seemed like she was really suffering this morning when Jules brought her breakfast.

They wish there was something they could do to ease Bethany's burden. Some way to take care of her like they did back at the laundromat when Bethany cried and Jules held her in the gravel. But Bethany is too far gone right now. Too busy to accept Jules's care. It's okay. Maybe once they've completed their journey together, there will be time to cuddle again.

Once Jules is done putting on their face paint, they fish the drugs they pilfered from Bethany's gift basket out of their hoodie pocket. They look down at the cocktail of ketamine and acid and magic mushroom stems. They remember how drugs are supposed to hasten the process, make it easier to get to Public Access Afterworld, so they suck down the handful in one swift gulp, without any water.

It's their first break from sobriety in weeks. They've actually gotten used to being sober, believe it or not. The headaches and withdrawals have receded, and they've stopped thinking constantly about their drug routine, those hourly fixes they used to dole out to through each day at the Turbo Putt.

Jules briefly regrets their decision to get high. The comedown was so bad last time, they can't imagine going through that again. They're not sure they would survive another detox. But then they remind themself that they won't have to. They'll be leaving this body soon. Their hangover won't ever have a chance to arrive.

• • •

When they stumble out of the porta-potty, Jules finds Emily waiting for them.

"You!" she shouts at Jules like she doesn't even remember their name. "We're meeting at the weapons locker in five minutes. Help me gather the others." Then, without even waiting for an answer, Emily keeps marching across the sand between buildings like an overeager hall monitor on a fifth-period power trip.

"Yeah, totally," Jules says. "You got it, boss." They laugh to themself. The K's already kicked in. They realize how much they missed this feeling. They love how drugs can make everything that's usually stupid and annoying suddenly seem funny.

They spend the next little while ignoring Emily's orders, wandering around David's compound. They check on Bethany in the mess hall. She told them earlier that it'd be a few hours until she opened the gateway, and indeed, every time Jules peers through the crack of the locked pantry door, there doesn't seem to be much happening inside. All is quiet on the receiver front.

So they wander the grounds in their ghost makeup. They kill time. They blow bubbles with their mouth, now messed up enough to get kind of lost between the buildings. For a little while they feel like a kid in a department store playing under clothing racks while their mother shops. All of David's other followers are rushing around panicked, as if all hell is about to break loose. Everything moves in fast motion while Jules wanders at normal speed. No one pays any attention to them.

Maybe this is their superpower. Conditional invisibility. The power to be instantly forgotten when things get serious.

• • •

They bring Douglas some leftovers in the barracks. This place is one of Jules's new favorite hiding spots around camp, because they know it's unlikely anyone will think to bother them in here.

Douglas is tied to a chair in the middle of the room, because the only actual cell in David's homemade prison is already occupied by that creepy tall guy who smells like ketchup. The one who never really talks or moves, who just stares at Jules while they hang out with the former night-shift manager from GlobalVill.com.

"Everyone's rushing around camp like they're ready to die," Jules tells Douglas. "But I'm laying low. Keeping close tabs on Bethany because pretty soon she's going to open up a one-way portal outta here, and I've been personally invited along for the ride."

"That's cool," Douglas says. He opens his mouth for another spoonful of beans. "Are you sure that's how it works, though? David seemed pretty certain that Bethany was the only one who could do special stuff. I'm not an expert, but are sidekicks allowed to go to Public Access Afterworld, too?"

"Don't call me a sidekick," Jules says. "I'm more like the Emily to her David. The Sam to her Frodo." They shovel another spoonful of rice and

beans into Douglas's mouth.

"I guess you're right," Douglas says. "There was that cartoon dog from TV. Mr. Peabody. He had a sidekick who traveled with him through time and space."

"People have been treating me like I don't matter my entire life," Jules says.

"What was the name of that little kid? Simon? Was it Simon?"

"I'm so fucking high right now," Jules admits. Douglas cracks up laughing.

"You're fucking crazy, man," he says. "But I like your style. You're just chilling while everyone else around here is freaking out about getting murdered."

"It's all hype," Jules says. "That's all anything ever turns out to be when David Sawyer's involved."

"You know what?" Douglas tells them. "Once my bosses get here, I'm gonna tell everyone that you're a chiller. That they should spare your life."

"I won't be here," Jules says. "Remember? I'm leaving with Bethany."

"Did you know I used to be her manager?" Douglas brags. "She reported to me, sat at a shared desk with all the other content moderators. I had my own office."

Jules spoons the last of the rice and beans into the hostage's mouth. The smell of ketchup travels across the room.

"Sherman," Douglas says. "That was that little fucker's name."

• • •

Outside, in the late-morning light, Jules hears a loud clanging sound in the distance. For a moment, they mistake it for that old, ever-present sound of golf balls dropping from the tube into the big plastic bucket in the Turbo Putt main office. But then their brain catches back up and they realize that what they're actually hearing is gunfire. The first warning shots of a battle on the horizon.

They spot Eddy, the former 8chan hacker they're pretty sure has a crush on them. He's hiding in the dark shade behind their shared sleeping

quarters, cradling a grenade in his hands like it's a newborn baby. He paces in a tight circle, mumbling to himself.

"I just want to go home. I just want to go home," he repeats.

Jules realizes Eddy has pissed his cargo shorts. They stare at this terrified neckbeard, and the drugs in their system morph Eddy into a truer form: An adult baby. An overgrown toddler in a sandbox, throwing a tantrum because his game of make-believe has suddenly got way too real. The gunfire draws closer. Dozens of David's other followers rush between buildings, panicking, all desperate for an escape that's no longer possible.

Shit, Jules realizes. Maybe the attack everyone's been worried about today isn't all hype.

• • •

Back in the mess hall, things are starting to speed up with Bethany. Thank god. Jules stares as the slim margin of light through the locked door as it flickers brighter now, glowing like a microwave.

"*I'm telling myself the story of my life*," they hear Bethany say from inside. They put their ear up to the crack and listen in. Then they quickly empty the remains of their vial of ketamine, snorting the rest of the powder off their hand, because they sense it's now or never. Bethany's crossing is about to happen.

They psych themself up for the journey. They pause a final moment alone in their body in front of the pantry door, then they rip it open. They're greeted on the other side by a harsh gust of neon. The wind blows against them, pushing Jules backwards.

They squint into the light ahead. Electricity flickers with silver dust in the air of the pantry, making it hard for Jules to see anything. But they keep forcing their way forward, staring through the storm, seeing now literally the coolest thing they've ever witnessed. Better than any fan art drawing of Public Access Afterworld ever downloaded from the internet. More awe-inspiring than any dream or fantasy Jules has ever had about the place. Because here it really is. Finally, right in front of their eyes. *The video store.*

Two static men flank Bethany. She crouches at the computer desk, a blown-out silhouette against neon light. Past her, the far end of the pantry is gone, wiped from existence, replaced by an entryway superimposed over

the wall. A storefront wedged in there, currently laying its own bricks. Jules watches as the marquee spells out the fabled name of the video store, letter by letter. “C . . . A . . . P . . .”

The front door bursts open. A little bell dings.

Across the room, Bethany doesn’t move. She doesn’t turn around. Everything’s so overwhelming that she has no idea that Jules is even in here with her. She stares ahead. Jules can see her bony shoulder blades peeking through her unwashed T-shirt, and in that moment they want nothing more than to hold Bethany tight as their two bodies dissolve together into one, and then none.

This is their chance. Their one shot to make it to Public Access Afterworld. They begin to push against the wind, trying to force their way into the pantry. “Hey!” they shout.

Bethany turns around. Her mouth hangs open. Her eyes are blank. She barely seems to even recognize Jules. “What are you doing here?” she calls.

Wind and electricity swirl in the space between them. Jules struggles to reach their friend, fighting against the storm.

“I told you! I’m coming with you!”

Bethany stares at Jules as if she can’t quite remember who they are. As Jules gets closer to Bethany, the storm begins to clear around them, easing back to calm. The electric lights in the room dim, and even the static men shrink down to nothing. The fabled video store Jules has imagined so many times in their head begins to unform, as if it’s being repelled back to myth by Jules’s mere presence. Soon it cross-fades down to nothing. The pantry returns to being a normal pantry.

Bethany turns around to look at Jules, her mouth agape as the last of the neon letters on the awning disappear behind her.

“You have to go!” she shouts. “I’m sorry. You can’t be here; it doesn’t want you.”

• • •

Now it’s quiet enough again for Jules to hear the gunfire approaching outside. Wait, they realize. Does this mean they’re going to die? Are they about to be slaughtered along with all of David Sawyer’s other followers?

The thought is so embarrassing they've avoided it until this moment. But now they realize that to the approaching army, they'll be seen as just another one of the anonymous internet weirdos here. Another Public Access Afterworld reject, like Emily's EKG test showed, and the video store just reconfirmed.

Across the pantry, Jules stares at the only person who ever made them feel different. Bethany Peters, who marched up to their counter at the Turbo Putt less than a month ago and suddenly made *everything* seem possible. She's trying to leave now. Abandoning Jules once and for all.

A rush of panic shorts out the numbness of the drugs in their system. Shame and anger return, and Jules feels the sudden, hot sensation that usually makes them want to reach for a razor blade. But they don't have a razor blade, so they grab the next best thing in the room with them.

Shelves come crashing down in the struggle that follows. Oversized cans topple onto the pantry floor. Jules pulls Bethany out through the entryway. David's security camera knocks off its hinges and topples from the ceiling down to the ground. The blinking red light shorts out. Bolts and hinges come undone.

And across camp, at that same moment, back in his surveillance center, the feed on David Sawyer's laptop abruptly cuts to black.

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2026

THE IRONY OF IT all wasn’t lost on him.

• • •

David Sawyer had always wanted to live in a TV show. Even when he was still a child, even back before he knew how to speak or even think, David had always longed for another world.

Real life just didn’t measure up. Because what did it have to offer him, really? A best friend he was in love with who was going to leave him for sure after graduation. A job at the CVS because all the Blockbusters in the state had closed. A never-ending succession of banal interludes where nothing ever really happened, where there were no real character arcs or plot twists like on TV, just the plain and insufficient everyday scraps of regular existence. His eyes a screen broadcasting unedited footage of a movie no one would ever want to watch. The first-person POV of some awkward kid who no one ever really understood or liked, who didn’t even really like himself either. A livestream of mundane fragments and anticlimaxes with a viewership of exactly one. An unremarkable existence. Unwitnessed, unrecorded.

How embarrassing that Jim Davis had read him accurately so long ago, so quickly on, that first night in the diner in Troy, New York. Sensed just how badly David had always wanted to be one of the special ones. The *crooked*, who could leave this world behind and enter a better realm. A place of pure television, where he could become someone else. Where something would finally actually happen in this life.

But David wasn’t like Chloe with her noir detective shows, nor Angela with her *Real Housewives*. He wasn’t like Dee with *The Twilight Zone*, or Lester with *General Hospital*, or Randy with his *Gossip Girl* dissociative

disorder, or even Erin with *Short Stack*. With “Air Ball Blues,” that very special episode with her name in the credits.

No. David didn’t have a TV show stuck in his head. He didn’t have a claim to the airwaves. He would never know what it felt like to be one of the special ones. All he could do was watch from the sidelines, squinting at static on one of his screens.

There was an ugliness inside him. Erin had sensed it long before he had. Had seen through to his true, rotten core back on that final night they spent together down in her basement in Hartsdale. Her last night on earth, when she’d glared at him while they had sex for the second and final time. *You want to live vicariously,* she’d said to him that night. *You like to watch, don’t you? Because that’s all you can do*.

And then she’d wrapped her fingers around his neck and squeezed so hard it was like she wanted to choke the life from his body.

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Just a few weeks ago, David had seen Erin one more time. His long-lost friend, beaming through the static on his biggest flat-screen.

That morning, Erin looked more vivid than she ever had before. The distortion around her face faded down until the static she’d emerged from, like always, was hardly visible anymore. Her signal was coming through clearly, the picture totally uncloudy. So high-fidelity that she almost looked real again.

“*I saw her,*” Erin said from the screen. “*The brightest one there ‘ll ever be, beaming through. She’s the one. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. Her name is Bethany Peters. She lives in Austin, Texas, but soon she’ll be departing for the desert.*

“*Her broadcast,*” Erin said, her eyes rapturous. “*Oh my god. It’s like it was coming through from a whole different network . . .*”

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11:51 A.M.

REALITY GLITCHES. COLOR BLEEDS. Frames of yellow and blue blink over Bethany Peters's irises. She chokes on sand.

"I'm not going to die for you!" Jules Estrada shouts from very far away.

Where is she right now? What's happening? Did she make it to Public Access Afterworld?

No. This place can't be that place. It's too similar to the world she just came from.

Bethany tries to sense her surroundings. She's back in the sunlight—that same sunlight she was so sure she'd never see again earlier this morning. And Jules is on top of her, screaming and shouting, bashing her head into the sand, raking her face through the earth.

"You want to leave me!" Jules Estrada shouts. "You're just like all the others!"

Bethany can't feel much. Jules's attack is a faraway sensation. Her body's numb, still way past the point of no return. She knows that whatever's happening to her, it's just a momentary signal intrusion. She's still so close to shedding her skin, like chicken cooked so perfectly it slips off the bone.

She blinks and squints up as Jules claws and shouts and spits, and it's like she's seeing them for the first time once again on a laptop screen back at GlobalVill HQ.

They're still in trouble, Bethany thinks through the daze of her diminished consciousness. *Even if the pills were fake, JulesPublicAccessAfterworld still needs my help.*

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David Sawyer stops watching. He jumps from the mattress and rushes out from his den of screens. He dashes into the morning light, almost tripping over himself because he's trying to run faster than his feet are capable of in the sand.

The battle has arrived. Out of the corner of his eye, David registers his whole operation descending into madness. His internet-followers-turned-cult-members have immediately turned on one another and their shared mission. They all jockey for the safest possible position behind the firing line, each trying to take cover, to use one another as human shields. It's like a desperate game of musical chairs, played to the death.

David watches as one of his once loyal followers tries to abscond. Eric, a scrawny guy from Des Moines, drops his weapon in the sand and sprints into the desert. He waves his hands in the air in a desperate attempt to show the approaching army he's no threat.

It doesn't work. David hears quick, clean sniper fire. Three shots, and then Eric from Des Moines is face down in the sand, feeding the ground red liquid.

David keeps running. He tries not to think about any of it. As gruesome as it all is to actually watch happen, this too was part of the plan. An eventuality David's considered for years. He knows that his core mission remains unchanged. He still has only one job left to do.

Protect the receiver. Protect Bethany Peters for as long as he possibly can.

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He finds Jules outside the mess hall, shouting and scraping Bethany's face bloody. David rips Jules off their target, then holds them back. Jules continues to struggle and shout and try to break free.

"Let me go! I'm not going to die for her! I'm not going to die for Bethany Peters!"

David uses all his strength to subdue Jules, to hold them in place. Bethany twists and writhes in the sand like she's turning in her sleep. She's barely conscious, stuck somewhere between dream and waking.

Good, David thinks. *That means she's still on her way. That there might still be a chance.*

“You need to go!” David shouts at Bethany. Jules keeps seething and struggling against his grasp.

Bethany hesitates for a moment. She looks up at David, her eyes glossy and faraway. But her gaze, David feels that same sudden jolt he felt back in his surveillance center when Bethany looked at him through the security camera. Once again, there’s something in that stare that makes David feel utterly exposed. Something so penetrating it feels like he’s not even real. That he’s her, looking at himself, seeing David Sawyer from the outside in, studying him like a corpse on an autopsy table.

“I made it to the other side of the mirror,” Bethany says. “I made you a TV show.”

Her gaze pierces him. Everything is muted now except for Bethany’s stare. David no longer hears the gunfire and screaming all around him. Bethany smiles, and even though her face is stitched with sand and fresh blood, it’s probably the most peaceful smile that she’s ever smiled in her entire life. The sun beats down on Bethany from this sky—this sky she’s leaving behind, it paints her body in warm yellow. And then Bethany turns and rushes back inside the mess hall, back to the pantry, back to that last in a long line of waiting rooms she’s been stuck inside her whole entire life.

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For Jules, it’s all one final humiliation ritual. Being held in place right outside the building, being forced to just stand there in the desert sun as Bethany runs inside alone towards her grand destiny on the other side of the screen. As the receiver passes from the mess hall into the pantry and pulls the door locked behind her so Jules can’t even watch, can’t even see Bethany Peters actually leave the world. And then there’s a big flicker of neon that Jules only catches a sliver of through the crack in the door, and after that it’s all over. The light fades down, David loosens his grip, and Jules doesn’t even bother chasing after Bethany, because they know it’s already over.

