

2020 OYAN Short Story Contest

Winners & Finalists

Authors retain the intellectual property rights for their work.

(<https://clearwaterpress.com/oneyearnovel/>)

Collin Suttle

And Indeed There Will Be Time; or, The Priestess of Celery

Everyone forgot that time worked differently for the Gods when the Gods started fighting.

It didn't last very long, the forgetting. The village pandemonium lasted about a week before everyone got bored of waiting for the giant fist of Karak the Wave Maker to collide with the even more gigantic face of Uhar the Battle-Hunger. Another week later, after the non-tavern establishments had opened again and the taverns had begun to pick up after themselves, the face and face finally met. A shepherd in the square discovered a fresh talent for hysterics, but all that reached the snow-muffled village from so far away was a distant *thoom*, almost apologetic in its smallness.

"It's not Uhar's best look," the alewife said speculatively, after she'd given the shepherd a drink to stop his throat.

Foam-lipped, the shepherd hazarded a look at the nearby priest of Uhar, but the priest had no way of denying the alewoman's statement. Uhar's was no longer, after all, a face they could put on a new batch of icons.

###

The fight, so slow and so large and so far away, spanned the seasons.

Bonfires on the longest night of the year were lit, and the smoke and the orange glow blocked out the very idea of the Gods, until winter lightning flickered and showed a grimaced face or an unfortunately lifted leg.

The village had always been served by their tiny temple to Uhar, but, when the snow began to melt, it melted away from a brand new structure: a squat big toe of a building, gray stone but more hole than wall. There were three windows to look through at the altar, and a door that hung crooked to admit the self-appointed ‘Karak-priest,’ as the middle-born girl from the family that tried and failed to grow a different root vegetable every year had dubbed herself.

It was, in the Uhar-priest’s opinion, an example of very bad timing. Karak *had* been doing well during the early winter, but by the first green leaf, Uhar had both the upper hand and the more gallant expression.

“Karak’ll win,” the girl behind the windows said, arms folded over the priestly sash she’d woven herself from wool she’d gotten for a basketful of snakeskins.

“There’s no *winning*,” the priest said. “They’re Gods.” He looked at her broad, smiling face, shining with what he construed as smugness but was actually just relief at not having to help her family plant celery this year. She hated celery as much as she hated failure.

“Uhar will win, though,” he added quickly.

###

The priest's acolyte, the only person in the village under thirty who could read, began his own project, using the great thin sheets of writing wax he used for scribbles because the priest wouldn't let him use parchment.

It was a piece of art, picked out in colorful inks - it was a steadily growing mosaic of wax tiles - it was a puzzle, the first of its kind; and it was taking over the few shady pathways in the village, so the wax would melt less under the coming spring sun.

It was a nuisance, and it was a calendar.

His new year began with the tiles showing screaming mouths ("That's me," the shepherd said, pointing with pride to the Fourth Day in the month of Appearance), gesturing fingers, and wild running feet that, as the days went on, slowed to a stop and were paired with shrugging shoulders and half-lidded eyes. The month of Appearance gave way to the much longer month of Acceptance. At some point he had to change months, because spring was there and a body couldn't just live in a single eternal month until the fight was won, could a body? so he started the third month of the day the girl opened the Karak-temple: the month of Addition. The First Day tile of Addition was inscribed with the girl's sash, and was painted raspberry-red.

###

One day, the village woke up, stretched, looked out their windows to see what scant progress had been made up there in the honey-drip time of the Gods, and saw that the sun's glow was eclipsed by blood.

The blood of the Gods, mind, so, more appropriately, eclipsed by ichor. It gushed in a shimmering wave from its source, like molten gold. Karak's nose was bleeding. In the act of disconnecting from their target, Uhar's knuckles glittered.

The acolyte grimaced and etched his calendar tile with black lines outlining a broken nose. The whole thing he stained yellow and sprinkled with pollen, to roughly mimic the look of faraway Godsblood.

"Uhar will win," the priest told the girl on his daily gloating wander-past.

Inside, the girl poked her small fire back to life, where she tended it with sticks, brambles, and the small snail shells her few followers had sacrificed, the closest thing they had to Karak's customary sea-shell offering.

