

SECONDARY GROWTH

by

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ABSTRACT

The first chapter of this creative thesis is a broad overview of the three core concepts described by H. P. Lovecraft in his 1927 essay on horror, “Supernatural Horror in Literature.” This chapter pays particular attention to how these core concepts emerge in horror fiction, the techniques Lovecraft uses in his stories to demonstrate them, and the scholarship that now exists around the subgenre of cosmic horror. The next three chapters are the creative thesis itself, a cosmic horror novella titled *Secondary Growth*. Lastly, the fifth and final chapter is both a close reading of *Secondary Growth* using the core concepts and techniques outlined in the first chapter and a reflection on how these concepts affected the development of the novella.

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CHAPTER I

In the essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” H. P. Lovecraft describes three core concepts that make up what he calls either “cosmic terror” or “cosmic fear,” a subgenre of horror literature now commonly referred to as cosmic horror (36, 39). The most important of these concepts is the fear of the unknown, as Lovecraft mentions this very fear in the essay’s now-famous opening lines (32). Underlying this main idea, Lovecraft names two secondary concepts, the combination of which he calls the genre’s “one test.” The first of these requirements is that “. . .there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread.” Additionally, there needs to be “. . .contact with unknown spheres and powers,” or an outside, alien threat (38). These core concepts are essential to cosmic horror stories, and Lovecraft argues that, through “. . .this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear” (36). Lovecraft acknowledges that traces of these concepts can be read in texts written well before his time, naming *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a specific example. These concepts and texts have informed my writing process for *Secondary Growth*, a novella that borrows heavily from the genre of cosmic horror.

The most important characteristic of any cosmic horror story is fear of the unknown. In “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” H. P. Lovecraft famously refers to the “fear of the unknown” as “the oldest and strongest kind of fear” (32). What is unknown to a reader is determined by the world around them. Naturally, this applies just as much to the world of early mankind, and Lovecraft proposes that the “. . .first instincts and emotions [of man] formed his response to the environment in which he found himself.” Lovecraft suggests a fear of the unknown became a biological “necessity” in humans, a “hereditary impulse” that has carried over from our past (34). In other words, a fear of the unknown is not only the “strongest” fear to

Lovecraft, but it is also instinctual, a deep-rooted feeling in readers that can still be drawn out by writers working in the subgenre of cosmic horror.

Because the fear of the unknown in cosmic horror is meant to reflect instinctual, deep-rooted feelings, the subgenre works against the idea of the supernatural. In the essay “Cthulhu Mythos: History of H.P. Lovecraft’s Monstrous Presence in Popular Culture,” Jozefa Pevčíková describes the fear in cosmic horror as being “rational” in nature. Pevčíková proposes that the feeling drawn out by Lovecraft “. . . is based more on [the] rational realization of a seemingly scientific fact than on the emotion coming from the encounter with a monster itself” (320). Of course, that is not to suggest that monsters are absent from the stories written by Lovecraft. On the contrary, monsters are another integral part of cosmic horror, often acting as physical manifestations of the fear of the unknown.

In H. P. Lovecraft’s stories, a fear of the unknown is characterized by the “Great Old Ones,” another term for the aliens found in Lovecraft’s stories which originates from “The Call of Cthulhu” (76). The impact these Great Old Ones have on the story does not need to be direct, an extension of their unknown nature. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” for example, many Old Ones are described as “gone,” their “dead bodies” instead inspiring worship from cults of people (76). In “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” the influence of the Deep Ones leads to physical changes in the residents of Innsmouth, which the narrator disparagingly refers to as the “Innsmouth look” (307). More importantly, it is the residents of Innsmouth who act as the most immediate threat to the narrator of the story. With that in mind, change can be read as an extension of the fear of the unknown, an idea which has similarly influenced the development of *Secondary Growth*.

Perhaps an extension of the “fear of the unknown” described by H. P. Lovecraft in “Supernatural Horror in Literature” is the fear of having what was once known become

unknown. The familiar becoming unfamiliar, in other words, or the human becoming alien. In works of cosmic horror, this change is often literally demonstrated through body horror. The transformation of the Innsmouth residents in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is a drastic example of body horror, as they are fated to turn into “shiny and slippery” fishmen with unblinking, “bulging eyes” (350). With that in mind, I argue the fear of the unknown can also be read as a fear of change. When categorizing the three types of terror in a now-deleted online post from 2014, Stephen King names terror itself as “. . .the last and worse one,” the unshakeable feeling “. . .when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute” (King). In this quote, King puts his readers into the position of someone who is faced with change: despite looking eerily familiar, these “exact” substitutes are unknown and therefore a source of terror. As such, there are elements of change, body horror, and substitution found in *Secondary Growth*.

Keep in mind, however, that a fear of the unknown does not necessarily require an alien threat, which instead relates to the second requirement in the genre’s “one test” (Lovecraft 38). In “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” H. P. Lovecraft argues that the fear of the unknown is a “hereditary impulse,” or an instinctual response to certain stimuli (34). This is the intended effect of all works of horror, and Lovecraft stresses in his essay that instilling “a profound sense of dread” is also the intended effect of a cosmic horror story (38). In addition to body horror, one way Lovecraft draws out these deep-rooted feelings in readers is through his description — or lack thereof.

Even subtlety has a role to play in cosmic horror, as H. P. Lovecraft sometimes instills dread through either ambiguity or a purposeful lack of description. In “The Colour Out of Space,” for example, Lovecraft is faced with the difficult task of describing a color which does

not exist. His solution draws attention to this impossibility, turning the description of the color into an extension of its unknown nature. As revealed by the narrator of the story, “The colour, which resembled some of the bands in the meteor's strange spectrum, was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all” (36). In other words, while the color is not necessarily “impossible” to describe, its description hinges entirely on “analogy.” Additionally, this descriptive technique applies to the alien threats found in Lovecraft’s stories.

Not only does the ambiguity of the descriptions provided for the Great Old Ones act as an extension of their unknowable nature, but it also reflects a lack of human knowledge. As argued by Jozefa Pevčíková, this lack of knowledge is demonstrated “. . .through the notion of indescribable, to [the] human sense incomprehensible monsters that cross the laws of boundaries of [the] human world and can only be described by imperfect comparisons” (319). This technique has influenced the descriptions written in *Secondary Growth*, especially those provided for its alien threat, which similarly rely on analogy. In cosmic horror, it becomes futile to even try and describe the alien threat affecting the characters of the story, which meshes rather well with the subgenre’s overall themes of futility.

There is a sense of futility in cosmic horror stories, which helps contribute to the sense of dread felt by readers. An important aspect of the alien threats in cosmic horror is that they are not defeated, one way this sense of futility is demonstrated. In the essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft refers to this core concept as a “. . .defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (37). It is no secret that Lovecraft’s protagonists most often kill themselves or go mad. The narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” carefully weighs both options, buying a gun before being discouraged by a dream (357). In the essay “Character and Perspective in Cosmic Horror,”

Heinrich Wilke observes that “. . .the failure to apprehend the true nature of the horror results in demise: cosmic horror frequently takes the form of a tragedy of perception, cognition, and the actions which they fail to inform” (174). In addition to borrowing from Lovecraft’s descriptive techniques for *Secondary Growth*, the horrors of the novella are also ultimately undefeated. As such, the theme of futility integral to cosmic horror is maintained.

Not only are the alien threats in *Secondary Growth* ultimately undefeated, but there is also no specific catalyst or explanation provided for them. Naturally, this lack of explanation is meant to act as another extension of their unknowable nature. Saijamari Männikkö notes this characteristic of cosmic horror in the essay “H.P. Lovecraft and the Creation of Horror,” arguing that the subgenre’s “. . .horrors are more sophisticated, having to do with the relationship between all humankind and age-old horrors that surge unexpectedly on the placidity of the everyday world. The horrors are meaningless in the sense that they do not arise for any specific reason” (5). Additionally, the lack of a catalyst for the events of a cosmic horror story contributes to the subgenre’s overall theme of futility. In cosmic horror, terrible things can just happen.

The alien threats of cosmic horror also contribute to the subgenre’s sense of dread, as Lovecraft casts his Great Old Ones in antagonistic roles. In the essay “‘Cosmic Horror’ and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft,” Vivian Ralickas argues this is an extension of the sublime nature of the Great Old Ones. In the works of H. P. Lovecraft, “. . .our human perspective—what the sublime affirms—not only is severely limited in scope as a result of its anthropocentrism, but also poses a genuine threat to our existence in an environment dominated by alien beings far superior to us in might and intellect who are indifferent, if not outright hostile, to humanity” (Ralickas 367). Although the alien threat in *Secondary Growth* leans more toward indifference than hostility, the effects of its indifference are still horrific and otherworldly.

In cosmic horror, an alien world exists beyond our own. To fulfill the second requirement of the genre's "one test," however, there needs to be some kind of "contact" between the two (Lovecraft 38). In his essay, H. P. Lovecraft describes these alien worlds as the ". . .hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars" (36). Despite this, the vast distance separating the Great Old Ones from earth does not prevent them from having horrific effects in familiar settings, as was previously evidenced by "A Shadow Over Innsmouth." As Lovecraft continues, these cosmic threats can even ". . .press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse" (36). Lovecraft makes an important distinction here, implying that these "unholy dimensions" can only be seen by those who are "dead" or mentally unstable. In fact, since the truth at the heart of a cosmic horror story typically drives Lovecraft's protagonist mad, it becomes clear that these alien threats do not adhere to logic.

Because they stem from "unknown spheres and powers," the alien threats in cosmic horror often actively work against logic (Lovecraft 38). Clancy Smith notes as much in his essay on weird fiction, "A Nameless Horror," observing how logic is ultimately useless for many of Lovecraft's protagonists. As Smith explains, ". . .the mind of the logician is broken in the attempt to reconcile what is experienced with the limited categories of sense and understanding within the protagonist's disposal" (89). Smith specifies that ". . .the mind of the logician is broken," which echoes Ammi Pierce's fate in "The Colour Out of Space." As the narrator observes, Ammi's experiences with the Gardner family have caused his "sense of logic and continuity" to crumble entirely (Lovecraft 34). As Ammi demonstrates, logic cannot save the characters of a cosmic horror story, as aliens do not adhere to human logic.

The Great Old Ones are aliens unbound by human logic, which ironically helps to explain the lack of a specific catalyst or explanation for their antagonistic roles. In turn, the unknowable nature of the alien threat is further reinforced. Heinrich Wilke argues as much in “Character and Perspective in Cosmic Horror,” noting that:

. . .the supernatural resists being tethered to relatively easily identifiable phenomena, entities, or processes. The impossibility of relating the horror to a definite source, or even to a definite effect, increases its alienness by compromising quotidian understandings of causation, thereby diminishing the chances of eluding or combatting the horror. (174)

Additionally, Wilke’s argument echoes the idea of the alien threat being undefeatable. In the end, humans are powerless when faced with the antagonistic role of the Great Old Ones in a cosmic horror story. Whether being driven mad, murdered, or killing themselves, the fate of Lovecraft’s characters often reflects the futility of their efforts against the Great Old Ones. With that in mind, the alien threats in *Secondary Growth* have tangible consequences for the characters of the story. As evidenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, however, the effects that these horrors have on a character can also be more subtle in nature. Both Lovecraft’s texts and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem have influenced the fate of the characters in *Secondary Growth*.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is referenced by H. P. Lovecraft himself in “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” which acknowledges the poem’s influence on the genre of horror. More specifically, Lovecraft counts *The Rime* and its “sinister daemonism” among the “. . .typical British illustrations of the advent of the weird to formal literature,” marking it as an important step in the evolution of horror as a genre (46). While Lovecraft often takes the psychological consequences of his stories to an extreme, as demonstrated by Ammi Pierce’s

madness in “The Colour Out of Space,” these effects are not always as drastic in other works of horror. Although the effects of the Mariner’s story on the Wedding-Guest in *The Rime* are subtle, they do reflect a change in his view of the world. In turn, the poem demonstrates trace elements of the core concepts of cosmic horror.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, an unnamed Mariner recounts the horrors experienced aboard a ship after shooting an albatross. Interestingly, this initial premise works against the subgenre of cosmic horror, as the horrors the Mariner experiences are a direct consequence of his actions. In cosmic horror, human action is ultimately depicted as meaningless, explaining why Lovecraft denotes *The Rime* as a step from “weird to formal literature” in his essay (46). The ending, however, contains trace elements of the core concepts of cosmic horror. After hearing the Mariner’s account of the supernatural, the Wedding-Guest “. . .went like one that hath been stunned / And is of sense forlorn” (ll. 622-623). Words like “stunned” and “forlorn” echo Clancy Smith’s idea of a “broken logician,” giving the poem a cosmic horror edge (89). The effects on his perspective seem to permanently change the Wedding-Guest, in fact, as he awakens the next morning as “A sadder and wiser man” (l. 624). Although the Wedding-Guest only experiences the horror of the story through a secondhand account, it still leaves a tangible impact on him. In other words, while the Wedding-Guest has not physically changed like a resident of Innsmouth, his perspective and understanding of the world has shifted. In terms of *Secondary Growth*, this idea has affected the ending for David Wheeler, the protagonist of the novella.

Three core concepts from H. P. Lovecraft’s essay have influenced my writing process for *Secondary Growth*, the most important of which is the fear of the unknown. Additionally, the novella draws out a sense of dread in readers through the horrific effects of an outside, alien

threat on a small town in West Virginia (1, 38). In the context of cosmic horror, humans are ultimately powerless against the Great Old Ones, which manifest as uncaring, deterministic forces. As Jozefa Pevčíková explains, Lovecraft's stories remind readers ". . .that human understanding of the world is incomplete, limited by our sense, skills, and technologies" (319). In keeping with the subgenre's "one test," *Secondary Growth* is primarily concerned with the fear of change, demonstrated through a narrative where the very idea of home becomes something unknown and alien.

CHAPTER II

As Noah Mueller pulled open the passenger door to his uncle's wood-paneled station wagon, his nostrils were assaulted by the smell of fresh print. He glanced toward the backseat of the car, cluttered with stacks of that morning's paper, and narrowed his eyes. Buried somewhere underneath one of the countless stacks was his friend Wesley, hard at work rolling each copy of the paper up with a rubber band and then tossing it aside. Noah gave Wesley a halfhearted wave before he crumpled into the front seat of the Squire, its interior bathed in a dull glow from the overhead light. Both boys sat there for a moment in silence, listening to the steady sound of the heater pushing out air. Raising his hands to the vents, Noah felt a wave of heat gently lap at his palms. It was barely a week into September, and the air had already turned this cold.

Noah shifted his eyes to look in the rear-view mirror, watching Wesley as he slid each rolled-up newspaper into a plastic bag. Wesley was diligent, absorbed entirely in his work. Each paper wrapped in plastic meant one less contributing to the ink fumes slowly filling the car. Noah stared for another moment before lowering his hands from the heater and awkwardly turning to face Wesley in the back.

"You doing OK, Wesley?"

Wesley kept his head low, bagging one paper after the other.