It’s just a few minutes before noon in the desert. The gunfire has arrived on David’s doorstep, and the only person Jules Estrada ever loved in their whole stupid life has left this broken world behind.

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IN THE YEARS TO COME . . .

DAVID WILL SOMETIMES WALK into that pantry again. Usually late at night when he's overwhelmed with guilt and anxiety about all the people who died that day, or about all the girls he spent his life making disappear. It's a ritual for when he needs to calm down and reground himself in the awful truth that eventually settled in after that seemingly climactic morning in the desert. After Bethany left for Public Access Afterworld.

She wasn't the one. Bethany Peters had never been the receiver. She was just another false lead. Another anticlimax. Another girl David sent to hell. The years pass, and David only becomes more convinced of it. Because after that morning, nothing changed. Bethany Peters never returned. Life just kept going on.

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After David checked and confirmed Bethany's crossing that morning, he'd rushed back across the compound trying to save whichever of his remaining followers he could. The sun beat down on the carnage in his front yard and he shouted at the top of his lungs for a ceasefire, desperately waving an invisible white flag for Shailene to catch and possibly grant him mercy.

"It's over!" he kept shouting. "Stand down! Please! She's gone!"

Six of David's followers were already dead, face down in the sand. Shailene oversaw a thorough search of the compound. She took readings from her various e-meters, confirming that there had indeed been a crossing earlier that morning in this exact location. But for now, everything seemed copacetic. Reality wasn't collapsing in on itself.

Then, after a very long day, once Shailene and her men finished their sweep and were ready to move out back to civilization, David hopped on

one more Microsoft Teams call to paper things over with the CEO whom he now understood wasn't just Shailene's boss, but his own as well.

"I hope we can forget all about this unfortunate chapter in what has otherwise been a very fruitful partnership," Fisch said. "We're fellow travelers, David. I really believe that. And there's still so much work to do to ensure that this beautiful world we call home remains safe."

He smiled at David like they were friends. But David knew the truth. The only reason Fisch had spared David's life was because of what a good job David had always done being his pawn. Making people disappear for the CEO.

After that day, David never had it in him to remove Bethany's belongings from the pantry. He kept the old laptop where she left it for years, on the computer desk, underneath the small yearbook photo of Erin Morrison with his handwritten note scribbled on the back.

Call it a shrine. A private museum that now only David visits. A tribute to the final false messiah he'd gotten so many people killed for.

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These days, David likes to head into the pantry late at night and rewatch Bethany's final video. That vlog she recorded shortly before she departed, her so-called Pink Eye TV episode.

There's something about that video that calms David down. Like his old horror movie fantasies or that morbid thought experiment about what would happen if his mind kept living long after his body died. Watching Bethany on the laptop screen feels terrible, and that's exactly what makes it feel comforting, too.

No matter how many times David watches that video, he feels the same jolt in his body when Bethany appears on the screen, her digital avatar now long outlasting her actual physical form. It's the same feeling David had the last time he saw her in real life, when she looked right through him in her last moments on earth, rendering him naked in her gaze. When she told him, "I did it. I made you a TV show."

When David first heard Bethany speak those words that morning out in the sand, he assumed she was talking about this video on the laptop screen.

That this was her final offering: a Pink Eye TV show that she had made just for him.

But now, after years of watching Bethany's final vlog, David has a new theory. When Bethany told him that she'd made him a TV show, maybe she meant it quite literally.

Here's what Bethany said in her final video . . .

I’m telling myself the story of my life. I’m telling myself the story of my life. I’m telling myself the story of my life.

Once there was a child. I’m not going to tell you the name of the child because it doesn’t matter. But this child had an imaginary friend, and her name was Bethany.

Bethany was beautiful. Bethany was brave and strong and resolved. Bethany went on adventures that the child knew he didn’t have the courage to go on himself.

The child understood that Bethany was an imaginary friend. It’s not like he actually saw her there in front of him. But she existed in his mind, and in his thoughts before bed when no one else was paying attention. To him, she was real.

Eventually the child’s parents grew concerned. They thought the child was sick, and they sent him to a psychiatrist. But he refused to talk to the psychiatrist. He knew she wouldn’t understand the way that Bethany was real. Instead he just cried and cried.

When the child was sixteen, he had a breakdown. He almost ended his own life, but his imaginary friend Bethany was there to stop him.

His parents sent him to a hospital that they thought might make him better. There they tried to make him admit that Bethany wasn’t real. But the child couldn’t do it. He could admit Bethany was in his head. He could admit that she was imaginary. But he knew that if he admitted she wasn’t real, everything would be lost. After all, she had been the one who kept him safe during his suicide attempt. He needed her to be real.

I’m telling myself the story of my life. I’m telling myself the story of my life.

The child decided in the hospital to "make it real." It was there that the transformation occurred. It was there that the child became Bethany. And she was brave and strong and resolved, just like she had always been when she was someone else's imaginary friend. And she was beautiful. And she was real.

Except there was one thing Bethany hadn't anticipated. Even after she made herself a person, after she left the hospital and moved away from the town where she was born and built a life for herself—as herself—she realized that she too now had an imaginary friend that could never go away.

It was the child she had been, and it was as if they had switched places. Once she had been the boy's imaginary friend, and now he had become hers. He lived inside her head just as she had once lived inside him. And he was still broken. Broken forever.

I'm telling myself the story of my life. I'm telling myself the story of my life (instead of living it).

Eventually Bethany realized that she had struck a deal when that person whose head she used to live inside was sixteen, on that night when the boy tried to end his life and the two of them almost both became nothing. Bethany had kept him alive. And now as long as Bethany was alive herself, he still would be as well, scared and shattered in his childhood bedroom. So he lived with her. And now he was the imaginary one inside her head. And yet she knew he was still very real at the same time.

Had she created him or had he created her?

What never stops changing but always remains static?

POSTSCRIPT

The Video Store

THE BELL ABOVE THE front entrance dings twice: once upon opening, and then again after the door slams shut.

Bethany swallows a puff of stale air-conditioning. Sheryl Crow sings from a shoddy wall-mounted speaker.

“Oh, hello there,” the man behind the checkout counter says. He looks almost exactly like the actor Seth Rogen. “Let me know if you need help with anything.”

Bethany lets her eyes drift around the space, past walls lined with VHS tapes. Her head feels all cobwebby again. Like a mouse has gotten into her frontal lobe and chewed through all the wiring. What is this place? Where is she?

That’s right. *Captain Video.* Fragments of all she left behind play back in her mind like slides from an old projector. The standoff in the desert. Jules Estrada raking her through the sand, screaming at the top of their lungs. Cans of beans looking down at her from pantry shelves. The static men who wanted to lead her here. That storm of electricity, and the glowing door before her, opening out of existence.

It all feels far away now, as if it happened to someone else. Actually, her whole life feels like this. She can still remember her childhood in Harlingen. Moving to Austin. Her sojourn in Lubbock and that road trip through the desert to David’s compound in Los Alamos. But it’s as if it’s all suddenly less something she actually lived through and more like a Wikipedia plot summary she once read.

The mildest wave of panic rises in her chest. It’s all she can muster, and it’s not very much. *This isn’t right,* a muffled voice seems to cry inside her. *You shouldn’t have come here. You need to turn back right now.*

Bethany looks behind her. The front door she’s just entered through has closed back shut, and whatever used to be on the other side of it is now fully obscured by painted glass. Amateur drawings of Luke Skywalker battling Darth Vader. E.T. and Indiana Jones with their arms around each other. Jaws leaping from the ocean.

She squints at the cryptic text written on the door, failing to make sense of it. “!SESAELER WEN,” “AMARD,” “IF-ICS,” “YDEMOC.”

DIIIIIIING.

Bethany hears a chime. It’s not coming from the little bell fastened to the door, but from just above it, where a wooden placard has been bolted up with three colored lightbulbs screwed in a line. One green, one yellow, one red. The green light shuts off at the dinging sound, and the red light immediately turns on.

Bethany stares up at the wooden placard on the wall She doesn’t bother trying to open the front door. She gets the point.

“Hey,” the clerk who looks like Seth Rogen says from behind the counter. “Did you know you get a complimentary box of popcorn with every rental?”

“The receiver . . . The receiver . . . The future of television . . .”

Bethany hears another voice coming from somewhere else in the store. She looks around, squinting past the little circus-style popcorn machine and the “Out of Order” *Mortal Kombat II* arcade game in the corner. Past those thick velvet curtains leading towards the store’s sectioned-off “ADULTS ONLY” area. There she finds the dead weatherman leaning against a pushcart stocking shelves and whispering to himself as he places each VHS box back in its designated spot.

“*The receiver . . . The receiver . . . The future of television,*” Ray “Can You Say Sunshine” Davino mumbles as he sees to his daily work.

Bethany’s gaze lingers on the bullet hole in his head. It’s still fresh. A tiny trickle of blood drips down his temple.

“Don’t mind that guy,” the Clerk tells Bethany, calling her attention back. “He’s kind of a creep, but he’s ultimately harmless. Trust me: I don’t do the hiring around here.”

• • •

Bethany browses the shelves. She discovers that it’s hard for her to think about much of anything right now. The Clerk keeps staring at her like he really wants her to rent something, and Bethany feels an instinctive urge not to let him down. Whatever’s happening inside her mind is rendering her

meek and obedient, totally anxious. Not so much eager to please, more disproportionately worried about what might happen if she doesn't. She makes a mental note of her newfound docility. Something to think about later when she's feeling more like herself again.

She drifts from aisle to aisle. The tapes in the store are organized into different sections based on genre. There's Sci-Fi and Drama, Classics and Comedy, all the tapes categorized and arranged into a system of interlocking cubicles.

As she continues browsing, Bethany realizes that there's something odd about the selection of the tapes available here in Captain Video. *All of the boxes are blank.* Every single plastic case is identical: plain white with no movie title or text written on it. Not even a hint of individual design or differentiation. So how is Bethany supposed to make a choice about what to rent?

The Clerk watches her as she browses. Each time Bethany picks up a new box, the man raises his eyebrows and makes a frowny face. He's backseat driving her shopping experience, indicating subtle excitement or skepticism based on which blank case Bethany weighs in her hand at any given time.

So she begins to choreograph her movements based on the Clerk's silent cues. She sticks to the "New Releases" section because that's the one he seems to like best. Bethany withdraws a slow succession of random cases from the shelves, holding each tape in her hand and waiting for the Clerk to react. Eventually she leans down to the bottom of one shelf and picks up a box from the lowest row. She hears the Clerk let out an audible "oooh" sound, and so she decides—this must be the one. She brings the tape up to the register.

"Great selection," the Clerk says. "If the watercooler chatter is any indication about this one, it's going to be a big hit."

"The receiver . . . The receiver . . . The future of television." Bethany looks over at Ray "Can You Say Sunshine" Davino again. He's still mumbling to himself, now hunched over a watercooler, sipping from a little paper cone cup while little brain bits trickle down past his eyes.

"*The future of television,*" he repeats. "*The destroyer of worlds.*"

Bethany feels a subtle twinge of anxiety. Is he talking about her?

“Don’t let him scare you,” the Clerk says, as if reading her mind. “He can be a little drama queen. That’ll be four dollars and ninety-nine cents. Or if you’d prefer, we can put it on store credit.”

Bethany pats down her pockets, looking for a wallet. “Store credit it is,” the Clerk says.

DIIIIIIING.

Another bell rings, this time from the other end of the store.

The Clerk hands Bethany her blank VHS case then nods towards the thick velvet curtains on the other side of his checkout desk. The sectioned-off “ADULTS ONLY” area at the back of the store. There’s another wooden mount of lightbulbs fastened to the wall above it. Red, yellow, green. Bethany watches as the yellow light turns off and the green bulb dings on.

Bethany stares blankly ahead. The Clerk nods again towards the curtains, trying to nudge her along on her journey. Bethany searches inside herself for any recognizable feeling. Confusion, trepidation, curiosity. But all she can muster is the same dull desire to follow orders, so she tucks her VHS case into the waistband of her jeans and she walks past the checkout counter.

“Don’t forget your complimentary popcorn,” the Clerk calls after her.

Bethany nods. She picks up a little circus-style popcorn box from the table in front of the curtains. Then she continues ahead, parting velvet, allowing herself to slip gently through.

The Clerk watches from his checkout desk. Ray “Can You Say Sunshine” Davino continues to sip water from his cone cup, bleeding from the hole in his skull.

Bethany inhales deep as she passes to the other side. She can feel her mind muffling over further, like her sentience is rubbing off on the velvet. Like her brain’s not allowed to travel with her wherever she’s going.

On the other side of the video store’s “ADULTS ONLY” section, she finds a vast clearing, a gaping open mouth like the inside of a cave. She steps out from the obscuration of the curtains onto a small rickety platform. The air is musty and wet. She spots a minecart parked a few feet ahead of her on thin metal tracks stretching down over the edge of a nearby cliff, careening along a winding path into the cavernous darkness, leading down towards the vast nothing below.

Bethany pauses, staring out over the edge into the void. She takes a few steps forward, letting her feet dangle over oblivion's lookout point. She doesn't need any interdimensional video store clerk to tell her what she's supposed to do next. She clutches her little complimentary popcorn box, makes sure her VHS rental tape is still tucked safely into the elastic lining of her jeans, and takes her seat in the minecart.

Once she's boarded the ride, a ceiling panel of space-age lights above her powers on. A safety bar lowers over her hips, automatically locking into place. The minecart heaves to life with a brief convulsion. Bethany worries for a moment as her cart wobbles into open air that the track below her vehicle might collapse under her weight, send her tumbling forever into the bottomless pit below. But no. The ride is well constructed. The rickety minecart wobbles down its pre-programmed paths, and Bethany eases. She settles into her seat and takes in the sights.

Soon, as Bethany's minecart continues down the track, she discovers that it's not all darkness beneath the video store. At first all Bethany can see are just a few dim sparks out in the distance, like faded Lite-Brite pegs twinkling against the void. But as her minecart bumps and twists around all the sloping curves of the tracks below, something grander begins to appear. Through her deepening haze, Bethany realizes what she's looking at is *utterly majestic*.

Lights blink from inside a giant translucent cylinder. Transmissions swim, rising and bending within the enormous clear casing. It's a grand collage of broadcast signals, the pictures all flickering in pristine quality, wedged together and twirling volcanically up through the massive cylinder.

The airwaves. Bethany watches them beam and dance so beautifully, squeezed together and rising up towards the now-distant video store above. Inside the cylinder is television. All of television history, wedged and encased, each broadcast a tiny constellation of light in a massive, overcrowded night sky. In there Bethany sees analog and digital, black and white and color, sitcoms and dramas. *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Gong Show*. Dick Cavett and Larry King. Friday-night movies and Saturday-morning cartoons. The past and the present and the future, too. Shows that haven't been invented yet. Shows that were canceled long ago.

It's almost too much for her to look at. A glowing, million-headed beast trapped in clear plastic casing. All those broadcasts rushing upwards, and

here’s Bethany Peters alone and nearly empty of herself, without even a camera to take a picture of such an awe-inspiring sight.

Her minecart rumbles and continues its descent, twisting around that giant plastic casing. As Bethany travels farther down, the shimmering signals inside the cylinder that once broadcast so clearly begin to break and distort. They grow duller and dim, more oblique, regressing from clear decipherable images into a soup of light and color, until soon they’re vague, scrambled glitches. The resolution keeps degrading the farther down Bethany travels, passing from perfect 4K into total pixelation. Bethany feels *herself* degrading, too. Chopping and distorting, her body losing resolution as she descends into the absolute basement of the universe. It doesn’t matter that she’s a person, not a broadcast, or that her minecart remains outside that massive tower of television. She’s disappearing, fading down along with everything else.

She senses that soon she’ll be all the way gone, but it doesn’t bother her because she’s left her will up above along with everything else about her. She’s ready to be buried. To be blanketed under gauze so thick and heavy it numbs everything she’s ever imagined herself to be.

Before she loses full control, she opens up the cardboard flaps on her circus-style popcorn box. The kernels inside are stale and oversalted with a thick yellow coating, the color piss gets when someone’s really dehydrated. Bethany treats herself to a handful as her minecart passes down farther and everything fades to darkness. Now she becomes part of it. She checks to make sure her VHS tape is still tucked safely in the waistband of her jeans. And, finally, she arrives.

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EPISODE TEN
SELF-TITLED
(*PUBLIC ACCESS
AFTERWORLD*)

OceanofPDF.com

1

PREVIOUSLY ON *THE WOLVES of Birmingham* . . .

• • •

My season finale begins with a recap. A montage of clips overviewing everything that's happened so far this season. It's catch-up, but it's more than that, too. It's foreplay, meant to get viewers in the mood for all that's ahead.