"Nah," the girl said.

###

The people in the village discouraged him, because summer was stretching awake in the green-tipped treetops, and traveling in the sun would be almost as bad for a body as it would be for a wax calendar. But on the last full moon before summer, the seamster set off to see the Gods fighting up close and personal.

"They're fighting on our territory now," he said calmly, putting sheep jerky in the pack he'd sewn himself especially for this journey. On it he'd embroidered a wave for Karak, a spear for Uhar, and a needle for himself. "And they've only managed a few punches so far, haven't they? They'll be fighting long enough for me to get there and back again. I'll be close enough to

see the hair on their legs. Maybe,” he added, as the shepherd grew pale and the Karak-girl’s mother grew concerned, “even get a touch in. Get a feel for what a Godly shoe is like.” He looked at the cobbler. “What’d that be worth to you?”

She peered at him slit-eyed. “You’re a blasphemous fool.”

“So I’ve been told.”

She set the unwieldy sack she’d brought on his wooden cutting table and withdrew a pair of boots from it. When he opened his mouth to thank her, she pulled the boots back and said, “You bring back sketches of Karak’s footwear, understand?”

He smiled at her. “I’ll come back,” he said, reassuring, “with all the sketches you could ask for.”

The cobbler handed over the boots she’d made for him by memory, one of the few courting tricks she was familiar with. No one pointed out the faint sickness on her face the day he left, for fear of going barefoot in the sheep pastures for a month.

###

Through the spring, the acolyte and his friends had pieced together a stone building in the village square, aided by the know-how of the oldsters who knew how to keep a building cool in the summer. And, as the summer hit, the acolyte, under the skeptical eye of the priest, began to move his calendar to its new and, he hoped, permanent home. He’d calculated the space that four seasons of tiles would take, how to adhere the wax tiles to the walls, how to brace a hollowed-out stone full of oil in the center of the room, so the calendar would be lit but not melted.

He touched up the stained pictures of each tile, and then opened the building to the village.

The first day of summer, the day after the seamster left, he had named the First Day of the month of Absence.

The girl-priest came to visit, her sash dusted with ash and rabbit grease.

“Been busy?” the acolyte asked, eyeing the sash.

“Just hungry.” The girl examined the half-filled walls of art. “You’re really going to finish, huh?”

“What, you thought I wouldn’t?”

“Did you think I’d be a priest this long?”

The acolyte didn’t answer because, for the second thing, no he hadn’t; for the first thing, he didn’t think his boss would like her calling herself a priest.

She turned to him, sucking a last bit of grease from her thumb. “What if they last longer than a set of seasons?”

The acolyte blinked.

“What if the fight ends, say, tomorrow night?”

Another blink. “Guess I’ll just record that, too. Build another waxhouse if I need to.”

The girl grinned and looked back at the walls, picking at gristle between her teeth. “Will you record who wins?”

“Obviously.”

“Good.” She patted him on the shoulder - *good work*, it seemed to say - and ambled toward the exit. “Cause Karak’s going to win.”

###

The shepherd's daughter came back to the village the morning after one of her midnight wanders, talking about the Herald.

“He was on the hill when I got there,” she insisted in the tavern. “The hills whose view they've ruined—“

“Blasphemy,” the alewoman said mildly, distractedly.

“He was just watching them,” the shepherdess went on, because if a woman said the Gods ruined the scenery and a priest wasn't there to hear, was it really blasphemy? “The Herald. Down from the heavens. *Beautiful.*”

The mushroom-digger who fancied the shepherdess looked sour. Of *course* the Herald was beautiful.

“And he didn't leave when he saw me.” The shepherdess had a mug of beer in her hands but she wasn't drinking, too dazzled yet. “He looked my way and smiled. Patted the ground by him.” She thumped the stool next to her to demonstrate. “Told me we could watch together.”

And then, despite the crowd she'd drown, she lapsed to quietude, eyes distant.

“Then?” the mushroom-digger prompted.

The shepherdess blinked.