Noah snapped his fingers. "Wesley. How you doing?"

Wesley jumped before raising his head. "Morning, Noah." He motioned toward the pile of papers slowly sliding off the seat beside him. "Sorry. I get kind of lightheaded back here."

Noah turned back, facing forward in his seat. "It's OK. It's not easy when Buck keeps the heat going."

Without missing a beat, Wesley returned to bagging papers. “At least all I’ve gotta do is bag. You’re the one who has to sit next to him.”

Noah sighed. “Still... beats having a headache before home room every morning.”

Again, a silence grew between the two boys. It was quickly broken by Noah, who was now speaking mostly with his hands.

“You know, Buck treats us like slaves. It must be easy being the driver. He’s just the guy who drives. He’s lucky he’s got us. When he gets back, we’ll knock him across the head and take the car. OK, Wesley?”

In the back, a slight smile spread across Wesley’s downturned face. “OK, Noah.”

Across the lawn, still waiting by the front door of Noah’s house, Buck Mueller spoke in hushed whispers with his brother. After gently pulling the front door closed, Buck patted his back pockets, stuck in a hand, and pulled out a crushed pack of cigarettes. Buck flipped the pack open as he marched toward the car, the first of the fallen leaves crunching beneath his boots with every step. High above, a sodium streetlight cast his station wagon in shades of orange, the quiet buzz of its bulb filling the air. Carried in by a cold wind, the faint noise of a horn bellowing could be heard from the railyard miles away. Then, the click of a lighter. To Buck, all noise was white noise. After year in and year out of running the same paper route, it was very likely all the fumes had gotten to his head.

Buck continued to march toward the two boys, gazing longingly at what he considered his greatest accomplishment. It was not his nephew, whose hands he saw flying wildly through the passenger window as he staged a coup with Wesley. It was not Wesley, who Buck had only known for three months. No, it was his 1984 Country Squire. He lingered outside the car for a

few minutes finishing his cigarette, then flicked it to the sidewalk below. With a turn of his shoe, he snuffed it out and returned to the boys inside.

As Buck sat down, he placed both hands squarely on the steering wheel, letting out an exaggerated sigh before turning to face his two passengers.

“Sorry about that, folks. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Noah winced. Now came that part of the morning where the stench of cigarettes from Buck’s clothes fought to overpower the smell of ink in the car. “What did Dad want?”

“Just something about the Wheeler girl. Said to keep an eye out for her and her daddy on our route today.”

Wesley chimed in from the back. “You mean Mr. Wheeler? Did something bad happen?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Mr. Wheeler’s usually out and about before we are, anyway. Mrs. Wheeler’s just calling around since Madison’s not at the house.”

“Huh.” Noah racked his brain for a response. “Weird.”

Glancing toward the side mirror as he spoke, Buck shifted gears and pulled away from the street. “I figure she probably just went out this morning with her daddy. Let’s get going.”

House after house, Buck would slow the car to a crawl as Noah pitched a newspaper through the passenger window. With a quick thud, each paper landed on the sidewalk outside. In the back, Wesley moved fast to make sure Noah always had a newspaper rolled, sealed, and ready to toss. When the three hit a rhythm, the timing of papers hitting the pavement was as precise as a metronome. Between streets, Noah watched the shadows of utility poles speed across his shirt as their lights passed by overhead. Aside from his misgivings about getting up in the morning, Noah had grown used to their paper route. It was simple, straightforward. This was their morning routine. After delivering to the first few streets, the two boys then had a small

break as Buck drove to the next neighborhood on their route. During this time, Noah often stared outside the window while Buck waxed poetically on some story from his past. Before he knew it, Buck had already started up with another, keeping one hand firmly on the wheel and gesturing with his spare.

“Seen this little lady sitting by the hill and knew right then and there I had to talk to her. But I was so drunk... hey, tell me if you’ve heard this one before, Noah.”

Noah had stopped keeping track of how many times Buck told this story. “No, Buck, I don’t think so.”

“Like I said, I was drunk. Still, I had enough sense to walk over and try to talk her up, you know? Work my magic.”

As much as he hated to admit it, Wesley was growing curious. “And how’d that go for you, Buck?”

“I was incoherent. I stumbled right past her, went straight down the hill. But you know what? Even after I busted my ass rolling down there, I didn’t cry. You boys best remember. A man never cries, much less in front of a woman.”

The three sat there for a moment, thinking to themselves. Wesley turned away and began to roll a rubber band up another newspaper.

Noah scratched at his shoulder. “Hey, uh, Buck...” Hearing the story growing up, the question never crossed his mind, but Noah realized he had never asked before. “What did you like so much about her?”

Buck unconsciously rubbed his thumb against the ring around his finger. “Well, I saw she was laughing, and she didn’t care how loud she was.”

Resting his chin on his palm, Noah continued to watch outside the open window, now looking upward. There was not a single star in the night sky. Just an inky black lingered over Greybull, West Virginia, the light of any stars washed out by the brilliance of a full moon. Noah glanced back down, seeing a row of houses stretch out into the distance. This was Fairview Street, which he recognized as both the next on their route and the place where Mr. Wheeler called home. Once or twice, he had been invited to the Wheeler house with the rest of the wrestling team after practice. He thought back to the conversation between Buck and his father and felt a knot begin to form in his stomach. Deeper into the street, Noah spotted the weeping willow in front of the Wheeler house, illuminated by the pale green glow of their front porchlight. Squinting his eyes, Noah leaned closer into the passenger window. The leaves of the willow cascaded further and further down, stopping just before reaching the grass below. As the car approached the tree, Noah could almost make out the shape of a long animal standing completely still behind its leaves.

Buck cleared his throat and began to speak. "Alrighty, folks. Up and at 'em."

Noah instinctively turned to face Buck, looking away from the Wheeler house for just a moment. Realizing his mistake, he whipped his head back toward the passenger window, catching another glimpse of the animal as it emerged from the dangling leaves and started slinking deeper into the yard.

Noah raised his voice, keeping his eyes fixed on the shape. "Hey, hey. Could you stop the car, Buck?"

Easing off the pedal, Buck shifted his hand from the wheel and hovered it over the gearshift. "All good, Noah?"

“Over there.” Noah stretched out his arm and pointed toward the animal, which continued to slip away from the willow tree. “Out in Mr. Wheeler’s yard, past the tree. You see that?”

Buck wrestled with the gearshift until the stick clunked squarely into place, the Squire’s wheels squeaking as he gradually brought the car to a full stop. Setting a newspaper to his side, Wesley lifted himself from his seat and leaned over the center console to get a better look. The car stood motionless in the middle of Fairview Street, all three passengers bending over each other to see outside the window. Still pointing, Noah noticed his hand faintly trembling in the air. His heartbeat began to race. Thinking quickly, Noah clenched his fist and pulled his arm back to his side, keeping it out of his uncle’s sight.

Buck, however, was singularly focused. Moving toward the wooded hill past the Wheeler’s backyard was some kind of large animal, one which he had never seen before. He narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out what it could possibly be. In an instant, the animal was flooded in an intense, blinding light. It must have set off a motion sensor somewhere on the side of the house.

At a loss for words, Buck started stammering to himself. “Christ alive...”

The creature’s body was unusually long, covered in slick, white skin that looked as if it had been stretched too tightly across the length of its torso. With all the gaps and tears in the overstretched skin, it almost had the texture of a birch tree. Although the animal appeared to writhe like a centipede, it somehow clung to a mass of dirtied, loose sheets below its segmented chest. Craning his neck forward, Buck could tell it was cradling this bundle against its upper body with several contorted, branch-like arms. Upon seeing these, he then noticed the countless other arms working together to slowly drag the creature’s slender frame closer and closer to the trees beyond the hill.

Suddenly, a towel fell on the grass across from the concrete bird bath. Then a couple of blankets. Piece by piece, the bundle of cloth began to drop from the creature's arms as it scurried away, leaving behind a trail of scattered rags in its path. Most of these rags were marked with stains, the reddish-brown streaks further darkened under the bright flood light. Finally approaching the incline of the hill, the animal paused for a brief moment before raising its upper half, rising high into the air. It bent itself backwards, facing the three in the car across the yard. It then pointed itself straight upward, revealing two massive antennae that wriggled against the open sky. Lowering itself back to the ground, it once again started to scurry toward the woods above the hill. As it disappeared into the trees, the creature left behind the last of its bundle of sheets. From this mess of dirtied blankets and rags, an arm fell limp in the grass.

Buck felt his heart sink. He struggled with his seatbelt, unbuckling himself and flinging open the car door. "Noah. Wesley. I need you both to stay put."

Noah tried his hardest to form words. "Buck, what do you—..."

Buck turned sharply, looking his nephew directly in the eyes. "Please."

Opening his mouth to try and reason with his uncle, Noah found he had nothing else to say. He could only watch in stunned silence as Buck leapt from the driver's seat, tripped his way around the hood of the Squire, then sprinted into the Wheeler's yard. Noah turned to check on Wesley in the back, his mouth still hanging wide open, only to see his friend's face similarly frozen in fear. Neither boy knew it, but both were thinking the same thing. This was it. This was the day Buck finally went and got himself killed.

Without saying a word, Noah threw open his door and followed suit, chasing Buck down as he raced toward the Wheeler house. Wesley, scrambling to push a stack of papers to the floor

of the car, was not far behind. As he jumped out to run after his friend, Wesley found no time to appreciate the first breath of fresh air he had gotten all morning.

Buck continued stumbling to the edge of the forest, the sheets and rags scattered around the lawn catching between his legs and tripping him as he ran. The lone arm was still out there, splayed on the grass and dangling limply from the pile of sheets. Getting closer to the bundle, Buck felt a lump lodge itself in his throat. This one wouldn't go down, no matter how hard he tried to swallow. Lowering himself to the ground, he slowly reached out and pinched his fingers around the corner of the topmost blanket. Lifting it gently into the air, he recognized the face of Madison Wheeler buried underneath. The color had been completely drained from her body. The last time Buck had seen Maddy, she was working part time as a cashier at her uncle's hunting supplies store. All those years ago. At the time, she was just seventeen. Buck set the blanket aside, slowly rising from the grass. Noah and Wesley, finally catching up to Buck, watched him from behind as he slowly gazed up into the woods, then lowered his head back down to face Maddy. As Buck turned around, they saw the tears running down his cheeks.

Buck instinctively reached for the two boys in front of him, falling to a knee and wrapping his arms tightly around them. "Look away, Noah. Oh, God. Sorry, Wes."

Beneath the shadow of his uncle's arm, Noah caught occasional glimpses of Maddy. Her pale hair was matted in some spots and frayed in others, the dark brown roots appearing jet black in the stark flood light. Although she was mostly covered in dirtied blankets, Noah saw her clothes were ripped and torn. Through these tatters, one could see the dirt and stains that sullied her bare skin.

Buck began choking up, each word out of his mouth stumbling over itself. "Run, uh... run over to the neighbor's house, Noah. Tell them to call the cops."

Noah squeezed his eyes shut and buried his head deeper into his uncle's coat. It smelled like tobacco. "What about going to Mrs. Wheeler's—?"

"No," Buck interrupted. "No, Jesus, her mom's still inside. She doesn't..." With a deep breath, he released the boys from his arms, raised himself back up, and pointed to the road.

"Across the street, Noah. Call anybody."

Noah had never seen his uncle like this. Not once. Buck was crying. He was breathing faster than ever, and his shoulders looked slumped and weighed down. Noah stumbled back a few steps, moving away from his uncle. Before Buck could say another word, Noah took off running across the lawn. Sprinting past the Squire and across the empty street, he felt the cold morning air brush against his face, now hot with tears. Up above, Noah could just make out the first hints of morning as the sky turned a deep shade of blue.

Back behind the house, Buck looked over to Wesley, who took several uneasy steps toward Maddy before stopping. He had been staring at her the entire time. Buck again lowered himself to the ground, resting on one knee and spreading his arms wide. "Wes?"

Wesley kept his eyes locked on Maddy.

"Back here." Albeit weakly, Buck snapped his fingers. "Just don't look, Wes. Please don't look."

Wesley looked down at his hands instead. His palms were pitch black, stained with ink after handling the morning papers.

—

Exhaling into his palms, David Wheeler watched as the warmth from his breath turned to fog and slowly rose into the air. He clasped his hands tight, rubbing them together and trying his best to trap a little bit of heat inside. Maddy was right. He really should have brought his gloves

outside. Turning his head toward the house, he was almost blinded by the sight of his backyard. Beneath the sun, the snow had become so bright it hurt to look at. David felt the breeze pick up, whipping the snow from the bare trees down to the yard. Each fleck fell softly, sparkling against the clear blue sky. Suddenly, David heard a sharp crack from behind. Frank Wheeler was close by, tossing some split wood to the ground before placing another log atop an old, overgrown stump.

Frank called out to his son. “Run those over to the shed, would ya, Davey?”

Although the stuffy, oversized coat his mom had wrapped around him made it a little hard to move around, David was nothing if not eager. Racing to the pile of split wood, he leaned down and started sorting the bundle into his arms. He took care not to get any splinters stuck into his bare hands. Bringing the wood to the shed next to the back deck, David listened closely as the snow lightly crunched under every step he took. In truth, the family woodshed was really a few beams and wooden planks nailed together below some shingles. David began scanning one of these planks, looking for the spot where he and Maddy had carved out their names the year before. Finding their names still scratched into the grain of the wood — as if they would ever leave — he felt satisfied enough to return to the task at hand.

Rather than stacking the split wood properly, David instead awkwardly stretched out his arms, hoping the bundle of split pieces would roll from his arms down to a lower stack. It worked, more or less. He turned around, retracing the footprints he had left behind in the snow. Before stepping off the back deck, he turned to look through the sliding glass door and caught his mother and Maddy sitting on the hardwood floor in front of the fireplace. The first to notice him standing there was Maddy, who gave her cousin a toothy grin that very nearly shined. He smiled back, then began rubbing his hands together as he continued his march back up to his dad.

Frank heard the steady footsteps of his son approaching from behind just as he drove his axe through another log.

Without turning, Frank raised his voice and continued to work. “Should just be a few more trips now.”

Whenever his dad asked him to help, David made sure to pay close attention, studying every move he made. Frank let out a grunt with each swing of the axe, sending a cloud of fog into the cold air and veiling him in mist. The short waves of his blond hair, darkened a bit with age, were tucked below a roughed-up Washington Redskins baseball cap.

David spoke up. “Dad?”

His father continued to work, responding only with the solid crack of a log being split. Wanting to get a better look, David inched a little closer to his father, staring at the gray plaid spread across his flannel jacket. As he bent down to pick up another log, Frank felt a small hand tugging at his coat.

“C’mon.” With a firm hand, Frank pushed his son aside. “You’re suffocating me here, Davey.”

Stumbling a few steps to the side, David stood still. Frank grumbled to himself, grabbing the log and readying it on the stump. With both hands, he lifted his axe high into the air, preparing to swing it down, then paused. Just in the corner of his eye, he could barely make out the shape of David. Still holding the axe steady, Frank gave his son a side glance and recognized that scrunched-up look forming on his face. His cheeks might have already been red from the cold, but Dad could tell. Davey was fighting back tears.