We begin with a scene from the pilot episode. There's brave young Tullycraft, heir-in-waiting to the Clan Lycra throne, out for his morning hunt on the outskirts of the plantation kingdom. He falls through undisturbed brush into water below, and finds a body buried deep beneath the bayou, preserved in ice. *Aries*, the last living sapiens in Second America. She awakens with a harsh inhale, her first gasp in a thousand years.

The scene switches. Now to later in the pilot. Werewolf troops rush through the secret tunnels underneath the plantation kingdom. Wise Wolfen Balor recites the ancient Lycra prophecy.

"And the last furless one shall emerge from the ice and bring forth a true United States of Monsters."

Next, a scene from episode three. Vampire forces kidnap Aries. She gasps for air once again as a hood muffles over her.

Now episode four. The father-son debate in the throne room. "No son of mine is going to throw away his life to protect a filthy human!" "Well, then, I suppose I am no longer your son." The camera rushes behind Tullycraft. It's episode five. He flees the bayou, mounts a horse with Bichael, his ever-faithful ward (and *The Wolves of Birmingham*'s fan favorite comic relief) by his side.

The camera speeds across borders. Lush green transforms into drained yellow. Husks of dead corn, signaling our arrival to the vampire kingdom of Mississippi.

Further into episode five now, just before the big mid-season action set piece. A vampire minion must be restrained from sinking his teeth into Aries's neck because King Lestat has bigger plans for her. Aries whittles a chair down to the nub, refashions it into a makeshift wooden stake. Aries is small but strong. Tender but tough. This TV show has feminist themes.

Episode six. Aries rides across the wasteland of Second America with Tullycraft and Bichael. The drum beats faster. The recap speeds up.

Highlights now of the constitutional congress from episode seven. Shifting allegiances. The ogres of West Virginia break their long-standing pact with Clan Lycra. "The vampire kingdom is on the march, my lord." Wise Wolfen Balor again. "They acquire new allies for the battle to come."

Episode eight. Greedy Uncle Morphole cements his secret pact with the vampire king. "Kill them all. Starting with my brother."

The cliff-hanger from the end of episode nine. King Lubron's big death scene. He's stabbed atop the throne by his own younger brother. Death crosscuts with life. Back in the bayou, Aries and Tullycraft make love for the very first time. Aries gasps like she's choking, just as she did when she first emerged from the ice in episode one.

"You will give me a child," she says. "And just as the prophecies foretell, he shall usher in a true United States of Monsters."

The HBO man thunders in the sky.

"And now . . . the season finale of *The Wolves of Birmingham*."

• • •

Cue the theme song. The London Symphony Orchestra soundtracks our propulsive opening credit sequence whisking viewers over a CGI map of Second America. The names of our earth actors appear one by one. Sigils update over the CGI territories that have changed hands since last episode, keeping viewers abreast of the ever-shifting balance of power in Second America. Eventually the camera settles on Louisiana. Clan Lycra's home. The wolf and the crossbow logo, and then the show's title.

The Wolves of Birmingham.

Dun dun dun. Bah bum.

The opening credits fade. All is briefly quiet. One final name appears over black. The Executive Producer. The Earth Creator. The man above with the title of showrunner, who believes he created this realm, who honestly thinks he's the one who dreamt these episodes up over years of brainstorming and outlining, spirited debates in his writer's room. How naïve. This man knows nothing of the other creator—the one down below. The one invisible even to herself, with a sickness in her chest so deep it must be converted into prestige television.

• • •

The theme song ends. It's time for the episode to really begin.

The season finale starts right where things left off at the end of episode nine. Tullycraft wakes up on the forest floor, intertwined with Aries. He lets her sleep. The camera watches from up above the canopy line.

Tullycraft sits up, then notices smoke pluming from city distance. He realizes something is wrong. He leaves Aries behind and races on all fours through the forest. Returns home to the plantation kingdom of New New Orleans for the first time since episode four.

His mother greets him in the Great Hall with tears in her eyes, a widow's shawl draped over her fur-laden brow. Tullycraft doesn't need to hear the words from her mouth to understand what's happened. He lowers his hind legs and howls to the heavens.

The scene switches. The camera returns to the marshland, watches from above once more as Aries wakes up on the forest floor. She stretches her body over wet soil, feeling the dampness on her naked skin. She gasps with her awakening. Another harsh inhale, just like in episode one when she first emerged from the ice.

I died so young.

Was I ever really anything at all?

Aries shakes off the nightmares of slumber. She returns to her body. To the reality of the season finale. She tries not to think about that momentary

rush of asphyxiation she just experienced. She realizes that Tullycraft is no longer by her side.

Something is wrong.

Something is wrong.

She gathers her clothes. The scene changes. Now Aries tramples towards city center. Peasants parade through the streets, carrying the dead king's coffin, howling at the moon in an homage to the real New Orleans tradition of the second line parade (the kind of realistic touch that makes this show "prestige").

The werewolf masses swallow Aries up. Their paws trample her tiny human body into the cobblestone street. She struggles for air. She's Marge Simpson on a couch, getting fucked into the cushions. *No. What?* This is just a small moment in the first act of the season finale, meant to keep the action up and remind viewers at home of *The Wolves of Birmingham*'s feminist themes. How even small-bodied humans can do very big things.

Aries swims through the hordes. She gasps for air as she rises to the surface. Always struggling to breathe. Always choking. She navigates the swarm. She reunites with Bichael by the castle gates. Good. It's time for some comic relief. Bichael tells Aries of the king's passing. Aries begins to cry.

"I'm surprised to see you so sad," Bichael says. "You do remember that the king hated your guts, right?"

"I'm not sad about the king's passing," Aries tells him. "I'm sad because I know what Tullycraft will try to do next."

The scene changes. The season finale plows forward. Aries finds Tullycraft in his dressing chambers, suiting up for the big confrontation with Uncle Morphole in the throne room.

She begs Tullycraft to forget about his father's murder. To run away with her and leave Clan Lycra behind before it's too late. Cue the London Symphony Orchestra once again. Aries reminds Tullycraft how she spent a thousand years frozen underneath the ice, until, finally, ten episodes ago, she was gifted a chance at life once again. And now she's in love. She can't lose this feeling. The way that Tullycraft looks at her like she's a real breathing human being. Not a monster, as everyone else in Second America sees her.

A feeling she once equated with love.

“We must leave,” Aries insists. “We can find safe harbor in Los Angeles. The Angels will hold their position of neutrality.”

Tullycraft protests. “No. Not even Clan Gabriel can be trusted anymore. Don’t you see? I have no choice. I must stay and fulfill my birthright. Because if I don’t, nowhere in Second America will be safe anymore for people like us.”

“*People like us!*” Aries shouts, spitting her lover’s words back at him. “You speak as if we are the same, but have you forgotten? I’m the only one, Tullycraft. The only human left alive. For a thousand years I slept beneath the ice. And then with one harsh breath, I . . . I . . .”

Aries trails off. She’s forgotten her next line. Is that even possible?

She just stands there, confused and frightened, wheezing, choking.

Tullycraft looks at her. He’s confused as well. He doesn’t know what to do, because nothing like this has ever happened in his TV show before. Aries just stands there in the throes of déjà vu. She keeps gasping for air. Eventually Tullycraft has no choice but to move on to his next line.

“And that is why we must come together and fight as a unified front,” he says. “To protect our future kin. To protect the werewolf kingdom. So that one day we might live to see a true United States of Monsters.” *I’m a chemical spill in the middle of the Friday-night dinner rush,* Aries thinks. It’s as if the thought is coming from somewhere far outside her own mind.

Asleep underneath the highway, listening to the waves above.

“I died so young,” she says out loud, even though it’s not the episode’s dialogue.

Tullycraft looks even more confused. He knows full well that this isn’t canon. This isn’t supposed to be her next line.

“I was just a speck,” Aries says. “A bottle of anxiety and emotions. Clueless and nervous.”

The score cuts out. The London Symphony Orchestra quiets. Even the camera knows something is very wrong.

Aries keeps struggling to breathe. She gasps and chokes, far away from herself, as though she’s still buried underneath the ice, as though she never woke up in postapocalyptic Second America, as though she isn’t here at all.

Everything in the season finale bleeds before her. Tullycraft's face drips and stretches. His eyes melt with the walls of his dressing chamber until the entire place is streaking downwards like rain on the window of a car.

"*Alone,*" Aries hears her own voice say. "*Underneath the stars . . . lost somewhere in the cinematic universe.*"

• • •

The season finale shorts out.

And very far away, all the way down in the basement of the universe, Bethany Peters reawakens to her patient body in Public Access Afterworld.

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2

WHAT IS GOING ON? Where am I?

I feel scattered. I'm all marbles. A jumble of sensation. A thousand bits of fuzz and hissing. Endless vibration. It's overwhelming. It's too much. It's pure chaos.

I want to be nothing, like I was just a second ago. But that's not possible. I can't turn this off, so instead I try to sense the dimensions. To feel the contours of my body, where I begin and end.

I sense the vibrations. I focus on them and realize they're coming from a table below me. I'm strapped down on a hard cement surface. I'm a body on a table and the table is humming like an electric chair. It's churning me up, scrambling me. I'm mid-disintegration.

I choke. Cough up my own spit. It's a struggle to breathe. It's a struggle to think. Vision is completely out of the question. Do I even have eyes?

Yes. I have eyes.

I sense their dimensions, but it feels like they're glued shut. I'm not in control. I can't move. This body I'm stuck in is racked with paralysis, like it isn't even mine.

Maybe it isn't. Maybe I'm a tourist inside it. A brief voyeur, squinting through a peephole I never should have found.

I keep gagging and choking, and now I realize why it's so hard to breathe. There's a tube down my throat. It sputters and sucks like a vacuum cleaner. I cough. Mucus and spit drip down my chin.

Whose chin?

Whose body is this?

I crave orientation. I crave control, so I try to answer the question. To search for a name and an identity to make this all feel less like a terrible

dream I can’t wake up from. What is my name? It should be a simple question. But the answer’s totally inaccessible. Try as I might, I can’t remember who I am.

I don’t like it. I want to go back to my season finale now. I think about my next scene. It’s going to be a highlight of season one of *The Wolves of Birmingham*. The big confrontation in the throne room between Tullycraft and Uncle Morphole. The scene that contains a big surprise death that no one’s going to see coming.

I try to go back there. Try to turn my sentience back off and reenter the world of *The Wolves of Birmingham*. *Please let me become Aries again,* I negotiate with this mind I’m stuck inside. *Please let me be television*.

It doesn’t work. That makes me even more scared, because usually it’s effortless. Usually I can move around my episode just by thinking about it. Switch scenes when it’s time to switch scenes. Float between characters and plotlines. Cue the London Symphony Orchestra. But here, now, whoever and wherever I am, I can’t control anything. Not even this body I’m trapped inside.

It feels wrong. I feel all bloated and raw on this vibrating table. My scratchy beard and the sweat matting down my body hair. I don’t like it—it’s an eternally unshowered feeling, as if this body I’m stuck inside is more a rotting plum than a person.

I try to move. I feel like a pilot in an oversized cockpit, strapped down with the controls just out of reach. I need to open my eyes. That’s the first step. Then maybe I can figure out where I am.

I focus all of my energy. I try to send a signal from my brain to my body.

Open, eyelids.

Open.

I blink. It works. I make myself blink. It takes all my will, but I manage to open my eyes. I don’t have the strength yet to move my neck or turn side to side, so all I can do is stare upwards.

Now I see where I am. I see what’s above me very clearly. It’s so stunning, so bright and radiant, that it partially stirs me out of my stupor. Now I remember. I’ve seen this sight a thousand times before on days like this, through these same eyes that I’ve always possessed but never really had to consider before.

I remember where I am, even if I still can’t remember my own name.

This is the hospital.

This is Public Access Afterworld: the place where my patient body lives when it’s not living inside its TV show.

I’ve woken up in the middle of one of my therapy sessions.

• • •

The tube down my throat keeps sputtering and sucking. The cement table below me vibrates and shocks.

I still can’t really move. I wish I could call for help. Summon a chaperone and tattle on myself, tell them I’ve woken up somehow during therapy. But I don’t have enough control yet over this body to do anything so complex as speak out loud. So I just lie there on the brutal surface of my table and keep staring up at those brilliant lights above me.

The airwaves. There they are, housed inside a massive, bulging container. That egg-shaped vessel made of thick, clear plastic, a firm encasing built into the ceiling of the therapy room, but stretching up far above it. A receptacle that holds within it all of the scrambles of our TV shows.

I see the tubes protruding down from the egg. Thousands of them. One stretches all the way into my mouth. And the others? Well, even though I can’t turn my head to see, I know they’re fastened down the throats of everyone else here in the therapy room. My fellow patients.

I wonder for a second if they’re all experiencing the same interruption that I am. If they’re awake too, unable to move or cry out for help. But then I register that all their tubes I’m staring at are still feeding TV signals upwards, spitting streams of glowing broadcast into the egg above.

No. None of them are awake. Unlike me, they’re still unconscious in their therapy sessions. They’re still transmitting, still asleep.

I lie awake and stare upwards. It’s beautiful, all those shimmering lights pouring out from my fellow patients. It makes me jealous, lying there watching everyone else’s TV shows feed up into the egg above. I watch all those broadcasts meet inside the egg. Watch them dance and circle around one another inside the ceiling vessel like they’re participating in some kind of ballet. If I squint really hard, I can make out the individual pictures

amidst all the twisting and frying. Not just colors and shapes. But people. Places. Scenes.

Look: There's *The Honeymooners*.

There's *The Andy Griffith Show*.

There's *Sex and the* fucking *City*.

I keep searching until I find my own contribution to the airwaves. *The Wolves of Birmingham*, the early scenes of my season finale from just before my broadcast cut out.

I squint up into the egg and watch it play back. The "Previously On" segments and the CGI opening credits. The name of my earth showrunner, and the werewolf second line parade, and Aries and Tullycraft in the dressing chambers, the scene during which that glitch occurred.

What was that?

I wonder again about it now that I'm a little more awake.

What went wrong?

I experienced some kind of signal intrusion. I lost my focus during my therapy session. Suddenly it felt like I was choking, and then I picked up a signal. The random fragments of memories that weren't my own. It was a disturbance, something from far away, from outside the realm of *The Wolves of Birmingham*.

That's never supposed to happen. My TV show is supposed to be a closed circuit. The character arcs pre-plotted, each line of dialogue labored over carefully. My mythology is meant to be precise. The continuity exact. Everything secure, serving its purpose as the episodes become seasons.

But somehow, today a phantom signal found its way into my season finale, and it was so jarring it made me snap back suddenly into this patient body. This form I've always technically inhabited, but that's always been hidden away somewhere deep and invisible. As long as I can remember, I've never had to think about any of this before. My patient body or the hospital where this body lives. That's not how it works in Public Access Afterworld. This is the bottom of the universe. The fidelity down here is so low that it's all scrambles. Everything runs on autopilot so we patients can focus on what really matters.

Doing our therapy. Making our TV shows.

Expelling our sickness.

• • •

I feel the tube down my throat continue to search for more television inside me. I listen to the awful sound the tube makes, like a dentist's drill, or a straw sucking empty air because there's no more milkshake left at the bottom of the glass.

I close my eyes, squeeze them shut, and try to imagine the next scene in my season finale. The big confrontation with Uncle Morphole in the throne room.

I picture it as vividly as I can. Play it over and over again on my inner eyelids. And slowly, mercifully, it starts to take on life, become my reality once again.

I feel myself drifting away. Thank god. Soon it's easy to forget this place. To leave my body behind. To ditch this pesky sentience and channel that glowing light inside me until I become it. Until my scenes are ready once more to be fed into the airwaves above.

I'm falling asleep. Right before I'm all the way gone, I hear the faint sound of the tube inside me wrapping its tendrils around my signal. The straw, refinding its milkshake.

The sound calms me down, because I know it means I'm transmitting again. I leave the hospital behind. I enter the throne room.

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3

“THIS IS TREACHERY!” Uncle Morphole growls. “My own nephew. A filthy usurper!”

I’m back inside Aries, my TV show’s hero.

She’s standing behind Tullycraft in the grand throne room, flanking her lover along their humble band of mutineers. Bichael and Wise Wolfen Balor.

The Lycra military surrounds us. We’re woefully outnumbered.

“No, Uncle,” Tullycraft says. “Our blood might run from the same line, but you and I have never been kin.”

Uncle Morphole laughs dismissively. He’s pure hubris. He doesn’t know what’s coming next, at the end of this scene. He looks at his palace guards, nods to the colonel in charge.

“And with what army do you hope to stake your claim?” he asks.