“I sat by him,” she said. “and watched the Gods with a God. He was my size, not unfathomable, like them. He said he was a baby, but he'd be their size one day and wasn't looking forward to it. He said he thought they would be more interesting from down here, where

he could see them like we do. But all he saw were—“ She stopped and blushed. ““Giant buttocks in the night.””

Murmurs at that. A few glances to see if the priest had materialized. He hadn't.

“Sounds like a drunk traveler,” someone said. A flare of irritation lit the shepherdess's eyes, but she said nothing, just took the first draw of her ale.

“I believe you,” said a new voice, and, her cheeks still round with her mouthful of ale, the shepherdess looked around to find the priest-girl beaming like a squirrel who'd found her nuts.

Even as the shepherdess swallowed, the priest-girl leaned forward. “Did the Herald say who was going to win?”

###

After the talk of the Herald and the seamster had slacked off, and after the novelty of the Karak-altar and the waxhouse had settled into normality - after the slow shift of the Gods' fight in the distance had become so much window dressing—

—They lost importance. Lost even a little of their visibility.

“No one's gonna win,” someone told the priest-girl. “It's how it is now. They're just another way to tell directions by.”

The priest-girl bunched up her lips. She'd kept watching the Gods, and she thought that act - keeping an eye towards the Gods when everyone else had looked away - made her priest indeed, not just self-appointed.

“Nah,” she said.

###

The calendar oozed, but held throughout the summer.

The priest-girl sat in her altar, took the occasional sacrifice, and watched.

The seamster didn't come back.

The Gods fought.

###

“Gotta be different, where their feet are.”

“Whose?”

“*Theirs*. That's why he left, eh? To see their feet.”

“You think some of 'em are getting danced on?”

“Probably.”

“Didn't even think about the people over there. It's so far away.”

“Well, that's your first problem. First of many.”

###

Summer folded into fall.

Karak had a blood-stained nose, a ripped breechcloth, wild sweaty hair, and a defiant gloss to his eyes.

Uhar was missing two teeth - no one had seen them fall, so they assumed he'd swallowed them - and his knuckles were split and gushing. But that was better than a sad, shattered Godly nose.

The Uhar-priest had taken to ignoring the girl at the Karak-altar. She munched on her bits of food regardless - she was getting chubby from the sitting and the snacking, and was at her prettiest in the fall, when she wore the falling leaves as a crown for her dark hair - and always waved a few fingers at the priest when he passed.

“Karak'll win,” she said to no one in particular.

Karak lost.

They woke one morning to a crisp, distant autumn sun, a mist on the sheep pastures, and the closed eyes and down-tilted body of the Wave Maker, Uhar's face above him just wrinkling into victory.

Well, was the general consensus, as they all gathered out in the square, *that's that*.

The Uhar-priest might have celebrated more than was decent.

The shepherd, for the first time in his life, heard louder bellows than his own in the alewife's establishment, and much, much later that night, the Uhar-priest had to be helped back to his altar across the village.

“Look at it!” the Uhar-priest yelled at the girl-priest from all the way across the square. His escorts tried to hush him, but he was ecstatic, incandescent, effervescent with the totality of his victory - that is to say, his God’s victory. “Look at it, you dunce! Look at it fall!”

A sleepy face appeared, moonlit and moonlike, in a Karak-altar window.

“Not nice to call a God an ‘it,’ sir,” she hollered back.

The man-priest was rude, noisy, and belligerent; the less described, the better. The girl-priest snickered and went back to sleep.

###

“Worried?” the acolyte asked the girl-priest two days later, when his boss was fit for functioning again and he didn’t have to tend the Uhar-altar all day.

“Nah.” She gestured at the falling God. ““Rest of you should be, though. See his trajectory?”

The acolyte looked, saw the angle of the God’s descent, saw where the tilt of his senseless body would take him.

“Oh,” he said after a moment, as he went white as fresh snowfall.

###

It took work - oh, did it take work - but they managed it, in the end.

Karak's fall was slow, but not as slow as the fight had been, so they knew to work fast. Only a week was given over to the theoreticals of the situation, the arguing over the exact angle of the falling God, the wholesale invention of new mathematics and geometrics and physics and such. There was yelling, name-calling, lewd gestures, and at least two inspiring speeches that pulled the village back together every day.