Frank sighed, finally lowering the axe back down to his knees. He faced his son, thinking for a moment. After a time, he spoke up. “...You ever see a tree’s rings, Davey?”

David sniffled, then quickly shook his head from side to side.

Resting the axe against the stump, Frank waved his son over. "Let me show you something, then."

David took an uneasy step toward his father. Frank waved again, this time with a bit of added enthusiasm.

"Trees are old, Davey. Real old. Kind of like your old man."

Slightly smiling now, David interjected. "You're not that old!"

Frank tossed the log off the stump and chuckled. "Maybe not, maybe not!" With gloved hands, he then brushed off the stump's surface, sending splinters and small fragments of wood to the snow.

David was now close enough for Frank to wrap his arm around him and bring him the rest of the way, leaning them both in front of the stump. He watched closely as Frank began tracing his finger around one of the stump's many rings. This close, he could smell the coffee in his father's breath.

"You see that? Every year that goes by, a tree gets itself a new ring. You can actually tell how old a tree is by counting how many rings it's got." Frank made a show of tapping the rings one by one, making his way to the center of the stump. "Let's see here..."

He gently grabbed his son's hand, then guided it to the stump. "How many rings would you be, Davey?"

Slowly but surely, the two started counting out loud, stopping only after reaching seven. Frank did stumble a bit after counting to four, wanting to give his son a chance to correct his mistake. By the end, however, David's smile had fully returned.

Seeing this, Frank let go of his son's hand. "But that's not all you can tell," he added with a wave of his finger. "The tree remembers it all. Every bright spring, every dark winter. Every memory becomes a part of the ring, and every ring becomes a part of the tree. You can read stories in them, like the scars on our skin."

His voice grew steadier, each word spoken with care. "We all want to be remembered. But we don't get to choose how. When you think back on your dad, I want..."

He trailed off before quickly composing himself again. "Well, I want you to remember him as the person who made you into a man."

Saying this, Frank picked up the axe, offering its handle to David. "You want to split a log?"

David couldn't believe his ears. With widened eyes, he studied the axe carefully, unable to move a muscle. Giving the boy a tiny nod, Frank again offered the handle of the axe, reaching closer to his son.

The weight of the axe felt strange in David's hands. It was heavy, much heavier than he expected. Trying to raise the axe a bit higher, he felt his muscles strain under the weight until his arms slacked back down. The axe looked so weightless when his dad was using it. Every swing, every cut. They were all effortless. He must have seemed so weak in front of Dad.

While David continued to contend with the axe in his hands, Frank carefully placed the log he had tossed aside in the center of the stump. He then walked behind David, helping him hold the axe properly. After he was satisfied with the boy's stance, Frank paced back several steps.

"Come on, now," he encouraged. "Just a little bit higher."

David raised the axe as high as his tiny arms could lift it. He teetered back a bit before readying himself and taking a deep breath.

“Alright, Davey. Swing!”

David drove the axe down. Catching the edge of the stump, he lost control of the axe as it fell, splitting his foot at an angle down the middle. Looking to the ground, he caught a glimpse of the white snow as it turned bright red, the blood trickling fast from his shoe. He forced his eyes shut and howled out in pain. Tightening his grip around the wooden handle, David struggled with the axe, unable to wrench it free from his foot.

Frank’s eyes shot open. “Christ!” Running over to David, he brushed aside his son’s hands and wrapped his own around the axe’s handle. He looked to the sky and took a deep breath, feeling the cold air as it filled his lungs. “Hang on, Davey.”

Tugging upward on the axe, Frank heard a pop from below that prompted David to let out another scream. He glanced down, readjusting his grip on the handle. The faster, he thought to himself, the better. With one swift motion, he pulled the axe free, finally dislodging it from David’s foot.

Frank spoke between ragged breaths, the agitation clear in his voice. “God damn it, Davey.” Throwing the axe to the side, he then pointed a finger toward the house. “Run on down to the truck.”

David tried to lift his foot, but a sharp pain yanked it back to the snow. He couldn’t move an inch.

“Oh.” Frank shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Right.”

Looking back up, Frank noticed his wife struggling to throw open the sliding door to the back deck. As soon as the door was open, Maddy shot outside of the house, bolting across the

deck and tripping over mounds of snow to reach her cousin. Her voice rang out, cutting through the sound of David bawling his eyes out. “Davey!”

Holly Wheeler was just behind her niece, unable to make sense of the scene ahead of her. There was her son, crying, his crumpled face nearly as red as the snow around him. Tracing her eyes from her son to the axe, she saw the long dash of blood splitting the distance between the two. She found herself moving faster and faster, now breaking into a full sprint. “Davey, baby!”

The sound of Mom’s voice was not enough to calm Davey down. Since forcing them shut, he had not once opened his eyes. So long as he couldn’t see it, then perhaps it would simply go away. Squeezing his eyes closer together, he focused on the inky black behind his eyelids, pushing out another stream of tears which ran down his face. Was Dad mad at him? The thought of that made him even more upset. As the shouts of Mom, Dad, and Maddy started to bleed together in his ears, the stinging sensation spreading from his foot also seemed to heighten. He rubbed his face against the puffy sleeve of his coat, then felt his father wrap his arms around him, lifting him off the ground. David listened to the brisk, unsteady crunch of snow coming from below, his head swaying back and forth in the open air. Suddenly, he heard the sound of the truck door being swung open. Before he knew it, his father was firmly placing him in the back seat. He heard his dad rummage through some of the stray items from the family store left behind on the floor of the truck. Feeling the pressure of something being tightly wound around his foot, David’s face shrunk.

Frank tossed a roll of duct tape back down to the floor of the car, which then dangled loosely from his son’s foot. By now, he was in the middle of trying to explain himself to his wife. “I need you to listen to me, Holly.” Slamming the back door of the truck shut, he paced toward the driver’s side. “We were splitting logs, so I thought—”

“Splitting logs?” Holly responded across the hood of the truck as she pulled open the passenger door. “Just what do you think he is? A grown man?” She laughed in disbelief, then waved over to David. “For Christ’s sake, Franky, he’s seven.”

Frank paused, standing still in front of the truck’s door and muttering under his breath. “He’s a wimp is what he is.”

It was just loud enough for Holly to hear. Even then, she had to make sure. “What’d you say?”

Frank’s voice boomed out as he threw his hands into the air. “He’s a wimp is what he is!” He pointed toward Maddy, who Holly had helped climb into the back seat. “Hangs around that cousin of his too much. Turning him into a sissy.”

Holly had never heard Frank say anything like that. A bit dazed, she watched him crash into the front seat and start fumbling with his keys, trying to jam them into the ignition.

In the back of the truck, Maddy kept her eyes locked on David as the engine sputtered to life. Her gaze drifted down toward his shoe before her eyes quickly shot back up. Although he had grown too exhausted to cry, his eyes were still closed, crammed shut below the tufts of his short blond hair. Maddy noticed his faintly trembling hands at his sides, which were balled into fists. It seemed he had forgotten his gloves after all.

“Look, Davey.” She elbowed her cousin’s ribs, then shoved her own hands in his face. Without even thinking, David opened his eyes. Although his vision was blurred with tears, he saw her fingers were bright pink, the first signs of frostbite starting to show. “We both forgot our gloves!”

David was barely conscious. As his father shoved his foot against the pedal and sent the truck flying into reverse, he could only sit and stare at Maddy's outstretched hands, the whole car shaking on the gravel lot.

After passing through the hospital's emergency room, David was admitted and given a bed. Inside his room, he found himself staring daggers at his foot, now stuck in a cast and wrapped in bandages. The sound of all the thoughts crashing in his head drowned out the buzz of the fluorescent panel on the ceiling. Earlier, he had overheard the nurse mention something about his bones to Mom and Dad. More importantly, he heard the nurse say it might be hard for Davey to move around like he used to. Useless, he thought to himself. A wimp.

Hearing a commotion from outside, David raised his head up. Maddy, who Frank had driven back home to her parents soon after David was admitted, rushed into the room.

"Maddy!" David felt his cheeks rise into a smile, his first in a long time. "Where's your mom and dad?"

Maddy was in the middle of catching her breath. She must have been running. "They're whispering really loud with Aunt Holly and Uncle Frank!"

David wasn't quite sure what she meant by that.

Maddy wandered over to the bed, captivated by the sight of her cousin's cast. "Is your foot gonna be OK, Davey?"

His eyes shifted toward the window beside his bed as the smile on his face faded away. "Don't know."

"Really?"

"Really."

David focused on the evening view outside the hospital window. Far below, a sign lit with small bulbs read Greybull Community Hospital. His gaze followed a couple of grown-ups making their way to the front entrance, one of which was pushing an even older woman in a wheelchair.

David started to speak, his eyes still pointing outside. “I heard the nurse, I think. I might not walk right anymore.”

The two grew silent. Maddy looked down at her buttoned-up coat. “I’m sorry, Davey. But I’m sure you’ll—”

“No.” Tears began swelling in David’s eyes. “No, Maddy, you don’t get it.”

David clenched his fist around the blanket on his hospital bed. “What if I really can’t ever run again?” The image of the other kids in his classroom flashed in his mind as he whipped his head to face Maddy. “What if—...”

His cousin grabbed his arm. “Well, that’s OK, Davey!” Maddy didn’t quite speak with reassurance, but as if the question itself was stupid. “Then I’ll just walk with you for the rest of your life.”

—

David had just sat down in his living room when he heard the telephone ring from the kitchen. Glancing up, he instinctively hovered his palm over his cane before returning it to the arm of his chair. He reminded himself he had bought the answering machine for a reason. Might as well give it some use.

Still in his chair, David leaned to the side and began to sort through a small, padded bag left on the floor, eventually pulling out a camera. Lifting it to his chest, he turned the camera in his hands before catching his reflection in the lens. Over the years, David’s hair had remained as

striking a blond as ever. Maddy, whose hair had lost any hints of blonde by the second grade, made sure to remind him of her jealousy over this, which she once dubbed his “greatest betrayal.”

Following an internship at the Greybull Daily Telegraph as a teenager, David started working as a photographer in Beckley, a neighboring town to the north. Business tended to move more slowly in the colder months around the holidays, which meant there were fleeting moments of peace between shoots. With the office just a minute or two away, David often made the most of his hour-long lunch break by driving back to his apartment and fixing up old equipment. Today was one of those days. His stomach growled as he eyed one of the wrapped-up pepperoni rolls sitting on the table in front of him. Beside it was a fresh cup of coffee, which David always took with milk and sugar. After the telephone had finished ringing, the machine produced a long beep. A familiar voice began filling the walls of the apartment.

“Davey? It’s Mom.” There was a subtle crackling under her voice, and the sound cut in and out over the speaker on the cheap machine. “Are you there to pick up?”

It seemed like she was struggling to find the right words to continue. David leaned forward, placing his camera on the table and then reaching for the coffee across from him. He listened carefully, lifting up the cup and holding it just below his mouth. He felt the warmth of the steam on his face as it swirled past his prickly stubble. “We really... I need to talk with you over the phone.”

Nearly a year had passed since he was last in Greybull, West Virginia, the longest he had ever been away from his hometown. He took a short sip of his coffee before wincing and lowering the cup back down to the table. It was still too hot.

“This call, uh... this isn’t about your dad again, Davey. It’s Maddy.”

David turned his head, now facing the kitchen. His mom tried to start up with another sentence but abruptly stopped herself.

“I don’t...” She was fully choking up now. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

David was already in motion, grabbing at his cane and struggling out of the chair to pick up the phone before his mother hung up.

“I love you,” she added in a steadier voice.

He bumped into his living room table, knocking over his cup and spilling coffee down to the rug below. He was moving as fast as he could to get to the kitchen doorway.

“Just, um... just give us a call when you get this message, Davey. Please.”

As that last word left her mouth, David could hear the strain it put on her voice. Then, a short click as the tape stopped. He hadn’t made it in time. Not even close.

By now, the only noise in the apartment was that of David’s heart pounding from inside his chest. Looking down at the cane held in his right hand, he tightened his grip around the handle, unsure of what to do next. He glanced back up toward the telephone on the kitchen wall, playing out the call he would have to make in his head. Almost out of instinct, he forced his eyelids tightly shut.

CHAPTER III

Although the night before leaving for Greybull was mostly spent tossing and turning in his sleep, David did dream. He dreamt he was hiking, one of those bizarre things that really only made sense in a dream. Frank did take Davey hiking once or twice before as a boy, but the two had stopped going by the time of the accident, and David would never hike again.

At first, David was following a well-trodden path which ran alongside a winding creek. Even sticking to the trail, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling of being lost. It was like the woods had developed a mind of their own. The trees were moving around him, disappearing and then reappearing again with the turn of his head. He was now surrounded on all sides by thin, white trees, each spiraling endlessly up into the clouds. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, and the gentle patter of the rain was interrupted now and again by the low rumble of an approaching thunderstorm. It all felt too real for a dream. David could even feel the static in the air as it danced across his skin.

It was getting hard to move around on the trail with his cane, which slipped and stuck itself into the muddy ground as the path wrapped around more and more birch trees. Eventually, the trail split off from the creek, tapering off before reaching a clearing in the woods. Out in the distance, David could see a woman lying in the mud. She was surrounded by fallen leaves, their brilliant shades of orange doused and darkened by the rain. He stood still, tilting his head to get a better angle of her. She looked a little different now, but he would recognize that face anywhere. It was Maddy.

A faraway flash lit up the sky. After a moment, the distant sound of thunder boomed through the trees. With Maddy just ahead of him, David finally remembered why he had gone hiking in the first place. Frantically rushing toward her, his cane again caught itself on the

uneven ground. Losing his grip, he stumbled then fell, crashing into a puddle and drenching himself in mud. Splashing his hand in the water to try and reach for his cane, he found nothing there. It had disappeared, somehow lost in the depths.

David shifted his eyes toward his cousin, then slowly raised himself to sit beside her. He rubbed the sleeve of his jacket against his face, trying to wipe away some of the mud. It was strange, really. Maddy was dressed in clothes he couldn't recognize. The roots of her hair were darker, too. Had she stopped dying it?

That's right, he reminded himself. It had been a while. He hadn't just come out here to find her.

He fell forward, lifting his cousin into his arms. David tried to speak, but his speech was slowed, one word from his mouth slurring into the next.

"I am going to save you." His arms tightened around her.

"I promise," he choked out. "I am going to come and save you."

David felt something brush up against his arm. He let go of Maddy and rested her back on the ground, searching for what could have moved. Stirring from beneath her sweater was some kind of protrusion, poking and prodding at the fabric as it tried to break free. David inched a little further back, but kept his eyes locked on the moving shape. It continued to dart wildly around her chest before settling on a spot just below her belly and pressing up even harder. Suddenly, a mess of tangled roots and branches shot out from her body like fire. The branches cracked as they bent down and forced themselves into the ground, sending specks of mud flying into the air. David looked away, lifting his arm to cover himself. Once the sound of creaking wood had slowly grinded to a halt, he turned back and saw most of the branches were now completely rooted in the ground. A thick, syrupy liquid bubbled up from the parts of Maddy's

skin where the roots had emerged. David crawled across the slippery ground on his hands and knees, his elbows sinking into the wet leaves. Reaching out a trembling hand, he ran his finger across a stream of the dark substance and felt it with his thumb. It was sticky. It must have been sap.