“This army,” Bichael says. He takes a step forward, then immediately trips, pratfalling on his face like a court jester.

“Wow,” Uncle Morphole laughs. “Some army you have there, nephew. Your bumbling ward, a senile old booksmith, and that disgusting *human* you parade about so shamelessly, disgracing your father’s legacy. I should have you executed along with the rest of these freaks. But you’re family, my dear Tullycraft, so I’m going to give you one last chance to bend the knee.”

It’s almost time for the big moment. I make Aries approach the throne.

“Mock us all you want,” she says. “But our little band of mutineers has something that you’ll never have, no matter how many kings you assassinate. No matter how hard you try to be worthy of that throne you sit on.”

“And to what do you refer?” Morphole says. “Spirit? Moxie? The courage to do what’s right, against all odds?”

“No,” Aries tells him. “Four bazookas from the U.S. Army we found buried underneath the ice. NOW!”

Uncle Morphole’s eyes go wide.

Tullycraft, Bichael, and Wise Wolfen Balor join Aries in uncloaking their robes to reveal those secret high-powered weapons from episode two. And before the werewolf army has time to react, before Uncle Morphole can shout any orders, a litany of CGI fireballs blast towards the throne.

In a matter of frames, Uncle Morphole is gone, unmade into splatter and stain on chiseled marble. This is one of the best twists in my entire season finale. Because here’s one character who won’t be returning for season two. Uncle Morphole, a long-shot bet paying off in the online death pools.

Little bits of gore splat down from the throne to the palace floor. No one knows what to do. Should the guards attack? Arrest the mutineers? Or does Clan Lycra have a new leader?

“Guards,” Tullycraft orders, “clean up this mess so I can take my rightful place on the throne alongside my *human* queen. The vampire army will be here by nightfall, and there is much to do.”

I make Aries smile. She takes Tullycraft’s hand. Together they march towards the weapons room.

“Come on,” Aries says as my score beats triumphantly. “The battlefield awaits.”

• • •

I finish my therapy session.

There are no more weird interruptions. Once the last scene of the day is out of me, the tube down my throat recedes back up into the plastic of the egg above. The table below me slows its vibrations and my straps unlock.

I’m back on autopilot now. Back to not having to think about this place or this body. I feel the static hum inside my skull. Cobwebs cover me, gauze me over.

My patient body gets up off the table. I walk without thinking about the fact that I’m walking. The other patients around me finish their sessions and

do the same. We all head towards the ramp at the far end of the room. Thousands of us, tracking dust from the unswept basement floor. Here but not really here, like magnets drawn across this massive airplane hangar. We join the single-file line forming by the towering ramp that winds upwards. We stand at the ready, shoulders slumped, all lost in our individual reveries. The memory of our TV shows' latest scenes.

Today I look around at everyone else in line. For perhaps the first time ever, I find myself really studying the faces and bodies of my fellow patients. It strikes me that we're each wearing the same set of clothes we always do down here, as if we've each been assigned a trademark outfit to wear day in and day out in Public Access Afterworld. For me, an oversized blank white T-shirt and sweatpants. For the guy a few spots ahead of me, an In-N-Out Burger vest with a nametag that says "Randy." And for the tiny woman right in front of me in line, a yellow dress.

I recognize that dress. I realize that I've seen it many times before. That I've zoned out on its patterns as we've all circled the hallways above the therapy room on so many days just like this one.

Wait a second, I realize. I'm doing it again. I'm thinking, without even meaning to.

• • •

Once the last session of the day ends and every patient has joined the line, we summon our chaperones.

It happens naturally, just like everything else down here. It's effortless for us, like a bowel movement. We all clench and release in our minds, and then the static escapes from inside our skulls, bleeds out through the pores in our skin. It plumes up into the air above us like a low-flying jet stream.

The static floats itself forward. It creates itself, growing brighter and thicker with each new patient it passes out of above. And then, once it reaches the front of the line, it settles into its preferred form, borrowing as it always does the sizzling approximation of human bodies. Electric silhouettes. A fleet of two dozen static men: our chaperones here in the hospital.

They all float forward, leading us in a silent procession up the ramp, out from the basement to the hospital's main floor, the place where we eat and

sleep and do stuff like that between our daily therapy sessions.

Unlike the therapy room, the main floor of the hospital isn't built underneath that giant egg bright with TV signals. It's built *around* it. Picture it this way: The main floor is shaped like a giant donut, and that glowing chamber of broadcasts is the donut hole. The hallways of Public Access Afterworld wind around it, forming an endless circle. And inside the off-limits middle part, all our TV extracts sizzle and fry and drift upwards, rising like heat towards their destination above. The distant, faraway world of my earth showrunner and all the others like him. The place where our TV shows push against the screen.

And then it's day sleep. We approach my room. I peel off from the line.

I stand outside my door, waiting for it to open. I read the nameplate in front of me. Something about it strikes me as funny. I must have stared at those letters on that nameplate a thousand times before, but I never bothered to read them until today.

This is my newfound sentience, I realize, rearing its head once again. I'm still thinking, like a bad case of the hiccups I can't quite shake.

"PATIENT," the nameplate on the door reads. "DAVID SAWYER."

I stare at those words, reading the name over and over. Is that supposed to be me? Is that the name that belongs to this body? Am I "David Sawyer"?

Mystery solved, I guess.

The door to my room opens. I go inside and hear the door lock behind me. I stare out the window in my room, squinting at the sun, at it's dull yellow, thick with saturation. It's comforting and easy to get lost within. The sun smiles back at me from beneath sunglasses, and eventually I get bored staring at it and go lie down in bed. It's time for day sleep.

I drift off under the thin, itchy covers while thinking about my next scenes. Tomorrow, I begin the Battle of New New Orleans. It's going to be a big day.

I fall asleep. I wake up later, and then it's second meal. And then it's night sleep.

And then it's first meal. And then it's therapy.

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4

I LIE DOWN ON my table and wait for the leather straps to strap me in. I feel the slab begin to vibrate, and soon my patient body becomes a Tilt-A-Whirl at the county fair.

My eyes fill with tears. *The Wolves of Birmingham,* I think. *The Battle of New New Orleans*. *Take me there,* I command my unconscious.

The static in my brain rumbles and rearranges. The next scenes of my season finale begin to take shape.

I hate this beginning part. The start of my therapy session is always the worst, because the scenes in my belly are still so unformed and vague that they almost feel toxic. Like milk pre-pasteurization, or brown sludge waiting to be fed through a filter so it can eventually become water.

This morning, I see inside my imaginary world, limbs and organs writhing, stretching in a sea of pink. I see Tullycraft, not as Aries's tender and heroic lover, but as he appears in the most sadistic of fan fictions—a monster, holding me down, strangling and fucking me deep into the bayou. I gasp and choke and realize that I'm worthless. That I'm not a heroic human girl. That I'm weak and pathetic—a useless thing meant to be used. My body sinks deep into the bayou, and now I become meat. My table quickens its vibration. I gasp and choke and become many bodies. The thousands of bodies that soon will be the vampires and werewolves and giants and ogres fighting the Battle of New New Orleans. But for now these bodies are just corpses, laid out and rotting in the sun, eyes bloated from napalm and carbon monoxide, the victims of some recent holocaust, or maybe the next one.

You get the idea—this part sucks. It's totally disturbing. I wish I could skip past it, but unfortunately it's essential to the therapy process. Because these early transmissions are the building blocks with which I'll soon construct the latest scenes of my TV show.

I keep working. I negotiate with the chaos. I begin to transform it. To add character arcs and plot twists. Camera angles and comic relief. It's not exactly like I censor myself—I don't turn the violence peaceful or make the bad good. It's more like I find *patterns* to make it all digestible. I'm sure you can understand, even if you've never psychically made a TV show. How everything can be put into its proper place. How there can be an order to things. A means of packaging chaos into digestible portions. I moderate all that's bad and ugly into safer form. I manipulate empty, hissing static into something better.

Episodes, until soon they're fully developed and ready to be sucked out of me, fed up my tube to my loyal viewers above.

• • •

My therapy session doesn't go so well today. It's probably my worst session ever. I only get through the first little moments of the Battle of New New Orleans. A shot of Tullycraft and Aries, side by side, preparing to lead the Lycra forces into combat, then a reverse on the vampire legions appearing on the horizon, sprinting forth against the freshly set sun. Tullycraft shouts, "NOW!" and then both armies charge full speed across the big dried-up quarry that stretches over the Louisiana-Mississippi state line.

That's it. Just four transitional shots. I don't even get to the battle itself. I'm embarrassed by my lack of productivity. I'm unfocused today. I feel lazy. I know I should be doing so much better than this. There's something else keeping me at arm's length from the world of my TV show. Whenever I try to focus, I find myself experiencing strange zaps: those same unwanted intrusions I experienced yesterday. The stray transmissions that caused me to wake up in the middle of my therapy session.

Today's interruptions are more frequent. They almost feel *normal*. I don't like them at all. They jolt me with a sense of dread and déjà vu. They fill me with a burning fire. I don't know how to explain it, but I can tell that these interruptions I'm experiencing are mad. They're angry, and they're trying to make me angry, too. They shimmer with the color of crimson. They speak fragments to me that make no sense.

You're a golf ball lodged in the tunnel under hole eighteen. Waiting to start the golf ball revolution.

You're a septic tank, willing itself to burst.

• • •

We finish our therapy sessions. Once I've shared my day's paltry offerings, I join the single-file line of my fellow patients. We conjure the chaperones from our heads and follow them up the ramp to the hospital's main floor.

I find myself thinking the whole time. My bouts of sentience are growing more frequent, to the point where now suddenly I'm noticing *everything* about the space that surrounds me. Details about the hospital I never bothered to study before. Like the peeling white wallpaper and the faded alphabet posters that look like they were hung by some deranged, renegade optometrist. The humming air ducts and the dripping pipes. I realize that this place is more run-down and shoddy than I ever noticed before. When you look closely enough, the decay is easy to see.

I study my fellow patients, and I realize that we're all run-down and decayed, too. All of us in our oversized outfits that never change. Our shaggy haircuts, which perhaps you could call retro except I'm pretty sure none of those styles were ever actually *in* fashion. Our clammy skin and patchy hair. The rings pruned four levels deep underneath our eyes.

I stare at the woman in the yellow dress in front of me and listen to her hum an old hymn and dig at her fingernails, pulling apart her cuticles. Then I look to the man in the burger vest whispering to himself the names of New York socialites like he's memorizing the phone book, the mean lady with pigtails in the fruit shirt muttering and glaring and shaking her head, cursing invisible enemies. I linger and stare at the young girl with conjunctivitis scratching in desperation at her big red patch.

We're sick. All of us. I guess that's obvious. This is a hospital, after all. But today for the first time I wonder: *What if this place is making us worse, not better?* My disobedience disturbs me. The thought feels forbidden. I once again briefly consider tattling on myself. Calling out to the chaperones to let them know that something is wrong with me. That I'm thinking. *That I can't stop thinking!* But then I realize that tattling on myself would be a

further exacerbation of the same root problem. I shouldn't be able to shout. I shouldn't be able to know that something's wrong with me. I shouldn't be present in this body at all.

Besides, I now think, if I did cry out, I doubt my chaperones would even hear me. They seem to be on their own version of autopilot, leading us down the same paths every day from day sleep to second meal. From night sleep to therapy. Maybe they're puppets, too. Unthinking and pre-programmed, just like us. Just like everyone down here.

Everything, except for me.

• • •

BZZZZZZZZ.

Something jolts me from my sentience. A loud hiss emanating from the center of the donut. It almost feels like my brain calling to me from outside my body.

I turn to face the egg of glowing broadcasts built into the middle of the hallway. I leave the line of my fellow patients behind and slowly approach the egg's clear plastic casing. No one notices that I've left.

I squint through the plastic like I'm looking into a fish tank at the aquarium. I study the fuzzy extracts of cowboy serials and old detective shows. The infomercials and black-and-white creature features in the great soup of television.

I find *The Wolves of Birmingham*. I watch my latest shots, still fresh from today's sharing. There are Tullycraft and Aries. The vampire army charging into battle with the last drips of sunset. And then I spot that sound that's calling to me like a voice from inside my own head. There . . . *right there* . . . there's something buzzing on the margins of my signal.

I sense immediately what I'm looking at. *The signal intrusions I've been experiencing.* The strange flares of déjà vu I've been having back in my therapy sessions. They've taken on physical form. Found a way to escape my body into the egg I feed. To hitch a ride up the tube down my throat with the latest scenes of my TV show.

They burn the color red. There inside the egg I see pure crimson static, angry and entropic, forming a harsh, thin border around the edges of my broadcast, glowing brighter than everything else in the egg.

I watch the red static sizzle and chew at the boundaries of my TV world. It's spreading, I realize. Chewing like termites through my show, and outwards as well, slowly invading all the lights surrounding it. The neighboring broadcasts of my fellow patients.

I turn to look down the hall, wondering if anyone else has noticed the virus I've inadvertently unleashed into our cage of television. But my fellow patients have passed far ahead of me. I catch only a brief glimpse of the last person in line as she rounds the bend and disappears from sight. It's the woman in the yellow dress. I spot the familiar floral patterns of her dress and hear the faint hum the last bars of "Amazing Grace," and for some reason it sends another sudden signal intrusion zapping into my brain.

Spatulas, my mind thinks without meaning to. *A woman with spatulas for hands.*

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5

THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH the window in my room.

I must have stared out that window a thousand times before, but today, suddenly it's so obvious to me: *That's not what a window looks like.*

It's fake. More like a painting of a window than a real window. Because all day every day, it shows the same scene: flowers and bushes and a little tomato plant, all underneath a big grinning sun wearing sunglasses. And then at night, the picture in the window transforms and it's just twinkling stars and a moon with a sleep cap on and *Z*'s coming out of its mouth.

Z, the letter of snoring.

But moons don't snore, and suns don't wear sunglasses. And beyond that, in my entire time here, I don't think I've ever seen it rain or snow outside. There's no spring, summer, autumn, or winter in Public Access Afterworld. No seasons at all. Just two options on an eternal loop: day and night.

This causes my newly active brain to wonder: How do I know this is wrong? How do I know that the sun doesn't actually wear sunglasses and the moon doesn't say the letter *Z* over and over again? How do I know there are even phases of the moon or different seasons or anything like that if they never happen here in the hospital?

Questions beget more questions. Soon I'm wondering: Have I seen the real sun before? And if so, how come I can't remember it? How long have I been in this place? How long have I been a patient in Public Access Afterworld?

How did I get here?

Travel all the way down there, and hope like hell I have the magic powers necessary to blow it up.

Make that CEO pay for what he did to me.

The fragments beam to me as if they're coming from some other, realer TV show. One that burns brighter and angrier than *The Wolves of Birmingham* ever could.

I'm a quarter dropping through a machine in the mall. Lights flash, and then I rest at the bottom.

There's no such thing as freedom. Not for people like me. There are just two things, on a loop, forever.

Prison and escape.

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6

I APPROACH THE WOMAN in the yellow dress in the cafeteria the next morning before first meal.

The cafeteria is usually a solitary place. Even if I'm sitting at a table full of people, really I'm eating alone. No one talks here, because no one's present enough to really be able to do so. Once the static men drop us off at the cafeteria, we all silently file through the serving station. We pick up trays from the automatic dispenser, then dollop our portions from the big vat of food that gets changed out every day. This morning's meal is soggy French toast with brown syrup. It's nothing special. It never is.

All of my fellow patients take their designated seats and eat. I pause as I exit the serving station. I survey the entire cafeteria, the thousands of bodies chewing, dribbling food down their chins.

I usually sit alone at a table in the left corner, but this morning I break from my routine, because I'm on a different kind of autopilot now. I'm still a puppet on a string, but I'm serving a different kind of master. Those new signal intrusions that are guiding me. I let myself be led. I wander through the cafeteria, heading towards her table. I set my tray down and sit across from the woman in the yellow dress.

"Hi," I say.

She doesn't look up at me, so I say it louder.

"Hi."

Now, as if she's being forced out of a pleasant dream, she raises her head and acknowledges me. The vacant glint in her eye tells me she's still hardly really here.

"Hello," she says, really polite but totally disinterested. She picks at the French toast on her tray, ripping it apart until her fingers are messy with syrup and batter.

“There’s something I’m supposed to tell you,” I say.

“Oh. What’s that?” the woman in the yellow dress asks.

I open my mouth, but then I realize that I don’t know the answer. Why did I actually come over here? What am I trying to do? My continued fogginess frustrates me. I wait for another transmission, for another signal to be beamed into my brain.

Think, I command my mind. *Remember*.

A century of screens, and so many women lost.

I grab the signal. I let it work through me.