The acolyte hadn't named weeks up to this point, but those seven tiles he stained a dark bilious yellow, the color of panic, the kind they hadn't felt even when the Gods first appeared on the horizon. He named it the Week of Accounting.

Then the week was over, and with the edge of Karak's shadow tickling the far, far edge of the farthest valley, with Uhar's gloating face upturned in a chest-beating laugh, the villagers downed their ale and got to work splitting the village in half.

If natural science, luck, and divine will were on their side, the God would fall in the center of the village, falling like a freshly beaten rug, right down the square. They had no idea how broad across he'd be, shoulder-wise, so they added a dozen dozen cubits to their most liberal estimates, just to be on the safe side.

Houses, stalls, stables, fences, pens, outhouses, sheds, pet houses - all pulled up by the roots, like so many weeds plucked to plant elsewhere. The most necessary went first: the houses, the alehouse, the Uhar-altar. In a day, the girl-priest had her own shabby rig uprooted, ready to be carried away.

The acolyte listened as his waxhouse dropped further down the village's list of priorities.

"We'll get there," the alewife told him, but the cobbler snorted, *Not likely* written across her face. The acolyte's own expression wilted.

Slowly, he began to peel his calendar tiles off the walls. If he couldn't save the waxhouse, at least he could save the wax.

###

Autumn came on and on and on until it was on the other side and was passing, passing, passing.

Karak fell.

All that was that was left of Uhar was a distant back, almost invisible. Maybe he was flying away.

The man-priest managed to simper at the girl-priest as they worked to relocate the seamster's empty house. "Still think you won?"

She was puffing along, red-faced, with the lintel-post in her arm, but she still grinned. "Yeah."

###

What was there left to say about it besides this: Karak fell.

The shadow that had lengthened, stretching up to meet him, was subsumed by the body itself. Sandaled feet, ankles, bruised calves, scarred knees, all falling somewhere in a valley beyond.

Then, faster and faster until he fell almost in mortal time: the thighs, the waist, chest, arms limp beside, shoulders, neck. Then the priest, staggering away as they all rushed to save the

last stones of the square, was eyeball to eyeball with his anti-God, or would have been, if the great divine eye had been open, ditto the panic-blinded eyes of the man, who then had his own little fall, with far less fanfare, unconscious into the dirt, and Karak had fallen and was still.

The land *thoomed* with echoes, trembling softly, yet to catch its balance. The sheep balked, birds made the air shrill, parents held children, the shepherdess gripped her orange cat tight.

The people gazed at the God that had split their village through the center like an ax through soft wood. He was too tall to easily cross, and blood still drained, gold and gleaming, from his nostrils.

The earth subsided, accepting the weight with little to-do. All was still, besides the sheep and the wriggling cat and the whimpering shepherd.

“Well,” the cobbler murmured, after a silence spent waiting to see if the God would rise. He didn’t. “That’s him, then.”

“You lost,” someone told the girl-priest, because the man-priest was still indisposed to gloating.

The priest-girl pouted big, snapped her fingers, and gave a gusty sigh.

“Must have done,” she said, picked up her own last stack of wood bits, and ambled away from her God without so much as a glance behind her.

###

The village was safe, even the acolyte's waxhouse. Of course, the place was bigger now, what with a split down the middle the length and breadth of a God, but they managed, carving out a path around his head in no time.

The night he fell was the night it began to snow. It snowed on the God's knees, under which the village children's favorite climbing tree had been laid low; it snowed in the small of his back and gathered around the folds of his belly; it fell on his head, obscuring the shattered nose and curly divine hair like a thicket of briars; it fell on his huge outstretched hands, where the village cats liked to play, darting and hopping between the fingers.

At first, the snow made little difference against the vastness of the God, gleaming on his fish-pale skin. But it kept coming. It fell and piled and heaped and slouched in great drifts until its volume and mass was too much, and it gathered on his body and veiled even the vaguest of outlines.

Two weeks into the month of Descent and Karak was gone.

The cobbler watched the horizon. The acolyte grew bored with increasingly repetitive designs inscribed on the tiles with increasingly cold-stiffened hands. The alewife was glad they'd spent too much time moving the village to drink much; her stores were overflowing.