The ground below David started to shake. With a steady rumble, a tree sprouted from inside Maddy's belly, hoisting her up into the air and forcing the roots and branches even further apart. David fell backwards, his head pointing up toward the tree. He could tell it was an oak, familiar and strong. As he watched the tree rise higher into the sky, David felt something coil itself around his foot. He whipped his head down and shouted. A branch-like arm was clutching him by the ankle, dragging him closer to the tree. He kicked at the branch with his other leg, causing it to tighten its grip around his foot. Twisting his body around to pull himself away, David again splashed a hand into the puddle, this time feeling the handle of his cane in his palm. He pulled it out, then glanced toward what was held in his right hand. It was a small hatchet.

David woke up from the dream drenched in sweat, his sheets bunched up and wrapped around him. Rubbing his eyes, he turned to face the high-pitched noise coming from his alarm clock. His blankets slid and fell to the floor as he rolled over to his bedside table, struggling to find the right button to shut off the alarm.

The rest of his morning was spent troubled by the dream. After tossing his suitcase into the back of his gray Mercury Sable, David slammed the trunk closed and made his way to the driver's side. He couldn't stop himself from replaying the dream in his head, committing every single detail to memory. As he climbed into the driver's seat, David reached across the center console to place his cane in the footwell below the passenger seat, letting it fall against the cloth cushion. He turned the key in the ignition, then lingered in the parking lot outside of his

apartment building for a few minutes, listening to the grumble of the idling engine. He tapped his thumb against the wheel. The more he thought about it, the more he realized how glad he was to see Maddy, even in a nightmare. He couldn't quite place it, but it was an odd feeling knowing she was now a sight reserved only for dreams. He lowered his hand, pulling on the gearshift and backing out of the parking space.

After a quick stop for gas and coffee, David was homebound, leaving Beckley for Greybull. He flipped his blinkers on and shifted lanes, eventually turning the sedan off the highway and onto a smaller road leading into the mountains. David flashed his eyes over to the dashboard, checking the time. Above the radio controls, a rectangular clock lit with a dull green screen read just past ten. He moved his hand down to grab the foam cup from the center console, his eyes returning to the road. With Greybull half an hour south of Beckley, David figured he would be back in town by the early afternoon.

A pair of solid yellow lines separated the two lanes of the road, both of which were covered in fresh patches of pitch-black asphalt. Even further ahead, David could make out a deep hole in the middle of the road, which was outlined in bright, neon green paint. Raising his cup to take a sip of coffee, David lazily moved the wheel a little to the right, trying to center the pothole between the two front tires. In an instant, the hole had disappeared beneath the gray hood of the sedan. Suddenly, the back of the car jerked down, one of the rear tires catching itself in the pothole. Still holding the cup to his mouth, the liquid inside sloshed up and spilled on David, drenching his shirt in lukewarm coffee. Setting the cup back in the holder, he used his elbow to lift open the center console. He rummaged through the flyers and cassette tapes inside, hoping to find a napkin. The best he could do was a receipt.

David cursed to himself, crumpling the receipt in his palm to soak up some of the coffee. Although he reminded himself that he needed time to call his clients and cancel appointments, he was still kicking himself for not leaving the night before. He tried to picture the David from yesterday in his head, but as an outsider looking in. There he was, a grown man frozen and hunched over in front of the telephone, too afraid to make a simple phone call. He shook his head to clear the image from his mind, focusing back on the road ahead of him. If Maddy were here, she'd probably slap him across the shoulders and tell him he was being too hard on himself. He shifted his eyes to the window, trying to distract himself with the view of the mountains outside.

Whenever he drove, David liked to take in the scenery, a much nicer way of saying he had a nasty habit of taking his eyes off the road. While it had been over a year since David was last in the town of Greybull, he often used the back roads around the area for work. He found himself driving through a residential area now, which he recognized from a shoot last summer. To his left, a row of brick houses sat perched on a hill, their lawns dotted with signs of various politicians running for local government. Telephone poles, some of which leaned far to the side, lined the edge of the road, each one decorated with an American flag that whipped against the open wind. Passing the residential areas closer to the edge of town, the houses were soon outnumbered by old farms and ranches. These made popular venues for weddings, and — despite how much he hated shooting for weddings — David did tend to better enjoy the shoots that were outdoors.

Out of all the photographs David took, however, his favorites were of the places that felt left behind, and the drive to Greybull was a glimpse into a time long gone. Wooden barns topped with rusted roofs sank into themselves, decaying on fenced-up fields of overgrown thickets. In the distance, he could see a tall, patched-up silo set against the clear blue sky, which seemed to

have brush growing out from the open gaps on its side. David wondered if these buildings had been untouched for years. Looking to the left, he noticed a field further down the road that was covered in countless rows of hay bales, each wrapped in white plastic. He chuckled, remembering how Maddy used to make fun of him as a kid for calling them marshmallows.

As his smile gently faded and his gaze returned to the road, David shouted out loud. He slammed his foot against the brakes, his body jerking forward before falling straight back in the seat. Several feet ahead of the car, a black cow was lying down in the middle of the road. The cow turned its head to face the headlights, close enough for David to see the sunlight reflected in its eyes. Slowly raising itself up, the animal lumbered over to the wooden fence on the right side of the road. Still shaken up, David slowly returned his foot to the gas pedal, lifting his hand to wave the animal goodbye. Seeing the lone cow waddle over to an empty field, he felt a bit sad. As the sedan picked up speed and pushed past the crescent of the hill, however, David could now see the rest of the field was filled to the brim with cows. He couldn't help but feel a little piece of himself light up.

With a few more miles of pasture behind him, the back roads soon split off to another highway, taking David out of the mountains and into the town of Greybull. A square, green welcome sign sat on the very edge of the city, listing Greybull's population as 9,158. In this part of town, the railyard stretched out for miles, its tracks running alongside the road David found himself on now. Speaking over the radio in a voice as smooth as molasses, the host of a local station was in the middle of his show, telling stories during the break between two songs.

The host seemed to be recounting the legend around a rock song David had never heard of. "Now, you might've heard folks out there say this next song was written in honor of a member of the band who sadly passed away. They say he was the bass guitarist in the original

lineup, but had himself a nasty habit of gambling. Died facedown outside a bar before the band could take off.”

His voice shot down to a lower pitch before going quiet, the audio from the speakers cutting out and being replaced with a faint crackling noise. Having grown used to spotty radio broadcasts, David tried to adjust the volume by turning one of the dials on the dashboard. Through a veil of white noise, David struggled to hear what the host was saying. Apparently, the song itself was about a gambler from hell trying to sneak his way up into heaven.

“Rumor has it this song was one last friendly dig at their bassist. It ends with the gambler being found out, turned away by Saint Peter up there at the pearly gates.”

David raised his eyebrow, having only been half listening until that point.

“At least, so the story goes,” the host added. David could make out another couple of words before the host’s voice once again disappeared, lost in a wave of white noise.

David spun the wheel to the side, turning the sedan into the parking lot of a long brick building lined with tall glass windows. His first stop in Greybull was not his house, but a small restaurant on the outer edge of the city, situated across from the railyard. Growing up, David had gotten close with Patricia, the owner of the diner and a close friend of his mother. Before David started working for the local newspaper, Patricia had practically begged him to work part-time there as a waiter. After what had happened to Maddy, he knew he should check in on Patricia and her daughter Abigail, who was Maddy’s best friend. Besides, David could always eat. As he pulled into a parking space and saw the old building through his windshield, his mind was flooded by the memories of all the times he came here with Maddy, usually to pick Abigail up after her shift.

Cane in hand, David pushed the door of his car closed before taking a step toward the curb. A sharp pain flared in his foot, stopping him in his tracks. He shut his eyes, then took a moment to collect himself, putting all of his weight into the handle of his cane. Although the wound from his accident had long healed over, an ache still remained, as if the memory of that day was ingrained in the scar tissue. After taking a deep breath, David opened his eyes and leaned back against the car door, looking out toward the railyard. This whole side of town smelled like industry. Black trains sat stationary on the tracks, most of which were flanked by long rows of carts filled with heaps of coal. The side of each cart was branded with the white logo of Norfolk Southern. From where David was standing, it almost seemed like the carts could stretch out on the tracks forever. Moving away from the car door, David paced toward the sidewalk in front of the diner, glancing up to read the red letters placed atop the roof of the building. Years back, some of the letters had been whipped away by the wind, but everyone in Greybull knew the sign once spelled out “The Hungry Miner.”

Glancing back down, David saw that he was reflected in the glass door of the diner, a view of the railyard captured just behind him. He stopped, taking stock of the man he saw reflected in the glass. His short blond hair, always swept to the side, was far messier than usual. The dense patch of stubble on his face reminded him he hadn’t shaved in days. For a split second, David squinted at his reflection, wondering if his eyes looked a bit puffy. He shook his head, reminding himself he didn’t really know what “puffy eyes” even meant.

As he pushed open the glass door, David heard the chime of a small bell just above his head. Across the room, a colorful jukebox sat beside the front counter, playing a blues song at a low volume, almost too quiet to hear. David thought he recognized the song as Moon River, but he was surprised to hear Louis Armstrong singing. Glancing toward the left side of the diner,

David noticed a woman with short, neatly trimmed black hair tilting a pot of coffee to refill a customer's cup. The checkered tiled floor was covered with square tables and booths, most of which were arranged to line the walls. The room was filled with the distinct smell of fresh coffee and maple syrup, just like David remembered. Even then, he felt a bit out of place walking through the door of the building alone.

On the far end of the diner, David could hear two men who were sharing a corner booth, both wearing bright yellow safety vests over their hoodies. He kept them in the corner of his eye, trying his best to listen in on their conversation as he walked to the counter. One of the men tore open a small packet of salt, tapping it with his finger to sprinkle it over a basket of fries. He was clearly the older of the two, his thick, white mustache wriggling around his plump face as he moved his mouth to talk. By contrast, the man sitting across from him was much younger. He nodded along as the older man spoke, taking an occasional sip from the steaming cup of coffee held in his hand. Hearing the steady tap of a cane against the tile floor, the older man glanced over, then lowered his voice to a hush. David lifted himself to sit on one of the stools lining the front counter, which squeaked and spun to the side as he sank into the red cushion. He turned his head down, carefully setting his cane against the counter next to his legs and listening as the two men picked up their conversation.

The older man had a deep voice, as coarse as gravel. "From what I hear, her daddy wasn't even at the house. You know my brother, works down at the station? Says they brought him in yesterday morning for questioning." He stuck out a finger to point at the younger man, then continued. "I'm betting you it was him."

"You serious? I don't think old Mr. Wheeler could do something like that."

The older man scoffed, shrugging his shoulders. "Why the hell not?"

“Come on, Mitch,” the other man firmly replied, setting his cup back on the table. “He’s my kid’s wrestling coach.”

“So?” After folding his arms and leaning back in the seat, the older man kicked out both of his legs. “Doesn’t mean anything. John Wayne Gacy was some kid’s clown.”

“I mean, sure, but... his own daughter?”

David heard the light tapping of a fist on the counter next to him. He jumped a little, turning his head to face the noise.

Leaned against the counter was a young woman, the same waitress David saw refilling coffee as he was walking in. She wore a simple black eyepatch which covered her left eye. “You know, David, eavesdropping doesn’t look good on you.”

A wide grin spread across his face. “Neither do running shoes.”

The woman looked up at his face, then back down toward the cane leaning against the counter. Turning her head away, she tapped the back of her hand against the front of the cash register. It made a small ding as the tray flew open. She began sorting a handful of coins into the register, which rattled into the plastic tray as she continued to speak. “I get this strange feeling you’re about to place an order.”

“Could I just get a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich? No tomatoes on that, please. Oh, and a coffee, too.”

“Alrighty then,” she responded. She reached below the counter, then pulled out a small yellow notepad. “Bacon, lettuce, tomato. Extra tomatoes.” She clicked the pen in her hand, glancing back up. “And a coffee. Anything else?”

“That’s everything. What’s the damage?”

“Not including your tip? Three eighty-six. Seems you still don’t like tomatoes, David.”

“Well, you know me.” David continued talking as he awkwardly turned his body around to grab his wallet from his back pocket. “The only thing I feel for tomatoes is burning, seething hatred.”

“Hm,” she replied. “How you doing otherwise?”

After pulling out a brown leather wallet, David turned back around and started sifting through its contents. He reached out his arm, handing Abigail a crisp five-dollar bill. “Same as everyone, I guess. I think I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything.”

He looked down, staring at the woodgrain pattern which ran across the surface of the counter. “I mean, Christ... I can still see the three of us running around after school, you know?”

His eyes shot back up. “I should really be asking you the same, Abigail. How have you been doing?”

Abigail turned around to grab a small white cup, then placed it on the counter. “I’m shaken up, more than anything. I just wish we knew more. It’d get folks around here to talk less, at least.”

As Abigail tilted the pot of coffee, she stared at the black liquid slowly filling the empty cup. Now speaking from her chest, her voice grew firmer with every word. “I just hate to hear her name coming out of mouths that never once would’ve said it otherwise.”

There she was, the Abigail that David remembered. She would’ve killed for Maddy.

Abigail got up and left for a moment, circling around the diner to refill coffees and let the kitchen know about any new orders. As she walked back to the counter, she tried her best to change the subject, peering past David’s shoulder and outside the front windows. “That your car out front, David? The gray sedan?”

David turned his head to look outside, then nodded.

She handed him a round plate as he turned around, which clattered as he set it on the counter. “You on your way to see your mom and dad, then?”

David nodded again, looking down at the white plate. The sandwich was cut at an angle down the center. He picked up one half in his hand, then started to explain further. “Maddy’s parents, too. We’re all getting together at the house for supper.”

“That sounds nice. You think you’re ready?”

David had already taken a bite from the sandwich, speaking with his mouth full. “As ready as I’ll ever be,” he said while chewing. “I’m definitely glad to see Mom again.”

He placed his sandwich back on the plate. “Suzanne, too,” he added, wiping his mouth with a square napkin. “I can’t even imagine what she’s going through.”

He shook his head, looking back up at Abigail. “But enough about my parents.” Forcing a wide smile, he waved his head from left to right, scanning both sides of the diner. “I’m surprised Pat isn’t already out here trying to sell me on dessert.” He gave a dry chuckle to his own joke, then continued. “Where is your mom, anyway?”

“She, uh...” Abigail cleared her throat, then spoke in a steady voice. “She passed away. Back in April. I’ve been running the place since.”

David’s face dropped. “Jesus, Abigail, I... I thought she might outlive the town. I had no idea.”