“She wanted you to know that she’s sorry,” I say, surprising even myself with the words. The woman in the yellow dress stares blankly at her food. “About that morning. In the square,” I continue. “She wasn’t ready then. She wouldn’t be ready for many years. But she wanted you to know that she’s sorry, and . . . and . . .”

I struggle against my limitations. I tune my frequency to the revelations beaming into my head. I force the message out.

“. . . and not a day goes by that she doesn’t regret it,” I say.

I exhale.

I did it. I feel proud, because I know intuitively that I’ve figured out the mystery, even if I still don’t fully understand what the words mean.

The woman in the yellow dress blinks a few times. She smiles vacantly again and looks up from her food. I stare at her sunken cheekbones, her nails chewed down to nubs, all dirtied with French toast and syrup.

“That’s nice,” she says. “And who was that you were talking about? Mary Tyler Moore? Lucille Ball? June Cleaver?” Willa Fischer smiles at me. “Did you know I make all their TV shows? Their houses are wonderful.”

She looks back down and resumes picking at her food. I sit there in silence.

• • •

During therapy, it happens again. There’s another big glitch, and I wake up in the middle of my session. But this time it’s different. This time it doesn’t just happen to me. *I make it happen.*

The tube lowers into my mouth and the table vibrates. I work with the bad inside me to reform it into my big battle scene. Then I'm Aries, charging with the werewolf forces across the big open quarry that stretches over the Louisiana-Mississippi border. My camera frames the spectacle from on high so the viewers at home can see the scope of things. The thousands of werewolves and vampires, giants and ogres, and of course the one small but very special human body I'm inhabiting right now, all of us ready for battle, ready to end the first season of our hit TV show right.

I hear the drums on the soundtrack, the thunderous footfalls of monsters charging towards one another. The vampire fangs unsheathing. I look to my left at Tullycraft sprinting into the carnage. I look to my right at Bichael making a goofy sort of grimace, like *are we really doing this right now?* Classic Bichael. Usually I would smile back. But right now I feel bored. In the blaze of the signal intrusions beaming into my brain, this all feels utterly insufficient.

I squint past the enemy forces, looking for something else to occupy my mind. I realize that without even meaning to, I've started eavesdropping on the very limits of this realm. Peering towards the area that my camera doesn't touch. *Offscreen.* The margins that my battle scene will never reach.

This is interesting to me. This is new. Suddenly I'm curious. Less bored with the proceedings. I wonder what's out there beyond the offscreen limits.

I squint, trying to see. It's blurry at first. I assume that because my season finale doesn't need that space to exist, it simply doesn't exist. But as I charge with Tullycraft and Bichael, squinting ahead past the Battle of New New Orleans, past Second America, I begin to negotiate with this reality.

Show me, I command. *Show me what lies beyond my episode.*

And then, slowly, everything in my show begins to melt away. The forces of Clan Lycra—Tullycraft and Bichael and the vampires and ogres—it's like the volume gets turned down on all of them. The picture dulls. Everyone else degrades into lower quality until it's clear that I'm the only real person awake in this entire world. Aries. The last human left alive, hundreds of years after the apocalypse, thawing out from the ice.

• • •

I leave the battle scene quietly. I break off from the rest of the forces that just a second ago thundered around me so loudly. My allies and my enemies alike, now all just figments from some lesser, inconsequential realm.

I walk out past the margins of the dried-up quarry. I head towards the offscreen zone, that blurry area where my television show ends and something else begins.

The closer I get to it, the more it comes into focus, like a mirage revealing itself in reverse. Soon what was once a vague dark ocean begins to fill in its details.

I see a black-and-white cityscape. Los Angeles, but not the postapocalyptic version ruled by Clan Gabriel. I sense that the year is 1960. I see city streets bathed in shadows. Steam billowing up from sewer grates. Cop cars strobing colorless lights into the night.

It's right in front of me: this noir alternate world waiting on the margins of my show, towering into the sky like a gateway, a sudden divide rippling in front of me like a body of water. Has it always been there? Have I just been too preoccupied to notice?

I keep walking towards it. The Battle of New New Orleans is far behind me now. The carnage has begun. If I really try, I can still hear the shouting and stomping. But I'm far beyond the camera's reach. I'm headed somewhere else.

I stare into the black-and-white cityscape ahead of me. I'm so close that I can hear the muffled score from inside that neighboring realm. Moody, downtempo saxophone, so unlike the pulsing orchestral strings of the London Symphony Orchestra.

I reach my hand out. I can smell the trash left overnight on those dirty city streets. I try to touch the divide, to let my fingers graze over the gateway between postapocalyptic Second America and the black-and-white cityscape just beyond it.

The moment I do, it feels like I'm licking a thousand-volt battery. I feel my atoms threaten to separate completely, and the tube in my mouth sucks harder. It's a great shock of electricity.

And then I'm back awake on my table in the therapy room, and the tube down my throat is malfunctioning, sputtering inside my lungs like a snake on methamphetamines.

I remind myself not to panic. My mind is clear. I’m regaining more and more sentience with each disturbance I experience. I’m taking back control of this patient body. I know now that I’m not as powerless as they want me to think.

I did that. I made that happen, just by thinking about it. I woke myself up.

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7

WHEN I GET BACK to my room, the nameplate has changed. The sign on the door no longer reads “DAVID SAWYER.”

Instead, it now says:

“PATIENT: NOAH PETERS.”

I stare at the new name. I’m confused again. Is that supposed to be me? That doesn’t make any sense. A person can’t have two names, can they? Make up your mind, Public Access Afterworld—am I supposed to be David Sawyer or Noah Peters?

I try both names on for size. I see if they fit. And the more I sit with them, the more it becomes obvious that neither one is correct. Both names feel as though they belong to someone else. David Sawyer and Noah Peters, different variations on the same bum theme. A disguise someone’s dressed me up in while I was sleeping, to convince me that I’m not who I actually am. The hospital’s latest attempt to keep me sick instead of making me better. Which I’m starting to realize is the whole point of Public Access Afterworld.

• • •

I lie awake all night. I decide that I hate it here.

Nothing ever happens.

Nothing ever happens.

Here, in this place that they call a hospital, it’s always night sleep then first meal. Day sleep then therapy. Everything on a loop. None of us ever getting older. Never aging or dying or starting a family or falling in love or anything like that. Never having character arcs or changing in any real actual way no matter how many suns with sunglasses or moons with the

letter *Z* pass outside our “windows.” The only place anything like that’s ever allowed to happen is inside the TV shows we grow in our bodies.

It feels like a cruel joke. A sadistic consolation prize for not being allowed to live an actual life. How did I ever let them convince me that I was sick? That what they were doing to me here was therapy? Getting strapped down and having my most personal parts converted into television and sucked out of me so they can become someone else’s entertainment up above? Being made part of some interdimensional grid that I never consented to help power?

That’s not therapy. That’s a factory farm. That’s forced extraction.

That’s rape. *What they’re doing to us here is rape.*

Public Access Afterworld isn’t a hospital. I understand now. It’s a prison.

I need new language to describe this place. Like, for instance, this isn’t my “room” I’m locked inside against my will. It’s my *cell.* And those men who lead us up and down the hallways here every day . . . Those aren’t my “chaperones.” They’re my *prison guards.*

Lucky for me, they’re not very smart. I stay up late into the night, catching the stray signals, calling them towards my consciousness. I’m learning to work with them now.

Is this all there is? Crippling mundanity or all-out manic episode?

The digital era begins.

I’m realizing that I can control them. Can train those signal intrusions to help me wake up. It’s as easy as thinking. It just requires focus. In the same way I retrained my body to move off autopilot, I’m teaching my mind to remember.

I know how I sound. Like a crazy person, mumbling to myself on a crosstown bus. A mental patient. But I’m not crazy. I’m stronger than this place.

Maybe this is my superpower. Controlling washer-dryers at the fucking laundromat.

One last bender, so let’s make it count.

I stare at the door to my room. I concentrate, remembering that this is something I’ve done before. I have a superpower. I can control electricity. Make TVs turn on and washer-dryers start spinning. That’s what happened

in the stories beaming down into my head. That's what can happen here, too.

I squint and glare at the door. I pretend I've got ESP. I let the fantasy get so real in my mind, until I become really convinced of it. And in that exact moment when I believe it, the door to my cell malfunctions and shoots open.

I make it happen, key cards be damned. The paneling fritzes and pops like an overheated toaster, then shoots open.

• • •

I tiptoe out of bed. I'm a child sneaking out of my room in the middle of the night. It's scary, but it's exciting, too, because it feels like I've never been awake this late at night.

I creep into the hallway. I hold my breath. I try to become a shadow, but then I realize it's not necessary. I look in both directions and confirm that everything and everyone is asleep in this place. There's no night watchman on patrol. Those static men are off duty, sleeping inside my fellow patients' minds, nestled in their skulls.

I walk alone, circling the main floor for a while. I pass the empty cafeteria, and all the other cells. I think about using my superpower to overheat my fellow patients' automatic doors, to unlock their rooms and free them all. But I suspect it would be useless, at least for now. All the other patients here are still on autopilot. Still far away in their inner worlds growing their TV shows. They haven't received my signal intrusion yet. They haven't woken up. I'll need to reach them another way. I'll need to find them where they're trapped.

I wind around the circular halls. I find the long ramp that leads down to the therapy room.

• • •

I want to see *the lights of New York City one more time. I want to feel the wind on my skin on a cool spring night in the West Village, near Christopher Street. And I promise if you let me see it again, I won't tell anyone about it. I won't take a picture on my smartphone or turn it into a*

TV show or feed it to the sickness at all. I just want to experience it. Unwitnessed. Unrecorded.

Please let me see the lights of New York City one more time . . .

• • •

Down below I find the therapy room quiet. I'm moved by just how massive and cavernous the space feels when it's emptied of all my fellow patients. An entire underworld, stretching out beneath that glowing egg protruding from the ceiling.

I want to be alone in this room where all day, every day they strap me in and suck the glow out of me. I want to lie down on the concrete table and greet the airwaves above on my own terms. I want to stare up into those strange stars and feel the wonder of a child in the planetarium.

I walk between the empty tables until I find my own. I step from the cold linoleum floor and lie down on my back. For a moment, I wonder if the straps are about to lock around me like during my sessions. If the tube is going to jut down and force its way into my throat. But this isn't a therapy session. I'm alone in the night. I stay unplugged, stay inside myself.

I watch the broadcasts swim above me. I let my eyes go soft. I stare past the twisted slivers of cop shows and family sitcoms, the telethons and Teletubbies. I grow so calm and clear-minded that I start to see through them. To sense what's going on underneath each choppy broadcast. I reach the shows beneath the shows. The hidden broadcasts nestled under one hundred years of TV history.

Everything bleeds together in the softness of my gaze. My sight goes out of focus and double-visioned, and I see an old woman reaching out and caressing the camera lens in front of her, desperate to make contact with her grandchildren up above. I see a girl in a wheelchair trying to hide from her mother in a tiny apartment in Flushing, Queens, telling herself stories about distant adventures. A bored guy behind a counter at the In-N-Out Burger, shoulders aching from a thousand miserable lunch rushes. I see a girl with conjunctivitis, staring into the camera and welcoming viewers at home to Pink Eye TV.

I know her name.

I sense her glow.

That’s Chloe Edmonds from Allen Park, Michigan. That’s Angela from Des Moines, and Josie from Flushing, and Randy from L.A. County. That’s Willa Fischer, frail and malnourished in a yellow dress, alone at the kitchen sink, scrubbing a burnt pan until her fingers bleed. That’s Lucille Ball. That’s Mary Tyler Moore. That’s the skunked underimage of every TV icon. What’s always been lurking beneath their signal.

Find the receiver. Make it real.

Find the receiver. Make it real.

I hear another voice calling to me. It’s a little brighter than all the other signals, but still not quite bright enough to escape. It’s crying out from beneath a very special episode. An endless rerun bulging and pulsing in the egg above, overgrown like an inflamed spleen. I see Lil’ Angus trying out for the basketball team. Creepy Coach Horton drugging the child star in the locker room. *Just one more question, Mr. Detective: Can I still join the basketball team next season?*

Laugh track.

Freeze-frame.

Script Girl.

Red static surrounds this very special episode, slithering its electric tendrils upwards.

Find the receiver. Make it real.

Find the receiver. Make it real.

I go underneath the voice. I follow it. I find her name. That’s Erin Morrison. Former future valedictorian from Hartsdale, New York. Alone, underneath the stars, lost somewhere in the cinematic universe.

If you can save only one, the voices in my head remind me, *make it her.*

• • •

I watch the broadcasts a little longer until I’m ready to go back to my cell. I know I should get some sleep. I’ll be back in my therapy session tomorrow, back inside *The Wolves of Birmingham*, back to the Battle of New New Orleans. There’s so much I have to do, and so little time left in my season finale.

But before I leave the therapy room, there's one more signal I know I need to find. The final transmission from those strange episodes beaming into my skull. The missing puzzle piece that can connect all the others.

I let my eyes go soft and I go a little bit deeper. Past Chloe and Randy and Willa and Erin, past the red static. I go past David Sawyer and Noah Peters. I leave behind those fake names they plastered on the doors of my cells.

Now I see the Greyhound bus to Austin. I see long, open days at Cherrywood Coffeehouse, hiding in the air-conditioning for the price of a small iced tea. Crashing on Lily's couch to avoid becoming homeless. Dancing and drinking. An early twenties bender at Cheer Up Charlies. The night I said my real name out loud for the first time. Those early months of becoming, when everything felt so possible it was utterly terrifying.

I see Abel. The way he looked at me like I was already the girl I hoped to someday become. No one had ever looked at me like that, and I mistook the feeling for love. I see tofu scrambles and foot rubs on the couch. The forty-eighth *Game of Thrones* rip-off binge-watch. I see the night I finally accepted that I needed to leave. That I wasn't done becoming myself yet.

I see GlobalVill's Austin campus. I see the Gap and all my other shitty old jobs. I see Lubbock and the Turbo Putt. Jules Estrada angry and heartbroken, hurling golf balls at me. I see the second Greyhound bus to Austin. A flurry of violence. Stray bits of brain mixing with wasabi peas on a tech company floor, and then the desert and the government trash left out past Los Alamos and that sign with the monkeys on it. I see the pantry where David Sawyer kept me, where he tried to turn me back into the imaginary friend inside his head, where he tried to hide me on the other end of a one-way mirror.

I'm telling myself the story of my life.

I'm telling myself the story of my life instead of living it.

I see myself in the airwaves. I change the camera angle. I enter the glow, let it surround me. I become her, like I'm becoming a character in a TV show. It's easy. Natural, because everything is natural. And this time I don't need any nameplate on the door to let me know exactly who I am. The person who I'm becoming, who I'll always be becoming.

I’m Bethany Peters. Like Buffy from *Buffy,* or Xena from *Xena*, or Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman, from *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. I’m the hero of this particular TV show.

It hurts to remember, because the remembering always hurts.

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8

THE NEXT MORNING, BETHANY wakes up back in her cell. Her automatic door is still on the fritz, still off its hinges, stuck wide open. Bethany walks through it and joins the back of the line of her fellow prisoners. She marches with them to first meal, then sits alone, eating yellow eggs and soggy toast, feigning oblivion like everyone else.

And then it's down to the therapy room, and back onto the table. The tube juts down her throat. The table vibrates with electric shock, stirring up new scenes inside her.

Bethany closes her eyes and lets it happen. She knows where she's going, and she knows exactly what she needs to do there.

• • •

And then she's *The Wolves of Birmingham* once more, midway through the Battle of New New Orleans. She's the camera above the quarry, surveying the carnage. She's the casualties piling up in the dirt, and the somber score letting everyone know that things have never looked more bleak for Clan Lycra.

Next she's Bichael with a spear in his back. Then she's one of the fabled Giants of Missouri, thirty feet tall, squashing werewolves like mosquitos under his hoof. She becomes Tullycraft at his low point, believing the great battle is lost, searching the ocean of bodies for his lost love, fearing her dead, and then spotting Aries face down in the dirt.

Bethany becomes the camera as it enters slow motion, and then she becomes Aries. In the continuity of the show, it's time for another moment of feminist empowerment. This is supposed to be a dramatic slo-mo shot of Aries coming back to consciousness, inhaling a harsh, sudden gasp and then

rising to her knees and unleashing a surprise attack on a squadron of goblins via a three-sixty battle-axe spin, sending CGI blood flying in all directions.

But Bethany rewrites on the fly. She cuts the moment of feminist empowerment from her episode. She drops Aries's battle-axe to the ground, then walks the girl's body away from the goblin hordes of Kentucky. The goblins all look at one another, like *uhhh*, *what's going on?* They look at Tullycraft, who just shrugs, because he's getting used to this kind of shit.