No one visited the priest-girl's altar anymore. Laughter rose at her expense, at first in the corners and then in the streets. Even the acolyte stayed away as she shivered in her tiny building with its tiny fire.

Her only guest was the man-priest, who no longer sneered because, for the first time, he saw her face as she watched the great snow lump that had been her God, still and hemorrhaging

power into the frozen earth. He saw her face, the burning there, the red nose and bitter crimson cheeks, set against her blue smirking lips.

He brought food - not for her God but for her - and said nothing. She watched him as they stood and stared at the snow, her inside and him outside, ankles crossed, teeth chattering, waiting.

###

Winter lingered, freezing the great snow lump.

Then winter gathered its things. The acolyte finished his calendar on the eve of the warmest full moon since the summer before. He pressed the last square to the wall and backed away.

“That’s that, then,” he said.

###

Winter opened the door, looked back once for a final farewell, and left the village, holding the door for the sun on its way in.

And the snow began to melt.

###

“You should come see,” the acolyte said through the window of the priest-girl’s altar.

She was asleep, but his voice roused her. She brushed her priest’s sash clean and followed him from the cold altar.

To see what he pointed to took some doing, because the entire village was out to look, too. He pulled her through the crowd, and to a one they stared as she passed by, even her parents, who didn’t try to talk, just moved to let her through.

The snow encrusted over Karak’s body had melted in a single morning. The water lingered on the ground in shallow frigid puddles. But the shape of Karak remained, unmasked, free of its icy sarcophagus.

Not Karak himself. He was gone, the way Gods are sometimes, simply, gone. But his shape was there.

His shape was there in a rolling hill of green: leafy and lush and crisp and velvet with grasses; broad dark leaves the size of a child under thin snappy stalks; delicate fans of minty green puffs; lumps of emerald dug into the richest, darkest earth the village had ever seen; lichens crawling and tumbling over each other and between the meaty stalks of face-sized mushrooms. Beneath the unknown verdance were extravagant glimpses of color: the umber and amber of carrots, the brown of potatoes, the crimson of strawberries, magenta of raspberries and onions, the pearlescence of onions, scarlet of tomatoes, the orchid sheen of aubergines.

And at the place where Karak’s head had fallen, and where his nose had bled so copiously, was the thickest, bushiest crop of ramrod stalks, their leafy tops luxuriating in the sun.

The priest-girl, in the silence of the village's wonder, went to the stalk bed and ripped up a handful, which didn't matter because there was more of it, always more. She held the stalks in her fist, opened her mouth, shut it. Then she lifted the celery up high, so her family could see.

The village roared. They cheered, sang, danced, and rushed the Godgarden, and the priest-girl, laughing, let them.

###

In the distance, a footsore figure approached (though not as footsore as he might have been, if he hadn't been beloved of a very talented cobbler). His bag was full to bursting with sketches.

###

The Karak-priest sidled up to the man-priest, grinning with pride.

"Technically," he began, but she'd already run off again, satisfied, and he didn't really feel like finnickin' with the truth, anyway.

Annika Lee

Guinevere

It was autumn—no, it was summer; or it was in between summer and autumn, when the leaves have just begun the slow march towards color and death. It was almost autumn in Paris, and I was a beautiful, proud, restless nineteen year old. As the first orange leaves fell from the trees, I spent most afternoons with a chosen group of friends in the forests near my father's house. We would drink and laugh and read poetry. Sometimes one of them would try to kiss me. Sometimes I would let them. And we would drink and laugh some more.

In the evenings, when my life was my own instead of belonging to others, I would let no one distract me from my work, which was that of making myself into someone new and harder. If I was to survive as a beautiful woman in the world, I would have to know many things, become many things. I would have to know how to sing and dance, converse and gossip, turn every expression into a tool in my arsenal. I would study languages, history, politics, science. I would forge myself into a many-edged knife.

And for seven years I had done just that, but at nineteen I was growing restless and looking for a way out of my father's house.

“What a way to live, Guin,” you would say. With that compassionate, amused, pitying look you got when I shared something incriminating about myself. There are so many incriminating things.