“Life goes on, Davey. Even when you’re not around.”

A new song started to play from the speakers on the jukebox. Abigail quickly broke the silence, and David could hear the hint of concern hidden in her voice. “Your mom really didn’t tell you?”

“We, um... we haven’t been speaking much lately.”

Abigail tried to remember the last time David was in town. About a year ago, Maddy had mentioned something about David's dad and an argument over the family store. Before she could think to ask further, David broke the silence with a question of his own.

"Do you like it, Abigail? Running the place, I mean."

"It's fine," she replied. "I just know my mom would kill me if I wasn't."

David chuckled, knowing exactly what she meant. "That's Pat for you, I guess."

"You're still a photographer, right? How about you? Do you like your job?"

"Well, it's harder than I thought it was going to be. You get a lot of different clients, so you never really know who you're going to get next." David looked down at the tile floor, kicking out his leg. "My foot isn't much help, either."

"Not what I asked," she interrupted. David glanced up, seeing Abigail leaning against the counter and staring him directly in the eyes. "Do you like it?"

He instinctively glanced back down, taking a moment to turn the question over in his head. He thought about the feeling of a camera in his hands, and all the ranches and farms he visited while out on shoots.

"I love it." He sounded far more confident this time.

"Maybe not the job," he clarified, "but I love taking pictures. And I want to get better at it, too. It goes without saying, but the really good pictures? The ones people get remembered for? You can read stories in them. Kind of like..."

David caught himself, then abruptly stopped. He sighed before finishing the rest of his thought. "Kind of like the scars on our skin." The words didn't sound right coming out of his mouth.

"That sounds nice," Abigail reassured him. "Really."

David sat there for a moment. He cleared his throat, then lightly strummed his hands against the counter.

“Well, there’s no time like the present. I’m heading out. When do you get off work these days?”

“I’m the only one left to close, so it’s another late night, like always.”

David winced, sucking air in through his teeth. “You still living on the back roads outside of town? You be sure and drive safe, then, Abigail.”

“Take it easy yourself, David. Tell Holly I said hello. And just, uh... don’t kill Frank, OK?”

David chuckled, picking up his cane from below and waving out both arms. “I’ll try my best.”

As he slowly paced toward the front door to leave, Abigail watched the red seat of his stool spin around in circles.

David climbed into the front seat of his car and tossed his cane to the other side. The only stop left was home. He hesitated before sliding his key into the ignition, holding it in the air. Just thinking about home was making his stomach wrap and twist itself into knots. Finally inserting and turning the key, David tried his best to take deep breaths, shutting his eyes tightly closed. Focusing on the inky black of his eyelids, David could hear the sound of his mom’s voice in his ears, crackling in and out over the speakers on his answering machine back at the apartment. David reminded himself just how long it had been since he had seen Mom, and how much he’d prefer to hear her actual voice. His breathing finally settled down as he held the wheel firmly with both hands.

From the diner, the Wheeler house was just a short drive outside of the city and deeper into one of Greybull's residential areas. It was just past where the old high school used to be, on top of a tall hill close to the local country club. While the sedan struggled to reach the top of the hill, David gazed at the family house in the corner of his eyes. The first thing he noticed was his father's bright red truck out front. Glancing toward the back deck overlooking the side yard, he had to stop his eyes from wandering up to the overgrown stump ahead of the woods. As the Sable rolled into the driveway, David listened to the gravel lot sputter underneath the weight of the wheels. He slowed his car to a halt, reaching to his side and feeling the gearshift ease into the palm of his hand. He lingered on the feeling, tapping his thumb idly against the stick. Catching his mind drifting off, David reeled himself back in, wrapping his fingers around the gearshift. Still there, he thought. Still there.

Pulling the key from the lock of the sedan, David reached for his front pocket and slipped his car keys inside. Gravel rattled with every step he took toward the house, which seemed to loom high above him. The Wheeler house was two stories tall and covered in light blue vinyl siding, topped with dark gray shingles which were spaced evenly above a row of square windows. As David made his way up the front steps, he saw the front door ahead of him and stopped. For some strange reason, his legs were more inclined to walk in a different direction, off the side of the house and toward the back deck. He couldn't explain it, but he wanted more than anything to see the woodshed behind the house. He thought back to when he and Maddy were kids, remembering the time when they stole a knife from the kitchen drawer and carved out their names on the shed. All these years later, he could still perfectly picture their names scratched into the grain of the wood. While he couldn't rip the plank straight off the side of the woodshed and take it home with him, a picture would do.

Shifting directions, David turned back, walking down the steps to fetch his camera from the car. He popped open the trunk, picking out his camera bag before securing the strap around his shoulder. Rounding the corner of the house, he glanced up toward the forest. In the distance, he saw Frank bent over next to the house, pulling a sign out from the side yard. Scattered rays from the sun danced through the latticework below the back deck, drenching his father in both light and shadow. With one last heave, he tore the sign free from the grass and tucked it beneath his shoulder. David paced a couple steps back, then stood completely still, feeling the smooth handle of his cane in his palm. He stood there for a second, staring at his father while he worked.

“Dad.” David cleared his throat, bothered by the hesitation in his own voice. “I’m, uh... I’m home.”

Frank slowly turned his head, his eyes widening at the sight of his son standing in the front yard. Although there had been a few replacements over the years, Frank was wearing a faded Washington Redskins baseball cap on his head, the same as always. He bent down, quickly leaning the sign against the back deck, then once again turned to look at his son.

At first, neither father nor son moved. It had been almost a year since they had last seen one another, and the weight of all the unspoken words now anchored the two where they stood. A lump slowly rose to the top of David’s throat, which he failed to swallow down. He knew they hadn’t left on the best of terms. What could Dad be thinking now?

Frank moved unsteadily toward his son, taking one heavy step after the other. He snatched the burgundy baseball cap off his head, holding it with a closed fist. A few years back, Frank had tried to get ahead of his balding by shaving his head entirely. Aside from the lightly colored stubble spread across his jaw, not a trace of his blonde hair remained.

Still nervous, David opened his mouth to speak. “How have you—...”

Before he could finish the sentence, Frank rushed forward, stretching his arms out wide to embrace his son. He hugged David tightly, then gently shook him from side to side. Unsure how to respond, David hesitantly raised his left arm to touch his father's back. David again felt his eyes wandering further up the hill, staring at the overgrown stump in front of the trees. He could feel the heat from his dad's breath on his shoulder.

"Son," Frank muttered out. "I am so, so sorry."

"What do you..." David tripped over his words, almost too shocked to speak. "What do you mean?"

Frank continued to hold his son tightly in his arms. "You don't know how much I've missed you." He shot his head up. "You wanna come inside and sit?"

"Sure, Dad, I..." David lowered his arm back down to his side. "Sorry. I was just on my way to see the woodshed."

Finally letting go of his son, Frank grabbed the gold bill of his cap with his other hand, wrapping it back around the top of his head. "The woodshed?" he asked, tilting his head to the side. "Well, sure thing. Knock yourself out."

Frank pointed a thumb over at the house. "We'll just catch up inside, then. Your mom's making pot roast for supper, you know?"

"Yeah. That sounds good, Dad. Thanks."

As he pulled his camera out from his bag, David felt as though the world had been turned upside down. He could only remember his father apologizing to him once before, a few days after the accident. Turning around the back corner of the house, he saw the woodshed was packed with several stacks of split logs. David's eyes darted around the side of the shed as he scanned the planks, trying to remember the exact one he and Maddy had carved their names into.

Setting his cane on the ground, David lowered himself to the grass to look at the planks more closely. He wasn't crazy, was he? He ran his fingers along a light gray plank a couple feet above the ground. It was this spot, he reassured himself. It had to be. David fell back on the grass, holding his camera with both hands. The plank must have been replaced at some point, as his and Maddy's names were nowhere to be found.

Later in the evening, the five remaining Wheelers sat around the dinner table, having just finished supper. David passed his completely cleared plate over to his aunt Suzanne, who sat with his uncle Randy across from him and his mother. Frank, as he had done for all of David's life, sat at the head of the dinner table. David eyed his father uneasily, still thinking about the missing plank from the woodshed.

More than anything, Randy Wheeler sounded tired. Frank's brother had always spoken in a flat voice, but this was the first time it had been beaten down that way. "Thank you again for fixing us up some grub, Holly." Randy reached across the table, gently taking Holly's hand in his. "Suzy and I... well, we needed a real meal. Feels like I've been dealing with the police all day."

Frank's eyes shot down, looking at their hands touch. Clearing his throat, his wooden chair lightly creaked as he lifted himself up, plate in hand. He bent over, gathering the other clear plates from the table and stacking them in his arm. As he circled the table, the thud of his footsteps caused the rows of plates displayed in the tall wooden cabinets in the dining room to rattle and shake.

Suzanne took a sip from her glass of sweet tea, then set it back on the table. "I've been meaning to ask, Holly, but could I go and use your phone? It's been over a day now, and still, none of the phones at the house are working right."

“Not exactly a tall order,” Holly replied, smiling. “Whatever you two need.”

“I’m telling you, Holly. It’s the strangest thing. Whenever a call does go through, the line just drops after a minute or two.”

Randy chimed in. “Heard from the cops today that it’s affecting their radios, too. Whole town’s disconnected.”

Suzanne chuckled, then spoke in a dry voice. “You’d think that’d help slow down the rumors.”

She turned to face her nephew. “Say, Davey... you remember Buck Mueller, back from when you worked down at the Daily Telegraph?”

David glanced over to his aunt, then smiled as he shook his head. He remembered Buck instantly. Before David had started interning for the Greybull Daily Telegraph, Buck once caught him and Maddy smoking cigarettes in the alley outside the family store. “You kidding me?” he answered. “Kind of a hard guy to forget.”

“He’s the one who found her, you know? Our Maddy. Thing is, he’s just about lost his damn mind. Keeps on saying the forests are changing. That the trees are moving.”

“That’s nonsense,” Frank interjected. He was in the doorway, having just returned from the kitchen after putting the dishes in the sink. “Rumors and hearsay aren’t doing anyone any good.”

“Randy,” he continued, raising his arms up. He had two whiskey glasses in one hand, and an unopened bottle in the other. “Care to join me in the garage before you drive home?”

Randy laughed, balling up his cloth napkin before placing it back on the table. “Won’t turn down that kind of offer.”

As Frank shared a drink with his brother in the garage, an ache in his foot compelled David to move over to the couch in the living room. His mother had stepped outside for a few minutes to smoke, while Suzanne took this opportunity to catch up with her nephew after his move to Beckley. As for David, he still felt a bit dazed after his conversation with his father. Besides, talking to his aunt always helped him clear his head.

David and his aunt spent the time reminiscing about Maddy, as his lunch at The Hungry Miner earlier in the day had reminded him of the time when, on prom night, Maddy accidentally took out Abigail's eye. Soon, the two found themselves sitting on the couch in a comfortable silence. David took a deep breath, rolling his cane between his palms. All this talk of Maddy had reminded him of the missing plank from the woodshed. Turning to face his aunt, he hesitantly spoke. "Suzanne... could I ask you about something?"

"Of course," she answered. "I don't even charge a fee."

"Well, do you remember the time Maddy and I got our hands on a knife from the kitchen? Carved our names out onto the shed?"

"Christ, Davey." She smirked, then continued. "How could I forget?"

"Well, I went out to check the woodshed earlier, but the plank was missing, and..."

He found himself trailing off. "Well, I'm just not sure why Dad would just get rid of something like that."

"I can tell you that," his aunt replied flatly. "Your dad's an asshole."

David chuckled, then looked down at the coffee table.

"Just don't get any big ideas," she added. "You're not an asshole, but you are a smartass."

Just like her daughter, Suzanne was always good at getting David to laugh.

“You know...” Suzanne looked down at the hardwood floor in front of the fireplace. “I was thinking back to how you and Maddy used to play together.”

She took David’s hand in hers, occasionally lifting it up and waving it around as she reminisced about her daughter. “Every morning, Maddy would just about beg us on her hands and knees to take her over here. She practically lived here more than she did at her own house.”

Suzanne laughed, quickly running a finger along her cheek to brush away a tear. “You two would run around the place, raising hell until you wore each other out. But then your mom and I, we’d walk out into the living room and see you two flopped out in the middle of the floor, sleeping like little angels.”

Her voice started to crack. “For the longest time, I wished you two would never grow up. But now...”

She rested her head on her nephew’s shoulder, then gently squeezed his hand. “Well... I would’ve really liked to see the people you and Maddy would have become.”

He didn’t say it then, but David felt the exact same way.

Once Randy and Suzanne had said goodbye and headed back home, Holly stood in front of the kitchen cabinets, carefully sorting the dried glasses back into place. She glanced outside the square window above the sink, gazing out at the woods above the hill. Maddy was like a daughter to her. As she closed the cabinet doors, Holly caught her wedding band in the corner of her eye. She lowered her hand, glancing down at her ring. The wheel that made her a Wheeler, she thought to herself. She swayed her hand around in the air, watching the light from the overhead bulb bounce around the shiny gold band.

Holly walked out into the living room, looking through all the framed photographs spread across the mantle of the fireplace. The flickering of the flames cast each framed picture in faint

shades of orange. She felt sick, as though a swarm of butterflies was fluttering around her stomach. So many of these pictures included Maddy, and now none of them would. Turning to look outside the sliding glass door, Holly saw her son sitting out on the hill by himself, his eyes locked on the woodshed.

After switching on the string lights lining the back deck, Holly slid open the door and stepped outside. She walked over to the ledge and leaned against a stretch of wooden railing, looking at her son who sat on the nearby hill. David glanced up toward his mother, then back down to face the woodshed. Holly was the first to break the silence between the two.

“You OK, Davey?”

David lightly shook his head, still facing forward. “Nothing’s the same, Mom. Nothing will ever be the same without her.”

With his right arm, he pointed his cane out toward the shed. “I wanted to take a picture of the plank. You know, the one that had our names scratched into it? But it’s gone. Just like her.”

“I stopped by The Hungry Miner today. To see Patricia.” He set his cane back on the grass, his voice almost lowering to a whisper. “But it turns out she’s gone, too.”

He found himself staring blankly at the rows of wooden planks until he once again heard the voice of his mother.

“Why didn’t you call?”

David lifted his head to look at Holly. She held her head high as she stared out into the woods past the hill.

“Why didn’t you call? I can understand not wanting to talk to your dad. But you didn’t talk to me, either.”

Her voice went low and steady. “Why did it take someone dying for you to come back home?”

Holly removed her arms from the railing, then raised her hand up, rubbing her forehead with her palm. “That was... that was ugly of me, Davey. Sorry.”

She stepped off the back of the deck, walking closer to her son before sinking down and sitting next to him on the grass.

“Your dad used to be a lot different, you know? He was sweet. Didn’t have a heart attack over every little thing. And he was funny, too. A whole lot like...”

In the evening light, Holly almost saw the splitting image of David’s father reflected in his face. “Well, a whole lot like you.”

David knew his mother didn’t mean anything by it, but the thought of being compared to Dad made him sick to his stomach.