Bethany walks Aries's body offscreen. And soon, just like before, all that bloodshed and CGI commotion grows dim and muffled. She's heading towards the offscreen gateway. That vast mirage stretching up into the sky that no one else in *The Wolves of Birmingham* even knows exists. The margin where this TV world ends and another begins.

As Bethany gets closer to it, the black-and-white Los Angeles cityscape she saw last time settles into view. It shimmers like liquid. Bethany reaches Aries's hand out towards the boundary, resolving not to let the shock jolt her back to consciousness. She centers herself, bracing for turbulence, a lucid dreamer refusing to wake. She brushes her fingers over the surface, careful to pace herself. She lets her skin get used to that tickling electrocution feeling, then slips her whole hand through the fold. It's an arctic plunge. Her borrowed body threatens to go cardiac. But she fights the terror that's trying to wake her up. She feeds the rest of her arm through next, watches it turn from color to black and white. Then she trust-falls.

She leaves Second America behind, heading somewhere else.

• • •

Bethany picks her borrowed body up off the sidewalk and looks around hard-boiled 1960s Los Angeles. A town filthy with crime and shadow. The streets shimmer with the sickness of a recent rainfall, and Bethany thinks: *All the sewers in the world couldn't keep the waste of this place underground.* Then she thinks: *Whoa, cool. It's a whole different sorta energy in here. So moody it's even affecting the way I think.*

She walks down Sepulveda, passing underpopulated dive bars, water dribbling out from broken hydrants. She passes a group of street hustlers playing dominos by the curb. She hears sirens, then spots police lights

flashing against a nearby tenement building. She heads towards those lights, sensing that this is the center of the show.

She finds two detectives surveying their latest case of the week. They're standing behind police tape, brooding over a fresh cadaver laid out under a sheet. Neither cop notices Bethany approaching.

"The third slaying in three nights," Detective Sunday says to the rookie next to him. The rookie nods. His character isn't important. Bethany can sense that Sunday is the main character here. The rookie's only featured in this one scene. He doesn't have any lines.

"A night stalker," Sunday continues. "A serial murderer. We need to make the captain understand that this is going to keep happening every night unless we do something about it. We need to call a press conference, set a citywide curfew, and—"

Detective Sunday notices the strange woman approaching. He trails off mid-speech.

"Ma'am . . ." he says. He looks Bethany's Aries body up and down, taking in her tattered outfit, her knotted hair and face still stained with blood from the big battle set piece back in *The Wolves of Birmingham*.

"Ma'am . . . this is an active crime scene," he says. "You can't be here."

Bethany ignores him. She doesn't slow her approach.

If you've seen his show, you know that Detective Sunday is rarely baffled. This is a man who's seen the worst of humanity, who prides himself on his ability to stay cool no matter the crisis. But in this moment, Detective Sunday feels at a loss, utterly perplexed. He looks at the rookie on duty next to him, and the rookie just shrugs. He has no lines, so he can't speak.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" Detective Sunday asks. He takes a small step forward, approaching the blood-drenched warrior woman with caution. "Ma'am?" he asks again. But Bethany's no longer paying attention. Something else has caught her eye.

She's staring down a nearby alleyway. Once again, she's located the hidden offscreen margins of this show where the cameras will never reach. The gateway where 1960s black-and-white Los Angeles ends and another TV world begins.

This time Bethany sees the Food Network. A bake-off show on the other side of that portal. A kitchen set on a studio soundstage, glistening in full-

color HD.

“Ma’am, I’m talking to you. What are you doing here?”

Bethany turns back to the noir behind her. She looks briefly at Detective Sunday, but soon she gets distracted again. Because down the opposite end of the alley from the Food Network, she spots another gateway. Another option. This one leading to what looks like the living room of a family sitcom.

“Did somebody hurt you?” Sunday asks. He takes another step into the road towards the warrior woman. “Tell me what happened.”

“Do you see that?” Bethany asks him. “Do you see the sitcom right there?” She stares past Sunday to the living room set waiting beyond the portal. It’s so close, she can hear the giggle of a laugh track emanating from the other side.

“What are you talking about?” Sunday asks her. He turns in the direction she’s staring. “That’s just an alleyway.”

“No,” Bethany says. “I think it’s Willa . . .”

• • •

Detective Sunday puts his hand on Bethany’s Aries shoulder. He tries to force her attention back to this world. Bethany turns and looks at him, and suddenly Sunday feels himself soften.

It’s something in the woman’s gaze. The way she shimmers brighter than everything else around him. It makes him forget himself momentarily. Forget this rotten city of shadows and filth.

Now Detective Sunday feels the strangest sense of déjà vu. He knows he should be arresting this woman, getting back to the case of the latest night stalker terrorizing his city, but in Bethany’s eyes, all of a sudden the plot of his world feels far away and irrelevant. Because how many night stalkers has he caught by now? Probably hundreds. It feels like there’s a new night stalker every week for him to catch in hard-boiled 1960s Los Angeles. But *this*? Nothing like this has ever happened to him.

“We have to go,” the warrior woman tells him. She offers her hand.

Sunday trusts her. Sure, they’ve only just met, but somehow he already trusts this woman more than the entire rotating cast of rookie cops who

never speak each week. He trusts her more than his hardscrabble chief back at the precinct. More than his own wife, who's always encouraging him to quit his job and get off the streets for the sake of their son (a son, he now realizes, he also doesn't really trust).

This girl is different. She's realer and brighter than everything else in his blank cityscape. He takes her hand and lets her lead him down the alley towards that place where the camera doesn't reach.

"It's okay," Bethany tells him as they approach the sitcom only she can see. "It's just a quick jolt, and then you should wake up."

She pulls him through.

• • •

And back in the therapy room in Public Access Afterworld, Chloe Edmonds snaps awake in the middle of her therapy session. She gasps and chokes as the tube down her throat shorts out. It malfunctions, shooting back up into the double-reinforced plastic above.

It takes her a few moments to realize that something has changed. Her mind is suddenly clear. Chloe Edmonds can think again. It's the first time she's been lucid in . . .

Oh my god, how long has it been? How long has she been here?

She remembers everything about her real life. She realizes in an instant that she's not actually a grizzled detective in one of the mid-century police procedurals she enjoys imagining. That this whole time she's actually been a sixteen-year-old high schooler from the suburbs of Detroit.

Her eye itches. She panics. She looks around the therapy room and takes in her surroundings as if she's seeing them for the very first time. She looks at the thousands of other patients still strapped in on their cement tables, tubes down their throats, eyelids blinking rapidly as broadcasts get sucked out from their bodies. Chloe's still just getting used to having her brain back, but her next thought hits her with a greater urgency than perhaps any she's ever had in her entire life.

I need to get out of here right fucking now.

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9

THE STUDIO AUDIENCE APPLAUDS. Bethany marches across the living room set of whichever long-canceled sitcom she's just crossed over into. She tries to place the era. It's a bit confusing, because the décor implies the 1950s, but in a way that's almost knowingly retro. This must be a show that aired in the 1970s that was set in the fifties, Bethany hypothesizes. The post–*Happy Days* nostalgia boom.

She looks around. Bethany searches for the center of this latest world. She smells a pie cooling on the kitchen sill in the next room over. There's a sink running in there too.

"Is that you, Frank?" someone calls from the kitchen. "What happened? Did you get tangled up in the sprinkler system again?"

The laugh track laughs. That must be it, Bethany reasons. She walks towards the voice.

"It's not Frank," she says. She puts her hands up as she steps into the kitchen. She tries to be as nonthreatening as possible. She doesn't want to frighten whichever character Willa Fischer is inhabiting right now.

Of course it doesn't work. The fifties housewife is all nerves. She's standing at the sink washing dishes, and when she notices the blood-soaked warrior who's just entered her perfect little world, she screams and jumps backwards. She knocks the cooling pie off the sill, sending it toppling to the ground.

"Who are you?" she shouts. "What are you doing in my house?"

"You have to listen to me," Bethany says. "I know you think this is real, but it's not. It's just an old sitcom. You're not the person you think you are."

The terrified housewife takes a few steps backwards, then grabs a kitchen knife from a nearby sheath.

“You need to leave right now!” she shouts. She waves the knife around in front of her. “Get out of my house!”

“This isn’t your house,” Bethany tells her. She keeps her voice calm. She takes a small step closer. “Your name is Willa Fischer.”

“No. My name is Judith Webb. I live here with my husband and my three children on Weaver Street.”

The studio audience applauds. That must be the name of this show. Bethany thinks she remembers it airing on TV Land in reruns. *Weaver Street*.

“Please,” Judith says. “Take whatever you want, just don’t hurt me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Bethany tells her. “But we need to leave right now. I’m worried we’re running out of time. The disturbances I’m causing are growing too big. Pretty soon they’re going to catch on to what I’m doing.”

Judith backs slowly into the corner. She waves her kitchen knife limply around in the air. She’s too scared to get a firm grasp on the handle.

“What are you talking about? I can’t go with you. This is where I live. I live on Weaver Street.” The studio audience applauds again. “This is my home,” Judith says, as if trying to convince herself it’s true. “This is my house.”

“No,” Bethany tells her. “It’s really not.”

She reaches out slowly and takes Judith’s limp, shaking hand. The kitchen knife falls to the ground. The poor, confused woman trembles all over. Bethany looks her in the eye, and Judith’s expression slowly calms. She still looks scared, but she no longer puts up a fight.

Bethany leads her back across the living room set, then out the front door onto Weaver Street. As they walk together, Judith realizes she’s never been this far down the block before. It’s as though life here on Weaver Street never had the budget necessary for her to venture past her house.

“It’ll be okay,” Bethany tells her as they approach the TV gateway together. “It’ll only shock for a second.”

• • •

The moment they pass through the fold, Willa Fischer jolts awake.

Her straps unlock. Her table slows its vibrations. It's another malfunction, and then she's back to sentience.

Elliot? Marty? Joseph? she thinks.

Where are you, Joseph? Still overseas? Still fighting on the beach? Or have they already shipped you home? Sent you back to me in a pine box?

"Hey! Hey!"

Willa looks around the therapy room. Her senses are overloading. Her mind is racing too fast.

"You're awake, too! Hey!" There's a girl with a swollen red eye calling to her, rushing across aisles, past unconscious patients all still plugged into the TV grid above.

"We need to find a way out of here. Can you hear me?"

Willa blinks. Her eyes dart around as she feels the icy grip of a panic attack take hold. Look at this place. It's the proof she's been waiting for. The hidden truth she's sensed all her life. That something terrible was about to happen. That it already has.

We lost the war. Joseph is dead.

I'm a monster. I'm right where I belong.

"Listen to me," Chloe Edmonds says as she sprints over to Willa. She climbs onto the table. "We need to figure out how to get out of here. I'm not sure what's happening or why we're awake, but I'm worried that if we don't act quick that pretty soon they're going to realize we're—"

WRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAANG. WRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAANG.

Chloe is interrupted by blaring sirens. An air-raid sound bellowing out across the therapy room.

WRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAANG. WRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAANG.

Security lights flash all around. A sprinkler system activates, rainng cold water down on Chloe and Willa and all the unconscious others surrounding them. The thousands of patients still strapped in on their tables all begin to convulse harder, more violently, as if someone just turned the dial up on their collective stovetop. Static begins to bleed out through the pores of their skin. Chaperones, summoned from their unconscious.

"Shit," Chloe says.

The static bleeds outwards. This time it doesn’t bother to take the shape of men. It just floods the air, then melts down like candle wax, dripping below the therapy room tables, a plume of hot white electricity spreading over the floor.

Willa gasps for air as her panic attack consumes her. She digs her fingernails into her cuticles, making herself bleed.

Oh my god, Elliot, she thinks. *What did you do to me? What terrible experiment did you trade my life for?*

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10

BETHANY MARCHES HER ARIES body across a high school gymnasium. Far away, on the other side of a dream, she can hear the faint sound of alarms blaring. Lights flashing and electricity pulsing. Her table vibrating faster and faster.

It's all coming apart, just as she suspected. Public Access Afterworld's emergency protocol has been activated.

They're onto her. She has to hurry.

It's raining hard outside in this other place. The thunder storm hocks loogies at the gymnasium's outer walls. This episode is broken. Bethany senses that this newest TV show she's just crossed into is supposed to be another sitcom. She can feel a laugh track waiting somewhere up near the rafters. But it's not cheery in here like Weaver Street. The aura's closer to a horror movie.

Bethany works fast, marching past a lone basketball idling out near the bleachers. She senses her way through the space towards the dark center of the episode. The boys' locker room.

A violent gust of wind blows the gymnasium entryway off its hinges. Water pours onto the basketball court, threatening a flood. Bethany doesn't turn around. She marches into the musty dark of the locker room. She's not leaving here without the one she came for.

• • •

"Erin? Erin, are you in here?"

The halls of the locker room stretch forever, transforming the gymnasium depths into a maze. Bethany squints down into the labyrinth and continues to shout ahead. The cavern is dark and oversized. The lockers stretch far

higher than they naturally would, now resembling a row of grand tombs in an ancient cemetery.

“I came to save you!” Bethany calls into the darkness. “David Sawyer sent me. I know you’re in here—we have to go!”

She descends deeper into the labyrinth. She turns corner after corner until eventually she finds a boy sitting on a bench, all polite and alone in gym shorts, his hands balled up into tiny little fists.

It’s Lil’ Angus, iconic eighties child star, grinning up at Bethany dimpled and vacant, as though he’s posing for the cover of *TV Guide*. But his face is degraded. It’s still a child’s face, but it’s grown atrophied and old, like a ventriloquist’s dummy left out for years in the sun.

“Listen to me,” Bethany says. “We have to go right now. We’re leaving.”

Lil’ Angus just grins at her. He says his iconic catchphrase, as if he’s a ventriloquist’s dummy.

“I dono about that. I dono about that.”

The laugh track springs to life, cackles and applauds. Lil’ Angus has something in his hand. He slowly unballs his tiny little fist and shows Bethany what he’s holding.

An hourglass.

Small and plastic, the sand dripping down from one end of the prism to the other. The moment Bethany sees the hourglass, she feels her blood thin. She steps outside her borrowed body and everything around her muffles. It’s a sensation beyond déjà vu. It’s like reality itself is being drained of life by a vampire.

“He’ll be back soon,” Lil’ Angus tells her. “And we’re gonna be in big trouble if he catches us.” The air grows thick with static, as if the entire gymnasium is bending and distorting, experiencing a global signal intrusion. Bethany feels herself breaking, too, coming apart down to atoms, like on the first day of her therapy back in Public Access Afterworld. For a moment, she becomes David Sawyer, naked and powerless, his patient body bloating on a table with a tube down his throat and an alarm blaring all around him.

She shakes off the sensation, telling herself to stop hallucinating, forcing herself to remain here, in this body. She grabs Lil’ Angus up off the bench,

scoops him into her arms like a newborn baby. The little plastic hourglass drops from his palm below the locker room bench.

Bethany hears footsteps approaching from down the maze. She cradles the sickly child star in her arms and looks around for someplace to hide.

“We need to wait for him,” Lil’ Angus says. “It’s the only way to make the basketball team.”

“I don’t want to hear about that,” Bethany says. “Too dark.”

• • •

She hides with him in one of the nearby lockers. She lets the door close behind her, and then she’s locked in, entombed with an atrophied child star, squeezed together with little oxygen to breathe. Which is okay. She holds her breath like her life depends on it and prays Lil’ Angus will do the same.

Footsteps approach. Bethany remains perfectly still. She squints through the slats of the door as their pursuer rounds the corner.

“Where are you?” he calls in a mocking, insidious tone. “I know my star player is in here somewhere!”

He snorts and laughs, and Bethany gets a brief look at the man as he passes. There’s creepy Coach Horton, a long-dead character actor currently playing a sitcom pedophile, straight out of the Emmy-nominated very special episode “Air Ball Blues.”

But this man—he’s more than that, too. Bethany squints through the fold of the locker door and she sees the man change his form, shapeshift between bodies as easily as other people breathe. Soon he becomes Anthony “Fisch” Fischer, *Forbes* Innovator of the Year, a solemn patriot doing what needs to be done for the greater good. And then he becomes the larger, hulking sibling of the same man, the glint in his eye now masochistic and unashamed, the thick smell of ketchup wafting through the locker folds. *Jim Fischer,* Bethany thinks. She knows the name the moment the man takes this latest form. He never stops changing. He keeps degrading back down through the generations as he stalks across the aisle, searching for his prey.