Still, you fell for me.

You came to Paris when the leaves and the rain were falling and everything on the ground was wet and rotting. The hem of your crimson cloak was muddy, so I thought poorly of you at first.

“We welcome you to our humble home, your majesty,” my father said to you. He feared what your ascent meant for him, but respected you enough to treat you with deference.

I stood on the steps, half-obscured by the shadows, and watched. I could only see your side, the profile of your face, the mud on the floor you had tracked in, the sword at your side. You said something kind and self-deprecating. I tried to size you up. I could sense, before I knew it, that change was on its way.

You were handsome, too. Dark hair, high cheekbones, tall. I do not willingly relinquish power, and it bothered me that someone else had it over me. “Another power play?” you’d ask if I ever said that aloud. Again your voice; again your gentle mockery. I can’t escape it.

Later that same day, you came to me—I was in the drawing room, and the fire burnt low. The pendulum on the grandfather clock moved back and forth. I lingered on the armrest of a couch by the fire, holding a book in my hands.

I was pretending to read as the hearth warmed my cheeks and toes. It was Milton or Dante. I was bored or just waiting. We had talked during the meal, across the mahogany table. I looked at you through candlelight, and you held my gaze. You gave and I took, a battle or dance.

After, you went with my father to talk business and politics, but I could sense your reluctance to leave—to leave me. So I waited in the drawing room for hours for you to pass.

It would've been enough, I swear, for you to pass and see me—a reminder, a hint—but instead you stopped. You knocked on the half-open door. I looked up. You saw my book. “Paradise Lost?” or “Inferno?” you must've said—or was it “Paradiso?” I can't remember, but I remember that I smiled. You stood there, a little foolish, until I said something like, “Don't think too highly of me, I only speak a little Italian.”

But you said, “I do think highly of you,” which is such a stunning, stupid thing to say, only you didn't know it. You asked, “Would you be willing to tear yourself from the book? I understand if you'd rather not—I love books too, and have been known to shirk responsibility to finish a chapter. But—” Here you paused, earnestness touched by a brief struggle to find the right words. “If you're willing, I would very much like to get to know you, Lady Guinevere.”

I was taken aback. Anyone could've said these words, but not in a way that was so devoid of manipulation, laced with simplicity and truth. Had you always been like this? Were you a child, talking to your father, saying things just as you thought them? Had I not gone my entire life thinking that someone like you must be secretly evil or stupid, or both?

“I would be willing to put it away,” I said. Unlike you, I weave words for a purpose. Here the weave was meant to snare you, and it worked.

After that things could only have gone one way. You would love me, I would try to love you back, and I would betray you. Isn't it unlikely enough for one truly good person to exist? I did try to be good for some time, though. I tried because the light in your eyes when we spoke alone for the first time has burned itself into me for the rest of my life. I can never be rid of you,

even if I chose another lover, even if I did everything I could to smash to bits the lovely fetters I knowingly clamped on when I said I would marry you.

#

We wed on a day when the bright sun burned away all the fog in the air over Camelot. We wed with my father walking me down the aisle, with the druid Merlin officiating. I wore white; I played the perfect bride crowned with tulle and daisies, and you wore the jeweled crown of the king.

“Here,” my father said after the reception, once the less important guests had left, leading us down a hall. “Humor me a little longer, Arthur—just here.”

He swept us into a room, and we saw the white cloth covering an immense circular surface. My father lifted a corner of the cloth and handed it to you. “If you will,” he said.

You glanced at me, I gave an encouraging smile, and you took the cloth in both hands and swept it away. Underneath, a marble tabletop gleamed.

“What is it?” you asked.

My father answered. This gift was my idea. I knew what kind of kingdom I wanted to rule and insisted on a symbolic gift to shape your image in the wider world. It was a small manipulation on my part. And you may have guessed it, but you didn’t ask even after my father left, even after Merlin enchanted chairs for the knights who would come. And I knew why you didn’t ask. I would’ve lied and expected you to believe me, and you would’ve tried to.