Holly wiped away a tear from her cheek with the arm of her sweater. “I’m just scared, David. I can’t help thinking that Maddy was the only thing keeping us together.”

David racked his brain, looking for the right response. It killed him that he couldn’t think of anything. “Mom...”

“You know how much I love you,” she continued, placing her hand on his shoulder. “But I don’t think you know how much I missed you.”

She lifted her hand, then stood up and brushed the grass away from her jeans. “Have a good night, Davey.”

“Good night, Mom,” he replied. “I love you, too.”

The two heard the steady sound of the glass doors sliding open. Frank was leaning out the door, holding a fresh set of glasses in his hands. “Drinks, Davey?”

“Really?” Frank had never once offered to drink with him before. “Sure thing, Dad.”

Once his mother had gone upstairs to bed, the only two in the house were David and his father. They sat around the table on the back deck, listening to the sound of the cool air passing by and taking turns swirling glasses of whiskey in their hands. As they talked, David watched the bulbs of the string lights dart across the glass in his father’s hand.

David had already gone through several glasses, trying to build up enough courage to ask his father about the woodshed. He stared into the amber liquid in his glass, asking himself how he should even approach the subject. He thought back to the conversation with his mother. She had asked him a hard question, too.

“Hey, uh... Dad.” David finished his drink, then spoke in a low, calm voice as he placed the empty glass back on the table. “Why did you take the plank off the shed?”

He leaned forward in the lawn chair, imitating a sawing motion with his hand. “You know, the one on the side that Maddy and I carved into when we were kids.”

Frank chuckled to himself, swirling the liquor around his glass before setting it down. “Well, you remember replacing the planks with me, don’t you? They’re like your old man. They get worn down, just like anything else.”

“What do you mean ‘worn down?’ You didn’t... you didn’t even think to hold on to it?”

“Nothing lasts forever,” Frank responded, talking as he reached beneath the table for the bottle and then poured David yet another drink. “Besides, a reminder only means so much. You’ve got your memories, and those are the things you’ve really gotta hold on to.”

“I just wanted a picture of it, Dad. Just a picture.”

David stared at the full glass in front of him for a few seconds, then lifted it to his lips, taking a long, steady drink. He could feel the liquid as it traveled down the length of his throat. David coughed, then shook his head, wincing from the taste.

Frank returned the bottle to the floor of the deck, speaking firmly to his son. “Do you remember what I told you when you were a kid? Somebody makes fun of you for your limp?” Frank leaned in close enough for David to glance up and see his crooked, yellowed teeth. “You remember?”

David could smell the miasma of liquor in the air, which stung as it entered his nostrils. He raised his head for a moment to think, but felt it fall backwards, the liquor quickly taking effect. He couldn’t recall much right now.

“You hurt ‘em. Hard.” Frank leaned back in his chair, the metal frame squeaking beneath his weight. “It’s survival of the fittest out there, Davey.”

As he finished his sentence, Frank reached out his hand, picking up his glass and swallowing the rest of his drink.

Frank took a deep breath, then looked his son squarely in the eyes. “Madison... she’s gone, son. Let go.”

Glass in hand, David pointed his index finger out to his father. “Fuck you.”

Frank smirked, setting his empty glass back on the table. “I’m not telling you to move on, David, to... to forget about her. But you need to learn to let go. At least enough to keep on going without her.”

“Let go?” David interrupted, his words now slurring together. “I thought you were the one who wanted me to stick around and... and run the store. So why are you telling me to let go? Did you ever even want me around?”

Frank answered without hesitation. "I did. More than anything, I wanted that store to be yours." He started stressing each word that came from his mouth. "It was always meant to be yours."

He sighed, then turned to gaze out at the trees. "But I was wrong. You're meant to be your own man now. Up there in Beckley, or whatever. I should have seen that sooner."

"Davey," he said, readying himself and sitting up in the chair. "Son. I'm so sorry."

Frank took a deep breath, then continued. "Will you stop by and come to the store with me tomorrow? I've been thinking of running ads again, maybe in the paper. Just got some specialty knives in, actually..."

He shook his head, catching himself getting off track. "Either way, I'm gonna need a photographer." Frank raised himself from the table, pushing in his chair.

"Lucky for me," he added, "my son's the best in the business."

For a time, David's father wanted nothing to do with his photography. "A hobby gotten out of hand," Frank once called it. Hearing his dad asking for his help now, David was almost at a loss for words. "I don't know what to tell you, Dad, I..."

"Tell me yes," Frank asked. "Give the old man a chance to make this up."

David felt like his head was spinning in circles. "Sure," he responded, slurring the beginning of the word. "Yeah."

Without saying a word, Frank stood up from his chair, moving past David and toward the house. After turning to watch his father step back in through the sliding door, David faced forward, looking out toward the woods. Thinking back, he sure was glad he brought his camera. In the corner of his eye, he could just barely make out the faint, inky shadow of the tree stump on the hill.

David heard the creaking of his father's footsteps from behind, which quickly came to a halt. Before David could even think of turning around, Frank had plucked the glass out from his hand, reached over his palm with a closed fist, and opened it. Something fell into David's hand, hard and cold.

Looking down, David saw it was a set of car keys. His car keys.

His father spoke from the chest steadily, like an oak. "Take the back roads."

David thought he must have looked at his dad funny, because Frank then explained himself further.

"Safer that way," he said. "Less cops on the back roads."

David started stammering. "What?"

"On your way home." Frank repeated himself slowly this time, emphasizing each of the words. "Take the back roads."

"I don't think I can drive, Dad, I—..."

"You have a place to call your own now," his father interrupted. "A man always makes it home."

He rested his hand on his son's shoulder. "You can just drive back tomorrow, you know? Help me with those pictures, like we talked about. But you can't stay here. Not anymore."

Seeing his son was not budging from his chair, Frank leaned in a little closer, tilting his head. "Ain'tcha, Davey?"

"Dad, I—..."

"Ain'tcha a man?"

With the back of his wrinkled hand, Frank scooted his son's glass of whiskey closer to him. "Finish your drink."

As David stumbled past the side of the house and to the driveway, he could feel the liquid sloshing around his stomach. He paced unsteadily toward the Sable, his cane catching itself into the gravel and causing him to trip. He fell forward, ramming his shoulder into the side of the car and cursing to himself.

David threw his cane over to the passenger seat and then yanked on the handle of the driver's door, slamming it closed with a heavy thud. He fumbled around with his keys, trying to shove them into the ignition before suddenly stopping and smiling wide. Better buckle up, David reminded himself.

After sliding the keys into place, David twisted them and heard the low rumble of the engine. David lifted his hands up and tightly wrapped them around the wheel of the car, his eyes wandering over to the rectangular panel of the clock on his dashboard, which blinked into life with a dull green light. As he swayed his head from side to side, the light from the clock seemed to multiply, and he watched the row of green rectangles blur together as he backed out of the driveway.

David was soon well on his way home to Beckley, keeping his eyes locked squarely on the pair of yellow lines separating the two lanes. His headlights cast the trees on the back roads in a blinding, white light. David squinted and carefully turned his wheel, seeing the yellow headlights of a truck coming his way. Switching on the radio, David could only hear a few seconds of a country song before the broadcast suddenly cut out. Each minute blended into the next as David listened to the steady hum of radio static coming through the speakers. Hidden beneath the rolling waves of static, he swore he could even hear the quiet sound of his own name being called out. David glanced down, adjusting one of the dials on the dashboard. As he looked

back up to face the windshield, he shouted out loud. What looked like a birch tree had fallen in the middle of the road.

David swerved the sedan to the side, causing the wheels to skid against the asphalt as it turned and crashed directly into the tree. David's body jolted forward, the seatbelt holding him in place as the airbag ballooned out. David didn't even think to brace for impact. Despite feeling the airbag push against his face, his head still felt like it was falling. Lazily, David lowered his eyes down to stare down at the footwell, his vision slowly surrounded by an inky black.

In an instant, David's vision returned to him. His head was pounding, and he squinted to look outside his windshield, which was cracked and split down the middle. The front of the Sable was crumpled, and light gray smoke billowed from the hood. Through the smoke, David could tell there was no longer a tree ahead of him. Only a low fog rolled on the open road, illuminated by the beams of his headlights. On the side of the road, there was some kind of dark substance spread across the asphalt, which reflected the light from above.

David stumbled out of his car, nearly falling to the ground before putting all of his weight into his cane and steadying himself. He flipped his body around, scrambling to shut the door of the sedan. Without any depth perception to speak of, he aimlessly waved his hand at the door. He gave up, then stumbled toward the rear of the car.

David was too drunk to remember his keys, but he did fetch a flashlight from the floor of the back seat. He turned, pointing it at the dark liquid trailing into the woods. Leaving the sedan running in the middle of the road, he began tripping past the tall, narrow thickets on the edge of the forest, which seemed to spin around him with the turn of his head. His stomach, still trying to reject the liquor, forced David to lean against a tree and collect his breath. The wind was whistling through the air, carrying the plumes of smoke from the engine further into the forest.

The stench of hot grease clung to the air. David coughed, stumbling his way toward one tree after the next. His flashlight was of little help, but worked well enough to keep him aware of the brush he would then inevitably tumble into.

Sometime during David's hike, the bulb of the flashlight in his hand flickered and died. A dense canopy of branches and leaves blocked the sky above, leaving him isolated in an inky black. He stood still and held the handle of his cane steady, not wanting to trip in the dark. In the back of his mind, he knew that the twigs and branches were all around him, reaching out like jagged wooden fingers. Hitting the side of the metal flashlight against his cane, the bulb flickered back to life, and David continued stumbling forward.

Several yards ahead, the fog rolled around a towering birch tree in the middle of a clearing. David narrowed his eyes, trying to get a better look at the tree through the faint blue mist. The pale bark of the birch tree was shiny, as if it were wet with dew. Drawing closer, David thought the narrow gaps in the birch were writhing. In fact, from where he was standing, it almost seemed as though the entire tree was in the middle of a long, deep breath.

David paced back several steps. This was an animal. It appeared stuck in the ground, with a long, narrow chest that rose into the air. A tangled canopy of arms waved like branches in the open wind, each one ending in smaller, twig-like fingers.

The wind picked up even more, sending dead leaves hurtling through the air. The breeze was carried through the gaps in the animal's skin, almost like it was sucking in this air to breathe. As the current passed through one gap and exited another, the animal began to produce a faint whistling sound. Before long, the whistle started to crack and change pitch, finally transforming into a proper voice.

"Davey..."

He fell backwards as the light from his flashlight flickered.

“Go home...”

David felt roots wrapping around his legs and pulling him close. Thrusting out his arm, David waved his cane at the animal. Caught in the twigs of an arm that resembled a branch, the animal whipped the cane out of his hand. Still trying to free his legs, David followed his cane with his eyes. He could tell the animal was lifting the cane toward its wide chest. His eyes shot open as he watched the creature stick the cane into one of the open tears in its overstretched skin, swallowing it whole.

The animal picked David up, who dropped his flashlight down to the grass below. He tried to kick out his feet, but the creature only responded by lifting him even higher up into the air. David felt one of the vibrating antennae brush up against his cheek, as thick as a branch. A loud ringing filled his ears, and it felt like his mind was on fire. His heart raced as all sorts of memories began to flood his mind. David assumed his life was flashing before his eyes.

David felt both of his legs snap, buckling beneath the pressure of a heavy weight. Shouting out in pain, David shot his eyes down only to see the animal was cramming his body into one of the gaps in its skin. With both of his legs stuffed inside the creature, David tried to wrestle himself free, sucking in mouthfuls of air to breathe. He forced his eyes closed as more twigs and branches pressed tightly against his stomach. David felt the sticky trunk of the animal push against his stomach as it absorbed him deeper into the flesh within. Fully digested, he moved further down the length of the tree, another Wheeler for the wheel.

—

Maddy sat in the alley beside the Wheeler hunting supplies store, staring at a faded spot of graffiti on the brick wall of the next building over. Holding her head between her palms, her

face was deep in thought. Every now and then, her sulking was interrupted by the sound of a car rushing by on the nearby road. From the railyard across the street, she could hear the whine of a train grinding against the metal tracks as it switched to its brakes.

Maddy took a deep breath, then spoke in a flat, dissatisfied voice. “Whenever I prayed to Jesus, it’d be real nice if he’d talk back for once.”

David responded with his mouth full, a half-eaten ham and cheese sandwich held in his hands. “I think that would make you a psychopath, Maddy.”

“Shut up, Davey.” She lifted her head up from her palms, then snatched her sandwich back from her cousin.

Maddy was on her lunch break, which meant she could be found at her usual haunt, the alley outside of the family store. On the weekends that David wasn’t fiddling around with his camera, he would join her out there in the afternoon, always eager to help his cousin waste time. Maddy craned her neck forward, checking if anyone was walking by at the end of the alley. Satisfied, she turned and began rummaging through the front pockets of her jeans, eventually pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Glancing over, David noticed a drawing of a yellow camel on the front of the small white carton.

He laughed, mostly out of disbelief. “Where the hell did you get cigarettes, Maddy?”

“What? You think I’m not cool enough to get my hands on cigarettes?”

“I think you’re plenty cool, but I’ve always kind of pinned you as one of D.A.R.E.’s finest.”

He watched closely as she flipped open the pack, then continued. “Have you ever smoked before?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

Maddy rolled her eyes, fishing a lighter out from her other pocket. She lifted the cigarette up to her lips, her eyes still locked on her cousin. Blocking the lighter from the wind with an open palm, she lit the cigarette. As she inhaled, David could feel a smile creeping across his face, ready to have a laugh at his cousin’s expense. As she opened her mouth and the smoke floated toward the sky, however, it became clear she wasn’t going to cough. With the smugness on his face now faded, Maddy made an ugly face, sticking her tongue out at her cousin.

“You weren’t listening,” she continued, taking another drag from the cigarette.

“About what?”

She exhaled the smoke straight into the air as she answered. “About Jesus.”

“What about him?”

She groaned, then quickly got to the point. “I’ve been wondering. Am I a good person? Do you think I’ll go to heaven?”

The bluntness of the question took David by surprise. “Well, I don’t think smoking cigarettes means you’re going to hell.”

“Listen to me,” she said, speaking more firmly. “I’m serious.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he replied, chuckling to himself. He leaned in, fully prepared to listen.

“I have mean thoughts, Davey.” She looked at her cousin right in his eyes. “Meaner than you can imagine.”

David kicked himself for misreading the situation. Now concerned, he leaned a little closer as Maddy continued to talk.

“Sometimes people make me so mad I want to hurt them. Like, really hurt them. But then I kick myself for wanting something like that.”

She shook her head, then flicked her cigarette down to the concrete. It landed next to an earthworm, which was shriveled and dried up on the sidewalk.

“I just wish things were more interesting around here,” she sighed. “Maybe it’s the people. That’s why I like you, Davey. You’re actually interesting.”

“Why? ‘Cause I’ve got a bum leg?”

“No.” Maddy took a second, then changed her mind. “Well, that’s part of it.”