Now he’s a sad old drunk numbing his guilt with whiskey and old monster movies. *Marty Fischer,* Bethany thinks. Now he’s a handsome scientist who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps during the Great

Depression, who ascended from shit-scrubber to scientist and then sacrificed his own wife to secure his legacy. Elliot Fischer, aging rapidly. He loses an eye. His hair turns gray. He retains his famous handsome good looks.

And then one last change and those good looks are gone, too. The scientist mummifies. A cowboy hat sprouts atop his wrinkled head. He becomes something more like a monster, a little demon you might see starring in a hemorrhoid commercial down on cable TV in hell. Elliot Fischer's lost eye doesn't grow back. Instead he loses another one, and now both sockets are voids, ant holes pointing forever inwards towards that which sees but is so seldom seen.

Bethany searches for a name for this final figure. She tries to sense who it is on the other end of the locker. But this final someone has no name, at least none accessible to her right now. Only one phrase pops into Bethany's mind when she squints out at the ghoulish figure stalking past them.

The Distant Seer.

• • •

She cups her Aries hand over Lil' Angus's mouth as the mummified cowboy passes their locker. She holds herself perfectly still, unbreathing. She feels a thick cloud of static rippling in the wake of the Distant Seer's pursuit. She squeezes her eyes shut and struggles to withstand the vertigo feeling, the force of static trying to unmake everything back down to its under image. She silently prays that her child star companion has enough strength to do the same.

And then, when the footsteps grow quieter and the static tidal wave begins to recede, Bethany reopens her eyes and squints through the locker to make sure the coast is clear. The Distant Seer rounds another corner. Their pursuer is still searching for them, but he's no longer just outside.

"In one second, we're going to run," Bethany whispers to Lil' Angus. "I'm going to break this door down and then we can't hesitate for a moment. We're going to have just one chance to make it out of here. Do you understand?"

Lil' Angus stares up at her, his milky eyes wide with terror. "I dono about that," he says.

It triggers the laugh track. The invisible studio audience applauds and hollers. *Shit,* Bethany thinks. She can feel the static path the Distant Seer's walking switch directions. He zeroes in on their exact location.

Guess it's now or never. Bethany smashes her body into the inner locker door, clutching her child star tight, making herself a missile torpedoing through the labyrinth of the locker room back towards the exit. She sprints, running into the gymnasium, searching for the gateway out of this nightmare of a very special episode.

Rain heaves across the floor. It floods the linoleum in freshly formed river rapids, transforming into a full-fledged indoor hurricane. It spills forth in torrents, trying to trap them.

The ground shakes, succumbing to an earthquake. The floor splinters, opening a sinkhole.

HAHAHAHAHA! The studio audience just keeps laughing and applauding, as if stuck on a glitch. A basketball hoop tumbles down, crashing into the bleachers, further splitting the floor in half.

"Is he following us?" Lil' Angus asks in terror.

"You ever heard of Orpheus?" Bethany asks him as she sprints towards the door that leads out into the storm. Lil' Angus ruffles up his little wrinkled brow.

"Well, just don't look back," Bethany says as the gym crumbles and breaks behind them.

• • •

Outside, Bethany discovers that running is no longer an option. It's all about swimming now. She clutches her child star in her arms, and they navigate mudslides, fight against quicksand.

"The football field!" Lil' Angus shouts. "We need to go back to the football field!"

Bethany squints ahead and spots it up there on a hill. She swims against Astroturf as it collapses into itself, sucks her down with the force of quicksand. Rain pounds from the sky like bullets, and Bethany tries to maintain her hold on the child star.

She loses her grip for just a second, but it's long enough for the storm to seize on her mistake. Lil' Angus gets swallowed, sucked down into a vortex below the ground. Bethany doesn't hesitate. She dives after him, swims the storm, holding her breath as mud shoots through her nostrils. She bears it all, because she needs to save Erin Morrison. She needs to bring the girl back to earth. It's the only satisfying way her season finale can end. With her proving everyone wrong. That she isn't just another victim.

She finds the child's fingers and regains her grip. She pulls them both upwards, paddling towards the surface. The two of their borrowed bodies wash up past the fifty-yard line. Bethany rubs mud from her burning Aries eyes, and finally, she sees it in front of her—the gateway where *Short Stack* ends and *something else* begins, looming brilliantly just past the end zone.

The portal is different this time. Unlike *The Wolves of Birmingham* or Detective Sunday's noir or *Weaver Street*, the portal before them isn't broadcasting another episode on the other side of the gateway. There's no TV show waiting there at all. Just terrible, burning red static the color of fresh-drawn blood. A tower of crimson stretching up past the sky, humming like an electric forest fire. A new plague ready to wipe out all the old ones.

The future of television. The destroyer of worlds.

Bethany slows for just a moment. She feels a twinge of self-doubt. Is this what she came all the way here to release? Is this how her season finale is really supposed to end? With her unleashing a fire that threatens to burn down the whole fucking universe?

It suddenly feels too big. Her worst self-destructive bender yet, gone way past nuclear. She senses that if she continues on this path, the undead weatherman's warning will prove correct. That she will be the future of television, the destroyer of worlds. That soon she'll unleash the kind of universe-toppling hangover that no one anywhere will ever recover from.

"Come on," Lil' Angus tells her. He looks up at Bethany, and when they make eye contact, the child star is suddenly young again. His spark returns.

"This is why I called to you," he says. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Shivers overtake Bethany's borrowed body. The red static in front of her flickers and burns and pushes closer. It's spreading. This time, the gateway is coming to them, eating across the football field, unmaking *Short Stack* in its wake.

The end zone disappears. The goalpost follows. Red flames swallow up the football field, pulling “Air Ball Blues” from syndication, canceling this entire TV universe as static chews from the five-yard line to the ten.

Bethany stares at it, and for a moment, she understands what Lil’ Angus means. *It is beautiful*. That red static, so bright and uncomplicated, so steadfast in its anger. There’s something righteous about it. So what if it’s going to destroy everything that ever existed? That’s above Bethany’s pay grade. Besides, reality’s totally sucked for a long time now. Maybe we should let it burn.

She takes a deep breath and prepares for the flames to cover them both. To swallow her and Lil’ Angus up with everything else in this sitcom world.

“You’ll wake up in the therapy room in Public Access Afterworld,” Bethany tells Lil’ Angus before they disappear. “Listen to me. When you get there, you need to get as high as you can. I’m going to try to break the glass and release the airwaves. It’ll come from above.”

“I understand,” Lil’ Angus tells her as they’re swallowed up into flame.

“I’ll see you soon,” Bethany says. “I’ve just got one more scene to finish.”

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11

ALARMS BLARE. STATIC FLOODS the aisles. Erin Morrison wakes up on the operating table as her tube shorts out and her straps come undone.

It worked. She knows immediately. It finally worked. After so many years stuck in this place, she called to Bethany Peters, and Bethany Peters came to save her. Woke her up like she was a slumbering princess in a fairy tale.

Memories come rushing back in reverse. Erin remembers her last day on earth, the last day she was sentient inside this body. She sees herself being sucked into the video store out on the football field the night of the homecoming dance. She remembers leaving her hometown screaming and struggling, convinced she'd never actually been anyone at all. She remembers calling her father, confused and desperate for a simple culprit. She remembers David Sawyer, too, remembers hating him and loving him both, feeling the richness of her anger as she strangled him on a beanbag in her basement as they had sex. She remembers the pictures of her fellow patients on the wall at Jim Fischer's abandoned house. All those oblique violations that led her down here. All that hurt and anger stewing while she was stuck so long in her own vacancy. In that "very special episode" that could never actually make sense of her violation, could only become a rerun of it, a prison dedicated to its endless re-creation.

She'd been strong all those years down here. She'd glowed a little brighter than all the others, but not bright enough. Every day after therapy as she lay on her table staring up into the airwaves, powered by just the faintest glimmer of sentience, when she whispered a prayer that someday someone strong enough might come to save her.

Find the receiver. Make it real. Find the receiver. Make it real.

Now, finally, her prayer has been answered. Bethany Peters is here, and Erin knows that soon, after so many years trapped in this foggy place, she'll

be leaving, going back up above. But even in her first moments of regained consciousness, Erin doesn't feel optimism, but she knows the truth. That it's already too late for her to ever really have a life.

Technically, physically, Erin hasn't aged a day since the night of the homecoming dance. She's still just seventeen years old. But inside, where it really matters, she knows that she'll never be anyone ever again. Certainly not herself. It's *Return of the Living Dead* at the IFC Center and she's the winner of the zombie costume contest. Erin has been in Public Access Afterworld far too long, and it's broken her forever.

• • •

"Hey! There's someone else awake!"

Erin hears voices shouting from the other end of the therapy room. She sits up, taking back command of this body she's just reentered. Her senses return and she can hear the alarm blaring. See all the other patients still strapped down on their tables convulsing in seizure, feeding static out from their skulls down to the floor. She watches the static melt and mutate, drip into a big gray flood. A continuous stream of electric light covering the place.

"Over here! Hey!"

Erin locates the sound of the voice. A teenage girl standing up on another desk on the other side of the massive therapy room. She's calling to Erin from her own table, as if they're both stranded on separate life rafts in an ocean of static.

The girl's not alone. There's someone else on the table with her: a scared, skinny woman in a yellow dress, clutching her knees, mid–panic attack.

"We need to find a way out of here!" Chloe calls to Erin from across the room. The static continues to flood, rising towards their tables.

"She said to wait!" Erin shouts back.

Erin looks up. She squints through the double-reinforced plastic into the airwaves above, surveying the glow, all those broadcasts and the angry red static chewing its way across everything. She searches for Bethany in the signals that remain.

"What are you doing?" Chloe shouts from across the room.

“She’s still up there,” Erin says. “Finishing her episode.”

• • •

Bethany marches across the quarry, headed back towards the battlefield.

She’s back in *The Wolves of Birmingham* again. But not for long. This TV world is ending, just like *Short Stack* before it. Just like all the others. She looks behind her and sees a towering wall of red static where the gateway to 1960s black-and-white Los Angeles used to be just a few scenes ago. The red is pushing closer. The fire is spreading, out past the offscreen areas into *The Wolves of Birmingham* itself. Bethany understands that soon the red will spread to the Battle of New New Orleans. Swallow up her creations. Tullycraft and Bichael, Clan Lycra and Clan Lestat, unmaking them all in fire.

Bethany wills herself to transform. She makes her body change. It’s easy now. She’s got the hang of this. She ceases to wear her Aries costume, ceases to be the last living sapiens in Second America. She toggles past David Sawyer and Noah Peters, evolving back to her true form.

The battle set piece has concluded. Season one of *The Wolves of Birmingham* is in its final minutes now. Bethany rushes past werewolf medics carrying wounded soldiers from the battlefield. In the old continuity of things, Clan Lycra has reigned victorious, but both sides have suffered heavy casualties.

“Ouch, ouch, that hurts quite a bit,” Bethany hears Bichael complain from a nearby stretcher. “I’ll have some opium now. Opium, please!”

Bethany doesn’t have time for bad comic relief. She marches towards Tullycraft. She made this scene, so she knows that her camera is scheduled to cut to him next for a triumphant, season-ending close-up of the freshly crowned king, the solemn general surveying all his hard-won spoils. A moment of mournful resolve before the hiatus between seasons begins.

Sorry, Tullycraft. Your shot’s getting preempted. Bethany shoves him out of the way. She takes his position, centering herself in the frame the camera’s about to cut to.

“What the hell?” Tullycraft whines, gawking at the transgender human being who’s so rudely invaded his season-ending close-up.

Bethany doesn't have time for him. She shoots him a look like *I made you, so fuck off or I'll unmake you,* and Tullycraft gets the message, senses her power. He puts his hands in his pockets and watches from the sidelines as Bethany waits patiently for the camera to catch up with her. She fixes her bangs, finds her angle. And then the shot changes, and she's broadcasting. She's live on TV. Ready for her close-up.

• • •

"Stay there!" Chloe shouts from across the therapy room. "We're coming over to you." She crouches down on her table, kneeling towards the sea of static below.

"No!" Erin shouts. "Bethany said stay high up! That her signal will come from up above!"

Chloe ignores her. She leans over the desk and dips her fingertips into the electric river rapids rising below.

"It's just air!" Chloe tells Erin. "I was in it before. It kind of tickles and makes your hair stand up on your arms, but it's harmless!"

She hops off the desk, letting her feet dip into the electrical stream. She reaches for Willa Fischer to join her, but the terrified woman shakes her head, still in the middle of a panic attack.

"Suit yourself," Chloe says, growing impatient. She turns away from Willa and begins to wade through the static, stumbling against the tide across the therapy room.

Erin glances down into the airwaves, calling her attention back from the season finale of *The Wolves of Birmingham*. She watches Chloe rush towards her. Alarms continue to blare. The static oozes and spills over Chloe's legs, rising up her lower torso. Erin notices *something* begin to reshape. Chloe doesn't notice. She's too dead set on reaching her destination across the room to register any shift. But Erin's eyes go wide as she sees the static bubble and evolve behind the girl with chronic conjunctivitis.

A giant cowboy hat tips up above the surface of the electric lake.

• • •

“You can see me,” Bethany says. She stares into the lens, breaking the fourth wall. The camera in front of her is invisible, but she knows it’s there. She feels it framing her. She reaches her fingers out and grazes gently over the inner contours of all the screens back on earth. Behind her, a wave of red chews across the battlefield, covering Tullycraft and Bichael and Wise Wolfen Balor, too. Unmaking all of them.

Bethany’s live on the air. Staring out at millions of viewers at home. All those families in their living rooms. The college kids snacking in dorm common areas. The cable boxes and streaming apps and illegal Twitch cam-rip livestreams, all of them tuned into Bethany Peters’s signal.

“You can see me,” she says to the camera. To the screen. “You’re looking at me right now.”

Back on earth, social media floods with real-time reactions.

“WTF is happening on WoB?”

“Is there something wrong with my Apple TV?”

“Wait, yo, is that the tranny who shot up GlobalVill?”

Back on earth, Anthony Fischer watches from his ranch in the desert outside Austin. He sits up straight on the couch, aghast at what’s being broadcast on HBO Sunday night. He feels immediately an absolute loss for how he’s going to explain this newest clusterfuck to the GlobalVill board.

Bethany senses him there, so many worlds away. She can sense all of her viewers. The millions of them, all watching her right now. David Sawyer in his surveillance center in the New Mexico desert. Her sister Tracy and Tracy’s cop husband in El Paso. Her parents, confused on the living room couch back in Harlingen. So many on earth, and even some others in different realms. Like that depressed half-man, half-bat watching her on a monitor in the Apple Store. Chimotera, soon to emerge from the mall, his prison, to find a swarm of red chewing through the sky. Finally something new. Something brighter.

All of them watching. Watching *her.*

“My name is Bethany Peters,” she tells the camera. “I was born on April nineteenth, 1999, in Harlingen, Texas, and then I was born again the summer of 2017 in a corner booth at Cheer Up Charlies, where I cried all night into my best friend Lily’s shoulders and said my real name out loud for the very first time. I know you’re watching me. I know you all can see

me. Can hear this broadcast back on earth. And I have a message I've traveled a very long way to deliver to you all tonight. I'm leaving this place now. I'm coming back to your broken little world. And when I get there, *everything is going to change.*"

Bethany smiles big, showing off her gums and teeth to the camera. She smashes her head into the lens, shattering the invisible boundary, shorting the airwaves out to red.

• • •

CRAAAAAAAACK.

The first layer of plastic bursts. Red electricity chews through the last little flickers of *The Wolves of Birmingham*. The remaining plastic that holds in the airwaves strains against its dwindling reinforcement. The egg above is a kettle headed to boil. A bag of blood midway through bursting.

All the unconscious patients in the therapy room start writhing harder. They twist and spasm, fast-forwarding in convulsions on their tables as the colored broadcasts they've been feeding upwards merge with the red fire spilling down from the grid into the tubes in their mouths.

Willa Fischer stares across the room as Chloe swims against the rising tide of the electric gray sea, the teenage girl dead set on making it over to Erin.

Behind Chloe, a giant continues to stir awake. The cowboy hat peeks out through gray static, and a great howling begins. The Distant Seer's massive form rises upwards like a tidal wave behind Chloe. Erin feels her heart constrict as static sheds its translucence. As electricity makes itself flesh.

CRRRRRAAAAAAAAACK.

The second layer of plastic gives out up above. The red static that's chewed through the airwaves wins its arm-wrestling match now against the plastic holding it in. It blasts immediately through each tube down a thousand unconscious patient throats. The system malfunctions and the egg shatters, as the airwaves are freed to spill down from the ceiling.

"Watch out!" Erin shouts to Chloe, but it's too late. The giant eyeless cowboy is now flesh. He roars and reaches his massive arm out, grabs poor Chloe Edmonds from Allen Park, Michigan, between his fingers. The

Distant Seer squashes her in his hand, squeezing the girl like a stress toy and sending her body hurling into the far wall of the therapy room.

Chloe's bones break all at once. Willa's panic attack only gets worse. She squeezes her eyes closed and rocks back and forth on her hard cement bed, trying to wake from this nightmare.

But Erin knows there's no waking up. There's only one way out.

"JUMP!" she shouts from across the room. "GET ON YOUR FEET AND JUMP FOR THE RED STATIC!"

The Distant Seer howls again, his voice flush with white noise. He directs his warpath next at Willa Fischer. He reaches an arm out to grab her. Willa opens her eyes just in time to stare for a moment into those massive empty ant holes where her attacker's retinas should be.

She catches a glimmer of Elliot Fischer in there. Father to her children, renowned scientist gifted with both brains and brawn. There in the eyes of this beast lunging to destroy her, she sees her perfect, handsome tormentor of a husband.

It ignites some belated flicker of resistance inside her. She thinks back to that morning nearly a hundred years ago when she said goodbye to her sleeping sonand then escaped out the back door of her temporary home into the desert. Now, just like she did then, she decides to make a run for it. To follow the advice of that girl shouting to her from across the room and *jump.*

The Distant Seer reaches out to grab her, but Willa hops to her feet and leaps towards the blazing red static spilling from the cracked egg above. And to Willa's surprise, as she reaches for the red, it reaches back. It's not just empty light. It's more like a hand. It clutches her in its grip, offers her a powerful alley-oop, pulls her up into its glow. She feels the red cover her body and carry her far away from this place, merging her into its light until she and it are all one thing.

Erin follows Willa's lead. But first she takes a moment to look that ancient, roaring cowboy deep in the empty eye sockets to let it know she's won. In the abyss of the holes, she sees fragments, quick flashes. A dripping hourglass. The shores of a riverbank. A great terror, and Saint Thomas. This crumbling East Coast clinic run by creepy Christians with anger issues. She

sees you and me, all of us gathered on the carpet after lights-out, alive and dead.

And then she’s Erin again. Light and energy, joyriding the airwaves with Willa Fischer and Bethany Peters, rapidly rising towards that world at the very top of the cinematic universe. The place they were all born, but that never quite felt like home.

POSTSCRIPT

Five Years Later

THE DAY THEY FINALLY return, David Sawyer spends his first few moments after waking the same way he always does—staring at static.

Last night, he passed out sometime around three A.M. He left on all thirty-two screens in his surveillance center through the night, just like always. He knows it's a pretty crummy waste of the little electricity Emily manages to pilfer all the way out here in the desert, but he tells himself it's for the greater good. What if, after half a decade of silence, one more transmission finally beams through? What if Erin Morrison is still out there, trying to get in touch with him?

He looks from screen to screen—the small sets and the bulky ones and that giant hundred-and-ten-incher built into the far wall, whose scrambled signal still blinks in a subtly different hue from all the others because it's connected directly to the Conductor below.

There's nothing coming through on any of those screens. Just wild noise. Just flickering light. Just like always. For five years now, the analog feed has been a void.

At first, David took it as a hint. He promised himself that Bethany Peters would be his final attempt. After her, he told himself, he was going to retire, bow out from the cult leader game, from this obsession that had so utterly ruined him. David was getting old now, pushing forty. After the final failure that was Bethany Peters, he couldn't imagine mustering the strength to chase any more signals. To follow those useless clues beaming every so often through the static, to send yet another poor, unsuspecting girl down to some terrible fate he'd never be allowed to experience himself.

But now, after five years of silence, David is willing to chalk up his promise of early retirement to pure naïveté. He's under no illusions anymore. This is a lifelong quest. If another broadcast from Erin did manage to bleed through the static finally after all these years, David knows in his gut he would drop everything to return to the hunt. Because in his boredom, he's discovered that there's one thing far worse than the ugly work he spent decades doing, sending people to hell.

Pointlessness. Without his mission, David has no purpose. He's a TV show that's jumped the shark. A relic still stuck on the airwaves well past the point of graceful cancelation.

This morning, like every morning, there's nothing coming through on his thirty-two screens but static. So David throws on a T-shirt and steps into his slippers. He walks the familiar path around his compound, from his surveillance center to the main building. He finds Emily waiting for him on the porch with a fresh cup of instant drip all ready.

"Morning," she says as she hands him the cup.

"Morning," David says. He takes a sip. He doesn't bother rubbing the crusts of sleep from the corners of his eyes.

• • •

All of his other followers are gone now.

It's been four years and seven months since Jules Estrada soft-launched their mutiny out on this very same porch. Since Jules led most of his remaining loyalists away from the desert in search of a newer, shinier fringe religion to dedicate their lives to.

David couldn't really blame them. After the Bethany Peters fiasco, morale had been at an all-time low at his compound. He buried half a dozen bodies in the sand after that day, and all he had to show for it was another anticlimax. Another bum lead. Another false messiah he'd banked everything on.

Then a week later came the season finale of *The Wolves of Birmingham*. That thrilling disturbance provided a brief surge of hope. Bethany had managed to hack a signal that the entire world was watching. Wherever she had been broadcasting from then, she'd managed to pull off the single biggest broadcast interruption in television history. For a moment, David braced for everything to change.

But Fisch and his board of directors swiftly papered over the disturbance. *The Wolves of Birmingham* was canceled at HBO out of sheer embarrassment. A press release the next morning blamed the interruption on an irate employee proficient with AI. And aside from a few conspiracy theorists online, most people bought the official story and moved on to whatever fresh, new psychosis the news cycle promised next.

David tried to hold out hope, at least for a little while. He'd never experienced a disturbance half as severe as the one Bethany caused that night on *The Wolves of Birmingham*. Perhaps she just needed time to pull off her next trick. But the months passed and then the years did too, and his hope dwindled away once again.

Nothing happened. Just like always.

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Jules had seized on the fragility of the moment. They started proselytizing to David's other followers. First in whispers after dark in their shared quarters, but soon more and more boldly during daylight. Soon they'd transformed David's compound into their own personal pulpit. It was like Jules was stumping for office, growing more confident with every sermon, just like David himself once had. They stood atop the mess hall table at breakfast each morning and promised everyone a better, more forward-thinking brand of extremism somewhere else.

"What the fuck are we doing out in the *desert*?" they shouted. "Why are we spending all our energy staring at old TVs and chasing down losers online when we could be out in the world doing crazy shit and, I don't know, partying with celebrities and other online influencers?!"

Emily was ready to put down the fame-hungry mutineer with a quick bullet to the head. David could have given her the order anytime and ended his Jules Estrada problem once and for all. But honestly, he kind of appreciated Jules's hustle. They had an energy and a passion that he himself had lost long ago. His followers were ready for a change, and David couldn't blame them.

And so everyone left. David retreated to his surveillance center and resumed staring at the static. He gave up, and over the next few years, his online numbers dwindled down. He became yesterday's boogeyman. He fell off the *Newsweek* listicle of the Ten Most Notorious Serial Killers of All Time. He closed himself off from the outside world and just kept watching the static. He grew out his beard.

"You know," David tells Emily this morning as he sips his instant drip and prepares for what he assumes will be another day staring at empty

screens. “You don’t have to stay here with me anymore. I appreciate your loyalty, but there’s not really much . . . going on.”

Emily stays silent for a while, because David gives her this exact same speech most mornings these days, and most mornings Emily responds the same way.

“Someone’s gotta brew the coffee,” she says.

And then they stand together in silence, staring out into the empty desert, two veterans of a war lost long ago. Twin soldiers grown so codependent in the trenches that now they’ll probably never leave.

• • •

Willa Fischer is the first one back that morning.

By the time David returns to his surveillance center in the desert, she’s already clawed her way out through the giant flat-screen. As David walks across the sand in his slippers on his regular path back home, he finds a disoriented, malnourished woman staggering out from his doorway on feeble, shaky sea legs, backlit by the glow of static.

David slows to a stop. He stares at Willa’s silhouette in his doorway. He can’t see her expression against the glow, so he just stands there and squints. He’s pure confusion, so used to monotony over the past five years, to nothing ever actually happening, that it takes him a moment to even register that he’s looking at the exact thing he’s waited decades for.

Willa Fischer blinks, confused, totally dislocated. She stares at David. Her eyes haven’t adjusted yet to actual sunlight. It’s been so long since she’s seen the real outside.

She squints at the blurry figure before her in the sand. At the white-hot desert.

“Is this hell?” she asks him in a soft, scared voice.

David realizes now who he’s looking at. For a second, he doesn’t want to believe it’s actually Willa, because it’s been so many years of waiting that it would be too painful to let hope in after an eternity of disappointment.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, tries to confirm that this isn’t a dream or a vision. That it’s actually Willa Fischer, back a hundred years

later, standing in the doorway of his surveillance center no older really than she looked in that faded picture Rachel once showed him.

David takes off running towards her through the sand. He leaves his slippers behind. He rushes at the confused woman, then takes her by the shoulders.

“How did you get here?” he asks.

Willa’s too disoriented to answer. Her body goes limp in his arms. She’s still a newborn back in this realm, hardly capable of holding herself up.

David looks past Willa into his surveillance center. He squints at the big flat-screen. It looks totally different now. He tuned into that screen just a few minutes ago as part of his morning routine, and all had appeared perfectly normal. But now, suddenly, everything has changed. The screen’s still blaring static, but it’s no longer just a two-dimensional image. No longer a flat, solid surface, no longer simply a broadcast.

The static is *bubbling,* like boiled bits of lava escaping from what used to be glass. David watches little embers of gray electricity jump like a 3D movie that you don’t need glasses to watch. He stares into the screen, trying to peer deeper inside that glow. It’s hard at first, but then he locates what he’s looking for. There she is, beneath the top layer of boiling static, extending a hand out from the screen. The barest little nubs of fingertips. A small palm reaching out from inside, gripping desperately through the box at empty air.

David’s eyes go wide. He loosens his hold on Willa Fischer and feels her pull away, too.

Could it be? Could it really be her?

Willa escapes from David’s embrace. She rushes out through the doorway into the desert and keels over in the sand. The hot sun burns down on her. Gravity pins Willa to the surface of the earth with its usual brutality. This reality, a harsh magnet making her sick.

Sensation surrounds Willa, burns her bare feet and shorts out her body’s circuitry. Her brain continues waking back up from her long, disorienting journey, and now she realizes she isn’t in hell at all. No. Of course not. She knows exactly where this is. The New Mexico desert. Earth. She’s herself again, back in the very same desert where nearly a century ago her life ended. Los Alamos feels like yesterday. And at the same time, she senses

it’s become distant history. That her husband and her sons and everyone she’s ever known are all long dead.

Willa Fischer keels over and vomits in the sand, emptying herself down into the earth.

• • •

Meanwhile, back inside his surveillance center, David Sawyer grabs at the slender fingertips of the girl struggling to escape the static on his flat-screen. It’s hard to get a grip. Her hand is small. It keeps dipping back below the surface.

David rolls up his sleeve. He reaches his arm through the screen and feels a sudden rush of electricity flare against his skin like a million tiny Pop Rocks exploding. He reaches deeper, struggling to make contact.

The moment he finally gets a good grip, he’s sure of it. He knows exactly who it is he’s pulling back to earth, just from the familiarity of that grasp.

It’s really her. It’s really Erin.

David pulls his best friend out through the static, delivering her back to earth in one confident tug. A home birth through a sea of television. He watches Erin’s head crane out from the bubbling static, her eyes wide open and rolled back in her head. She’s overwhelmed with sensation, crying and choking, leaking spit and fresh vomit as she crosses the divide. Then she gasps hard as she finally tastes air. She sucks greedily at oxygen, remembering the sensation of how it tastes here on earth.

The rest of her body returns next, toppling David over onto the floor with her weight. She lands on him all slick and wet, a fish reeled up from the slimy depths of a glowing ocean. She keeps gasping and wriggling on top of him, convulsing, half conscious, spitting up mucous.

David’s out of breath now. He rolls Erin over onto her side so she’s lying next to him instead of on top. He steadies her with his hands while she continues to gasp and suck at the air, and finally, he gets a good look at her. His best friend. His last hope. Erin Morrison, still just seventeen years old, still *herself,* dressed in that very same black hoodie she had on the night she disappeared.

“Erin,” David says. He’s not sure if she can hear him. “Erin, it’s me.”

She blinks and convulses. Her body keeps shaking, but her eyes slowly adjust to the light around her. David puts his hand on her heart, afraid she might be going into shock. He presses down gently on her ribs below her breastbone, miming an amateur Heimlich. He continues to do his best to steady her.

"I found you," he says. "I finally found you. It's okay. It's okay. You're back. You're safe now."

Erin's convulsions begin to calm. David rolls over on his side. He holds Erin, just like he used to on those nights so long ago when she'd fall asleep next to him on the beanbag in her basement and he'd stay up late watching static on her Toshiba.

Erin blinks. She begins to be able to discern color and shape, the detail of this world she's returned to.

"David?" she asks, her voice weak. She stares at him lying next to her.

"Yes," he says. "It's me. You're here with me. You're safe."

"I saw it, David," she says, her eyes still dim but growing rapturous with prophecy. "*The future of television.* Just like you always used to tell me about on nights in my basement. "It wasn't anything like you said it would be."

"It's okay," David tells her, his hand still on her chest. He wraps his body tighter around her. "You're back with me now."

He can feel Erin tense. Like the more she realizes she's alive, the more stiff and corpse-like she becomes.

"I should have killed you last night," she whispers. Then she reaches her hand out and tries to wrap her fingers around David's neck. But she's still too weak to strangle him, so she just lies there and lets David Sawyer hold her instead.

• • •

Around this same time, just a few feet away, the third and final person to return to earth that morning claws her own way out through the flat-screen. Bethany Peters swims a breaststroke through electricity back to earth. She gasps as her body crowns out through the screen, struggling and grabbing for any hand to help her along. But Willa's busy vomiting out in

the desert, and David's too preoccupied with Erin to notice. So Bethany's on her own. She grabs onto the rim of the flat-screen for stabilization and then she shuffles herself forward inch by inch, until eventually her body drops down onto the woodchipped floor of David's surveillance center.

She lies there, convulsing in the shock of her reemergence into this layer of reality, stewing in a puddle of electrical amniotics. And for a little bit, everything around her is just pure noise. Silence and sound, darkness and light, all of it indistinguishable from the larger mass it forms. Everything is pure sensation. Overwhelming and unfiltered, bled together into one single, awful whole.

Bethany gasps and chokes and waits for her senses to organize all that they're capable of perceiving. Slowly, it happens. The noise and the silence begin to separate, the darkness and the light, too. There are solids and liquids and air again. Bodies and space between them. The world she's returned to retakes its shape.

She senses static surrounding her. All those feeds of buzzing gray from the thirty-two screens that encircle David Sawyer's surveillance center. And even in the infancy of Bethany's regained senses, she can tell something is changing in the sound of it coming from the television behind her. From the massive flat-screen she just crawled through. It's not just that the static on that screen sounds shrill and angry, that it's pitched louder and sucking hotter than all the others. It's that it sounds more *real*. Like it's broadcasting in a resolution far past 4K. Sharper than even this reality she's returned to.

She turns around to face the television, already sensing what she's going to see there. What she's brought back with her from the dream realm. *Burning red static*.

She watches the crimson glow spread across the massive flat-screen, chewing its way back to earth too.

Immediately, Bethany feels guilt and anxiety. She claws herself up to her knees, negotiating with her still-wobbly center of gravity. She tries to call to David, who's still lying a few feet in front of her, clutching his barely conscious lost love in desperate passion.

"Something's wrong," Bethany tries to tell him. But he can't hear her. He's too preoccupied, and Bethany's voice is still far too weak to be heard over that red noise bellowing behind her.

Now Bethany watches the red static spread to the other screens in the surveillance center. All thirty-two broadcasts go rotten at once. Glass shatters. An electrical fire howls outwards, freed from its binding, ready to continue its bleed across the cinematic universe, into this world next.

As Bethany watches it spread, she suddenly feels sick. Just like Willa Fischer outside in the sand, she realizes she has to puke. She feels it rush up in her with a violence to match the red static burning out from all those screens. Here it is. Just as it always comes eventually. The inevitable crash from her worst bender yet.

Bethany keels over and vomits onto the woodchipped floor of David's surveillance center. She can taste the subtle hint of popcorn near the back of her throat. We hold on to the image, because it's the final image of my TV show's first season. Bethany Peters, a silhouette against a glowing crimson plague, hunched and sick on a calm morning back on earth. Born again—*yet again*—into the desert, through a screen.

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