She was playing with the pack of cigarettes, flipping it open and then closed. “It’s because you’re so honest. You’re like an open book. You can’t help yourself, either. It’s just who you are.”

Maddy thought to herself for a moment before grinning, snapping her fingers, and pointing to David.

“You’re totally that guy, Davey. You know, the kind of guy who falls for the cult and then gets brainwashed!”

David responded with a nervous smile. “You’re making me sound like a real sucker here, Maddy.”

“No, no, no. Listen to me, Davey. Everyone else around here’s a liar. But you? You never lie. You couldn’t if you tried.”

Her voice grew quieter, almost to a whisper. “But me? I lie all the time.”

She faced the brick wall in front of her, then continued to speak. “Dying doesn’t sound so bad, really. But when I die, where am I going to go? How long am I going to have to wait for everyone else to catch up? For you and Abigail?”

David looked at his cousin, trying to find the right words to say. His eyes wandered to the small white carton she held in her hands.

“Let me have a cigarette,” he said firmly.

Maddy’s cheeks rose up as she smiled. “You’re kidding.”

“If it sends you straight to hell, then at least I’ll be right there with you.”

Suddenly, the two heard a low noise coming from the end of the alley. Looking over, they saw a man clearing his throat and waving at them. He wore a camouflage trucker’s cap over his slicked back hair, and had a thick, black mustache which was surrounded by scruff. At first, Maddy and David both stared at the man like two deer caught in the headlights. After a moment, Maddy awkwardly waved back at him.

The man started wandering down the alley, eyeing the metal trash cans and countless garbage bags lining the sides. He rifled through his back pockets before finally pulling out his own pack of cigarettes.

“Either of you kids got a light?”

Maddy and David stared at each other, then back at him. Without saying a word, Maddy slowly reached out her arm, handing him the lighter.

After lighting his cigarette, the man thanked the two and pivoted to walk back down the alley. Once he rounded the corner, Maddy was the first to start laughing. David followed suit, then turned his head to face his cousin as she pulled out a fresh cigarette from the carton.

“Wherever I go,” Maddy chuckled, “you go.”

“Wherever you go, I go.” At the time, David meant it with all his heart. He reached out, plucking the cigarette from her fingers. “Just one.”

He raised the cigarette up, placing it between his lips. Maddy leaned in close, holding the lighter in front of the cigarette that dangled low from his mouth.

“Once it’s lit,” she explained, “you’ve gotta breathe in the smoke. Not too much, but not too little. Does that make any sense?”

David nodded, trying to talk with the cigarette still in his mouth. “Got it.”

Maddy flicked the lighter. Bright sparks scattered from the top before it finally produced a tiny orange flame. From a light so small, David was surprised to feel even a little heat on his face. Once he saw the tip of the cigarette touch the fire, he started to inhale, Maddy’s smile growing wider and wider with each passing second. He exhaled, watching the smoke rise in the air.

David clung to his upper chest and hacked up a lung, all while Maddy very nearly lost both of hers bent over laughing at him.

—

Opening his eyes, David woke up to the sounds of birds chirping and gentle rushing of water from a nearby creek. Through the canopy of trees high above him, he could tell the sky was a perfectly clear blue. The air felt fresh and clean as it filled his lungs, and David felt like he had never breathed easier.

The sound of a twig snapping took David by surprise. Emerging from the narrow trees, he saw a woman wearing a white cable knit sweater. Although the roots of her long hair were dark brown, the ends shifted into a paler shade of blonde. The woman took several unsteady steps toward David, then stood completely still.

He would recognize that face even at the end of the earth. It was Maddy.

“Is it actually you?” she asked, tilting her head. “I don’t know how long I’ve been out here, but I...”

Shutting her eyes closed, she shook her head to the sides. “I thought I’d seen you before.”

“It’s me,” David stammered out, putting his hand to his chest. “Davey. Have you really forgotten about—...”

“I know who you are, stupid. But haven’t I seen you here before?”

“I... well, I haven’t seen you in almost a year, Maddy, I...” David was stumbling over the words, trying to explain himself to his cousin. He lifted himself from the ground, then took several short steps toward her. Each one was pain-free. He suddenly rushed into Maddy’s arms, feeling as though the weight of the entire world had finally been lifted from his shoulders. The two stood there for a time before David started to sob.

“Nothing is the same out there, Maddy,” he choked out. “Nobody knows what to do without you.”

She smiled weakly, the words cutting her deep. “That’s something...”

Maddy spoke weakly to her cousin. “You know, I never minded if I died. I was so scared of other people dying, of being left alone. All that time and I never realized...”

She stopped then sighed. “The living are also lost to those who are dead.”

“I missed you,” she added, letting him go.

She walked over to a winding, narrow birch tree. “I’m starting to forget things. Mostly things from a long time ago, but newer things, too.”

Maddy walked behind the thin tree. “I’m with it, in here. It hasn’t digested me, but it grows bigger. It’s feeding on my memories. Adding them to the ring.”

She popped back out from the other side. “But it shares its memories, too. When I close my eyes, I see an inky black. And then, like the sparks from a lighter, I see the tiny lights that start to dance across the night sky.”

She moved closer to her cousin. “The universe will continue to stretch out, Davey. Each new star is another ring in the secondary growth of the world.”

She measured her cousin up and down, looking at his foot. “It won’t take you like it took me. Not yet. You’re broken.”

Maddy’s face went serious. “What happened to your dad?”

“Dad? He’s holding up, just like everyone.”

Maddy looked confused. “Holding up?” she asked.

David ignored the question. “But they’re still looking for your killer. They think it’s your dad, Maddy. But if I can show them...”

David started to slow down, seeing Maddy’s face had changed. She looked afraid.

She started stammering. “No, I thought they would’ve...”

Strangely, she pointed out into the woods past her cousin. “It wasn’t that thing out there.”

“What do you mean?” David felt his heart sink. “Are you saying your dad really...”

“It wasn’t my daddy who killed me, Davey. It was yours.”

“My...” David stuttered over his words. “What?”

Maddy was afraid for David. His eyes were wide, and she could tell he was struggling to find the right words to continue. Despite the years that had passed since then, her cousin looked just like she remembered him, the same boy she saw wearing a cast around his foot in a hospital bed. His life had changed that day, but had he?

“I just realized something, Davey. You never got to be a kid. Not since the accident.”

She reached out her hand. He took it, expecting her to lift him from the ground.

“I am going to fix you,” she promised, still holding his hand in hers. “I just need to borrow something from you.”

CHAPTER IV

David startled awake, sitting up on a couch he did not recognize. He was breathing fast, as if waking up after a nightmare.

Sitting in the chair beside the couch was Abigail. She was smoking a cigarette. His eyes glanced down at the pack, which rested on a coffee table in the center of the room. They were Camels, the same brand Maddy smoked.

He had a splitting headache. “Abigail? How’d I end up here?”

She took another drag before tapping her cigarette on the edge of a red ceramic ashtray. “You were miserable,” she answered. “Saw your car crumpled up in the middle of the road, and you covered in syrup about fifteen feet away. What in God’s name even happened to you, Davey?”

David was still dressed in his stained clothes, though he was missing his cane and his shoes. He rested his forehead in one hand and groaned, looking around the room. He had been to Abigail’s house with Maddy plenty of times before. “Why aren’t I at the hospital?”

“You asking to be charged with drunk driving?”

David grew silent. He felt so stupid, now remembering the conversation he had with his dad and the drive he took.

“Besides,” she continued. “You didn’t have a scratch on you. Not a clue how you managed that one.”

She cleared her throat, picking up the pack of cigarettes from the table. “But I saw your foot.”

“My foot?”

He started to push the blankets off, trying to remember what Maddy had told him in the dream. While David struggled to recall most of the conversation, he did remember Maddy promising to fix him.

As David lifted his leg up, his eyes widened. The scar in the middle of his foot had entirely disappeared, the pattern in his skin now replaced with the grain of wood. Running his fingers along the length of his foot, it felt like touching part of a mannequin, cold and dead. It was as if the skin itself was hard as bone.

Still staring at his foot, David started to stutter. "I saw her. I can't believe it, but what people are saying... it's right. It's all right."

Abigail tapped the bottom of the pack against her palm as another cigarette popped up from the top. "What do you mean?"

"It's like I've woken up from the strangest dream, Abigail. I can't remember everything she said, but..."

His head shot up as he faced Abigail. "There is something out there. In the woods. I think it killed her."

"David..."

"I know how that sounds. But Abigail, you've..."

"David."

"Are you listening to me? She's..."

Abigail placed the unlit cigarette in the ashtray. "I loved her."

"What?" David adjusted himself, the blankets falling from the couch to the rug below. "I know that."

"No, David, I... I loved her."

“Oh,” he responded. It took a moment to click. “Oh.”

“And I have to spend the rest of my life wondering if she loved me back.”

“She did,” he interrupted. “You know she would’ve done just about anything for you.”

She reached back down, picking up her cigarette from the table. “If what you’re saying is true...”

“No.” Abigail shook her head, talking as she placed the cigarette between her lips. “I’m sorry.”

David lifted himself from the couch then stood up straight, watching the sparks fly from Abigail’s lighter. “I need to go tell Mom and Dad.”

“You can call them, David. Who knows if you can walk on that foot.”

“They think it’s her dad, Abigail, I...”

“Stay,” she interrupted. “Please.”

David glanced past her shoulder, seeing a photograph of Patricia hanging above the door in an oval frame. He turned, running through the hallway and out the front door.

David, for the first time in his life, ran as fast and as far as he could. Every step closer to his house was one taken without pain. He took deep, sudden breaths, sucking in the cool breeze until the air completely filled his chest. His heart was pounding, but his head felt clear. David took swift, purposeful strides. His calves burned, stinging red hot. He held on to that sensation for as long as he could.

As he approached the front door to his house, David had the uncanny feeling he had forgotten something important. He shook his head, thinking he must not be used to not having his cane. The sweat poured in waves down his face, and his blonde hair came down in strands

ahead of his eyes. Sweat beaded at the bottom of this tangle of hair before dropping to the ground below. He brushed his hair aside, then lightly tapped his knuckle against the door.

After waiting a few minutes, he knocked on the door with a heavy thud.

Frank gently pulled open the front door, his eyes half-shut. "Davey?"

He yawned. "I didn't expect you back so early."

"I need to talk with you, Dad." David rushed by his father, headed for the kitchen. Frank followed him. He swung open the door to the refrigerator, pulling out a jug of water. He threw the jug up to his mouth, drinking as much water as he could swallow. He exhaled, then spoke to Frank.

Frank's voice was low, having just woken up. "I thought you were coming back tomorrow, David."

"Dad, I saw Maddy. Buck... well, he was right. I think there's something out there."

His father sounded disappointed. "Don't you remember what we talked about?"

Frank was concerned. Where was his son's cane? He sighed, then walked over to the ceramic bowl which kept the keys to the truck. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

David slipped out with his father from the back deck, careful not to wake up Holly. He followed Frank down the hill to the truck, watching his father from behind. Every few feet to the car, Frank would stop, stand completely still, and turn back his head. Whenever he did, David saw his father's face drenched in the orange glow of a sodium streetlight. Frank would quietly utter "This way," standing and waiting until his son got close enough to him. Before long, David was climbing into the passenger seat of the truck and pulling the door closed behind him.

Whenever David asked where they were going, Frank would respond with a gentle smile or a couple of words. “You’ll see,” he reassured his son. After a while, David recognized they were heading to the hunting supplies store.

David glanced around the shop as they entered. Rows of wooden shelves were filled with hunting supplies ranging from oil lanterns to tins of lighter fluid. Hanging on the walls behind the counter were a few different brands of small hatchets, the sight of which always made David’s stomach turn. He had been nervous around axes ever since he was a boy, meaning he was never able to spend too much time inside the shop.

Frank looked around the walls of the store as he paced behind the glass counter. “I really did always want it to be yours, Davey.”

He rested his elbows on the counter, then looked his son squarely in the eyes. “She’s dead, David. Now, I don’t know what you think you saw, because I know what I did.”

David nervously eyed his father, who was pointing at his chest.

“I’m the one who killed her.”

Frank lifted himself from the counter, raising out both arms wide. “I did it here. Then took her out to the woods.”

David spoke quietly. “Why?”

“She broke you. Made sure you’d never be a man.”

He turned, facing the wall. “She put that axe in your foot, didn’t she? Made you afraid of nothing.” He ripped a hatchet from the store walls. “She denied you your inheritance.”

David watched his father turn the counter and pace toward him. Faster than he could react, Frank drove the axe down. It hit David in the foot, who shouted purely out of instinct. He couldn’t feel a thing.

“Didn’t want you to find out so soon. I was gonna ease you into it, you know?”

Frank walked over to the glass counter, picking out a knife from the display case.

“Just got these in... be a shame to ruin them.” He turned around, picking out another hatchet from the wall.

David wrenched the hatchet free from his foot. It was split wide open, splinters and fragments of wood jutting out from the wound as he bled a dark sap. As his father continued to speak, David snuck up behind him.

David drove down the axe. It hit his father in the center of his back, just below the shoulders. David heard liquid gurgling up from Frank’s mouth as his knees gave out and he crashed to the floor. After lowering himself to the ground, David flipped him over.

Frank was foaming at the mouth, a red froth oozing from the corner of his lips. “You did it.”

“I promised...” Frank tried to clear some of the blood from his throat, which shot out and spilled onto his shirt, staining it bright red. “I promised I’d make you a man.”

David would never forget the smile spread across his father’s face, colored by the satisfaction of having gotten exactly what he wanted.

—

Until the bitter end, Maddy held on. She held onto her life as though it was the most precious thing in the world. She had been tricked, and everything around her seemed a few shades darker now. The light in her eyes faded in and out as an inky black ate away at the corners of her vision, almost as deep a shade as the sap which trickled out from the knots in her skin. Her palms stung, and she could feel the cold, wet grass poking against them from below.

Maddy tried to shift her body around, searching for any stars peeking through the canopy. She found nothing in the night sky but the full moon, which shined on her face like a spotlight.

Maddy could hear the wind gently blowing the fog through the trees in the woods, interrupted now and then by the chirp of a cricket. Deeper in the forest, there was a low croak from a frog. After waiting for what felt like forever, she heard shuffling from the thickets in front of her. Although her sight was blurred, she could almost recognize the man's face, which looked familiar. Was it her cousin?

As weak as she was, she tried calling out to him. "Davey..."

"Shut up," he responded. Not her cousin, but the bogeyman who shared his face.

"Remember, it's the squeaky Wheeler that gets the grease, Maddy." His voice came out strong and sturdy, like an oak.

She heard rustling from the woods, turning her head to face the tall, skinny trees. The man continued to speak, but Maddy was too distracted by the ringing in her ears to listen.

The man coughed into a closed fist, then waved his hands around as he paced back and forth in front of her. "What you did to my boy... you poisoned him. Turned him against his own. You pit blood against blood."

He stopped, now looking out into the mist. "Us Wheeler men..."

"No," he corrected himself, looking down at Maddy's motionless body. "All of us."

His voice went low as he muttered under his breath. "This whole family is cursed."

The man turned away before stumbling back into the foggy woods. "Forgot a shovel. You'll help feed the roots."

"I'll be right behind you," he added, lifting a finger to the air. His voice trailed off as his silhouette disappeared somewhere in the trees. "Don't wait up."

With his departure, the entire forest grew quiet. Maddy's eyelids were feeling heavier. She promised herself she would let them rest, just for a moment, and then she'd open them right back up. Before she could fall asleep, she heard more rustling from the leaves, this time coming from the bushes beside her.

Maddy turned to face the noise, but she was met only with two antennae, flailing in the air. Her voice was like broken glass. "I want to go home."

Perhaps in recognition, the two antennae started to chatter, one whipping and writhing against the other.

—

David pulled the truck over to the side of the road, hoping to find the animal where it last was. He had taken Frank's truck out to the back roads, retracing his steps from the night before. David slammed the door closed, then headed straight into the woods. As his pace quickened, he could feel the air brushing against his cheeks. He ran through the trees, a flashlight from the family store in his hand.

Arriving at the clearing, David was relieved to find the animal still stuck in the ground. It had grown much larger, its skin now hardened like chalk. Its antennae flailed wildly in the open air. With most of its arms dug into the ground, it had finally assumed the form of a birch tree.

David tried to catch his breath. He inched closer to the tree, ready and willing to be eaten this time. He felt so tired.

It had been months since she had last seen him, but Maddy was able to hear the sound of David's return. She found him in a spot not far from where she last saw him. He was drenched in sweat, and he looked tired, wearing the same clothes as before. She thought she had fixed him. Why did he look worse now than he did before?

“Davey,” she asked, wandering over to him. “What happened to you?”

He started to stumble over his words. “I’ve got him in the truck. I didn’t...”

David shook his head, still lying on the ground. “He’s dead, Maddy.”

He lifted himself up to sit, his head pointing up to the sky. “How can I ever go back?”

“Well, that’s OK.” Maddy responded instantly, as though it was stupid for him to even ask. “You just need to stay here with me.”

“What do you mean?”

Maddy rushed forward, taking his hands in hers. “Let’s be digested, Davey. You and I. Together.”

She squatted down next to him. “I can hold on to you like it holds on to me. We can stay here, being digested until... until...”

Maddy let go of her cousin, lifting herself to stand. The wind picked up and lifted the leaves from the ground, sweeping them away as the branches from the trees swayed behind her. “You and me, Davey. We’ll bleed out into one. Maddy and Davey... we’ll bleed out into one single inky black.”

The words were rushing from her mouth, her voice growing more and more frenzied. “The thoughts we have will be the sparks that light up the darkness. And we’ll think of each other, Davey. And we’ll be stars.”

David took a moment to think. He was painfully aware of just how much his life had changed in two days without Maddy. How worse off the world was. Suddenly, he felt his voice rise from his chest.

“I’ll do it,” he answered. “I’ll stay here with you.”

Maddy took several uneasy steps forward. “You will?”

He looked up at his cousin, her image blurred from the tears filling his eyes. “I don’t want to go it alone.”

He blinked, feeling the tears cascade down his cheeks. “All this time, I just wanted to be strong. I wanted you to see how strong I was. I...”

David exhaled deeply, then continued. “I wanted to show you I could do it alone. But I can’t. I can’t make it out there without you.”

He faced his cousin. “You had to grow up that day, too. So you could walk with me. How can I ever give you that back, Maddy? I clipped your wings. I killed you.”

Maddy looked into her cousin’s eyes. She had promised to walk with him for the rest of his life. But did that mean he had to follow her for the rest of hers?

She sat down beside him, then sighed. “You don’t have to follow me anymore, Davey.”

David turned, facing down to look at the blades of grass as his cousin continued to speak. “You need to live. You don’t need to let go. But you have to live with it.”

He didn’t know how.

“Did you run, Davey?” Maddy inched a little closer to her cousin, tapping her shoulder against his. “...Did it hurt?”

“No,” he responded. “No, it didn’t.”

Maddy’s eyes lit up like stars. “How’d it feel?”

“Maddy...” He squeezed his hands into fists, tight enough for them to shake from the pressure. “It was the best feeling in the whole world.”

Maddy smiled before falling back to the grass, her hands wrapped around her stomach as she laughed out loud. After a second or two, David started to chuckle. He followed suit, kicking

out both legs and letting himself fall to the grass. The two sat there for a time, holding one another and laughing at the world.

“I’ve never felt more alone than when I was with you, Davey. But in a good way, y’know? Like it was just me and you against the world.”

She tilted her head to look at her cousin, feeling the grass against her cheek. “We’re the same person.”

“It won’t keep you around,” Maddy reassured him, “but it won’t digest you, either. It’ll want to reject you, like last time.”

David nodded his head, watching as his cousin lifted herself to stand tall with the trees.

“Bring Uncle Frank here, too. He can help feed the roots.”

“You know...” She crossed her arms behind her back, leaning against a birch tree. “When we were young, Davey, and I pictured eternity, I always saw you and me. It didn’t matter if I was going up or going down. I decided I wasn’t scared of dying, because I knew you would come and find me.”

She gave her cousin a smile, stretching her arm out to point a finger at him. “And you did.”

Looking out toward the woods, she lowered her hand and continued, now speaking a little more wistfully. “But... you wanna know the funny thing about it?”

After a pause, she whipped her head back around. Despite the tears filling her eyes, Maddy was laughing as she spoke. “I don’t want to die.”

Rejected by the animal, David slid out of one of the narrow slits in its skin, as if birthed anew. Bits of flesh and bone clung to his clothes. He wiped away some of the sticky sap from his face, then took stock of his surroundings. Raising himself from the ground, he felt a pain rise in

his foot, causing him to lean against a nearby tree. Looking down, he saw his left shoe was freshly drenched with dark burgundy stains.

After dragging back his father's corpse to the clearing in the woods, David looked away with his eyes crammed shut, trying to block out the noise of the animal adding Frank to its rings. When the sounds of squelching had slowed, he once again opened his eyes. Rays from the morning sun peeked through the small gaps of the canopy, their leaves swaying back and forth in the cool wind. As David turned to face the animal, his head started to ache. He winced in pain, as if his brain was buckling under the pressure of giving the creature form. Narrowing his eyes, he saw translucent wings emerge from some of the gaps in its white skin before unfurling. Their flutter whipped away some of the leaves and produced a steady buzzing noise, steadily rising in volume before becoming too loud to bear. David hunched over, raising his hands to cover his ears.

The animal ripped some of its slender limbs out from the ground, trying to unroot itself. Some limbs were ripped clean off, the roots and branches left wriggling aimlessly in the soil. Once most of its arms were free, the animal raised both antennae high into the sky, pointing them straight up. After lowering them down, the antennae returned to their usual clicking and lashing around. Clumsily rising into the air, the animal's branch-like arms dangled far below its body as it readied itself, then slowly took flight.

David looked down at the ground in front of him. All that was left was a gaping hole in the earth, filled with several narrow tunnels where the roots of the animal had nestled into the soil. Feeling the warmth of the morning sun press against his skin, David glanced around the woods, a little unnerved by the countless other trees surrounding him. He slowly traced his eyes up one of these trees, following the branches as they twisted and turned to reach up at the sky.

His eyes shot back down. The earth and the trees, David understood, would outlive man. But Maddy Wheeler would outlive them all, trapped in amber as she was.

David took one step before stumbling forward and groaning in pain. He straightened himself, then eyed his foot up and down, which was slightly damp with blood. He needed a new cane.

CHAPTER V

In keeping with the three core concepts of cosmic horror mentioned by H. P. Lovecraft in “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” *Secondary Growth* draws out dread through the effects of an outside, alien threat, and the novella was written with a fear of the unknown in mind. This concept is best demonstrated through the alien threat of the story, a physical manifestation of the fear of the unknown which takes inspiration from Lovecraft’s traditional Great Old Ones. Finally, through both the alien threat and the tragic character of Madison Wheeler, there is some kind of “. . .contact with unknown spheres and powers,” fulfilling the final requirement of the genre’s “one test” (Lovecraft 38). For the character of David Wheeler, this “contact” becomes explicitly physical when he is crammed inside the alien creature, whose role in the story hinges on the fear of the unknown.

In cosmic horror, the fear of the unknown often physically manifests through the Great Old Ones, which are outside, alien threats. For lack of a better term, I wanted to make sure the alien threat in *Secondary Growth* felt truly alien, meaning I took care not to draw design elements from familiar animals or plants. As Heinrich Wilke states in his essay on the subgenre of cosmic horror, “. . .the supernatural resists being tethered to relatively easily identifiable phenomena, entities, or processes,” and I wanted this characteristic to be reflected in the alien’s design (174). In the finished novella, the alien threat is based on a combination of a birch tree and a stick bug, most often simply referred to as “the animal.” As Maddy tells David, the animal feeds on memories, and its growth is based on its digestion of them. This alien characteristic was inspired by the secondary growth of tree rings, a process which widens the trunk. In a cosmic horror twist, the animal attempts to “trap” David by physically inserting him into its rings, literally cramming David inside the length of its body. Beyond these details, an explanation for

how this supernatural process works is not provided, a convenience afforded by the genre of cosmic horror.

Setting aside the supernatural ability to “trap” the souls of Maddy and David, many other elements of the alien threat are intentionally left unknown. In practice, descriptions of the animal are alluded to rather than stated outright. As Buck Mueller observes in the opening scene of the novella, “With all the gaps and tears in the overstretched skin, it almost had the texture of a birch tree” (4). This technique is borrowed directly from the description of the alien color in “The Colour Out of Space,” which can only be described by the narrator through “analogy” (Lovecraft 36). When designing the animal, I tried to keep the traditional image of the Great Old Ones in mind. Tentacles have become a staple of Lovecraft’s Old Ones, for example, which I tried to imitate through the winding roots and branches on the animal’s rear. Although the fear of the unknown physically manifests in *Secondary Growth* through the animal, the human monster of the story is intended to be Frank Wheeler, meaning these techniques are applied to his character, as well.

While there are elements of Frank that are distinctly human — like his trademark Washington Redskins baseball cap, for instance — many elements of his history are purposefully left unknown. Additionally, the animal is used simultaneously to subvert and foreshadow Frank’s true role as Maddy’s killer. The animal is often displayed front and center in scenes, shown directly through either flood lights or headlights. This attention to lighting is meant to parallel Frank, the monster of the story who is always “spotlighted” or shown directly to the reader. In turn, Frank’s true role in the narrative is revealed: a monster who carries on despite being shoved front and center in both his family and community. Aside from demonstrating a fear of the

unknown, these techniques are also meant to draw out feelings of dread in the reader, another one of the core concepts mentioned by H. P. Lovecraft.

In *Secondary Growth*, one of the ways the sense of dread is reinforced is through sensory details. There are many references to sight, smell, taste, and physical sensations such as lumps forming in the throat. Additionally, there are several scenes in which David forces his eyes shut, giving the reader uncomfortable insights into his other senses. Dread is also reinforced through a sense of futility, best demonstrated through my inclusion of dreams. Dreams are another tradition of Lovecraft's stories, providing the narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" with prophetic visions of his eventual transformation. Dreams are also present in *Secondary Growth*, and David's dream at the beginning of Chapter III is meant to foreshadow the twist of the story by distinguishing Frank's oak tree imagery from the animal's birch tree imagery. Despite the prophetic nature of David's dream, however, he is powerless to change the events of the narrative, another staple of the genre.

Frank Wheeler is human, and in the genre of cosmic horror, that means his actions are ultimately insignificant. Frank tries to kill Maddy, but the alien threat ironically forces eternal life upon her. More importantly, both the cosmic and the human horror of the story are ultimately undefeated, another way the novella draws out dread. The cosmic horror has prevented Maddy from reaching an afterlife, and Frank — although dead — has "won," thinking he has forced David to become a man and let go of his past by killing him. In doing so, the cycle of toxic masculinity continues through David. All three characters are unable to escape these fates, as their human actions are meaningless. This sense of futility is also demonstrated in David's promise to save Maddy. In his prophetic dream the night before leaving for Greybull, David promises Maddy he will save her, but that is ultimately impossible. The character of David

Wheeler is left to carry on at the story's conclusion, although his perspective of the world has permanently changed.

In cosmic horror, there is a price to pay for trying to understand what is beyond our comprehension, whether to an extreme or in a subtlety akin to the Wedding-Guest in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The Wedding-Guest is left "stunned" and "forlorn" by the Mariner's account, becoming a "sadder," but a "wiser man" nonetheless (ll. 622-624). In *Secondary Growth*, David does not suffer as drastic a fate as a typical Lovecraft protagonist, but his understanding of the world has changed, much like the Wedding-Guest. This is demonstrated best in the closing lines of the story, when David comes to realize ". . . Maddy Wheeler would outlive them all, trapped in amber as she was." This encounter with an outside, alien threat calls into question his notion of an afterlife. With that said, subtlety is not the only way a sense of dread is evoked in the story.

Like his cousin, David is a victim of both monsters in the story. While David is not "trapped" like Maddy, he is left traumatized by the log-splitting accident and the experience of being inserted into the tree's rings. Both scenes use heightened sensory details to demonstrate another staple of the genre: body horror. Similarly, David's foot is eventually replaced with an exact wooden substitute, which is then split like a log, paralleling his childhood injury. By contrast, David's cousin Maddy suffers a fate as drastic as the traditional Lovecraft protagonist. In *Secondary Growth*, both monsters of the story have tangible effects on the character of Madison Wheeler, who is left trapped in limbo.

Maddy is an inherently troubled character, giving her a connection to the ". . . unholy dimensions" that are mentioned by H. P. Lovecraft in his essay (36). Lovecraft also specifies these are places ". . . which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse," and luckily for

Maddy, she is simultaneously dead and moonstruck. Before Maddy is murdered, she is paralyzed, stuck in Greybull. After she is murdered, she is permanently stuck in a dream-like limbo. One of the character's most important speeches relates to this newfound "unholy dimension," prophesizing a future in which she and David eventually lose their memories and "...bleed out into one single inky black." In keeping with the fear of the unknown, the reader is never provided with direct explanations for how this process works. With that said, Maddy describes the effects of the monster to the extent of her limited human knowledge, painting a dreadful picture of her eventual fate.

Many of the core concepts of cosmic horror have influenced the writing process for *Secondary Growth*, resulting in a novella that evokes both dread and a fear of the unknown. Madison Wheeler martyrs herself for her cousin, denying him the same fate and asking for the body of his father. In true cosmic horror style, there is a nihilistic reading of *Secondary Growth* in which the animal is merely mimicking Maddy, manipulating David to bring it another meal. Either way, David Wheeler makes very few decisions for himself, instead being passively pushed forward by the events of the narrative. When David initially thinks about returning to his hometown of Greybull, West Virginia, he is filled with dread. His feelings are reaffirmed upon a nightmarish homecoming, transforming the familiarity of home into an unknown, alien place.

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