Spring in Camelot came and went, evolving into the hum and buzz of summer. We hired servants and set your sister Kaye as castle steward. Knights came to fill the seats at the round table, and I befriended many of them, especially Kaye. We had much in common, close as we were to you, often confounded by your actions. Oh, and there was Lancelot, who arrived at the

end of summer. But you know the story—the whole damn world knows the story. I'll tell a different one.

#

There was a time when we watched the stars from Camelot's tallest tower. I had flown into a rage earlier that day—at you, because you took it so gently—about a border conflict. You comforted me, and we climbed the tower armed with blankets and hot drinks. We held hands and watched the stars, huddling deep for warmth, unbothered by matters of state. The tears had dried on my face, and the anger had died down, but I knew it was never far from me.

“You know you couldn't do anything to make me hate you,” you said. We were watching for shooting stars.

“You don't know the future,” I said. I could feel it within me, the capacity to cut you deep if I was prompted. The ugly truth was tainting all the comfort I could've gotten from you. “You don't know what I haven't done yet. You can't forgive me for the future.”

“Yes I can,” you said. You squeezed my hand, turned to look at me. You were always looking me in the eyes when I didn't want to face you. “Guin. We can frustrate each other, anger each other, but it changes nothing. Will you believe me?”

“Say it again,” I said in a small voice, asking it more of the night sky than of you, asking it of the universe. “Say everything can be forgiven.”

You kissed my head and whispered, “I forgive you for everything. Flip the switch that ends the world, break my heart. Everything.”

“Well, I don't want that,” I said, a little biting. I didn't want anything melodramatic. I felt like you were teasing me.

“What I’m trying to say—” Here you sat back a little bit, musing. “It’s impossible to say without sounding foolish.”

“Sound foolish for a moment,” I told you, risking a glance at your face.

You were smiling—carefully, patiently. All the stars in the sky above us, some raining down like fiery angels plummeting to the ground, and you were smiling at me. “Do anything, Guin. Stab me in the heart. I’d ask if you wanted me to step closer for your convenience. You were forgiven before you lifted the knife. You were forgiven if you weren’t sorry.”

I turned back to the stars, leaning on your shoulder. And I told you that you did sound foolish, but that it was all right this one time, and you chuckled and stroked my hair.

#

Now it’s midnight at the abbey. Our night on the tower was seventeen years ago. I slept with Lancelot. You knew. I slept with him again. You knew. I was caught by knights who wanted to humiliate us both. You said you’d sooner exile Aglovale than shame me. So I fled—Lancelot and I. You let me go. I rode away, hair streaming behind me, clutching Lancelot’s side. My wedding ring lay on my pillow. My finger felt too light.

We entered self-imposed exile. In a week I grew angry at him and told him I was leaving to join an abbey. Despite who I was, they took me in. I wrote a diary, and cursed my broken, traitorous heart. I cursed the root of the dissatisfaction that led me away from you, though I could not name it. I cursed you for letting me wander. I wept until I couldn’t.

I asked the icon of Mary how to be good when you have spent your entire life angry. She didn’t speak, only looked at me with familiar patient eyes.

I dedicated myself to a life of service, sang in the choir, baked bread, spun wool. All my life I mocked the people who begged gods for help. I stood on my own two feet, I dug my nails

into the dirt and crawled my way forward, I beat this lump of clay into a queen. I made myself. Only I cracked in the kiln and pieces of me went flying, shattering everything around me.

So at long last I arrive at admitting I was wrong. It's taken a long time, but I was wrong.

#

I have written it all down. This is the end of my long vigil. My hand is tired from writing. My eyes grow sore too.

A knock comes at the door. "Sister Mary?" There were two Marys here—I am the third—I would take no other name.

"Yes," I say, and rise from my desk.

The door opens, and Sister Beatrice peeks in. There's sufficient moonlight to make out the creases of her face. "I know it's late, but you have an important visitor."

"I'll come," I said, and blow out my candle.

I follow Beatrice outside. At the front gate, another sister waits anxiously, holding a cloak. She drapes it around me, and before I know it she's pushing me out the gate.

I come face to face with Sir Bedivere. Bearded, reliable Bedivere, a steadfast man. I haven't seen him in—well, it's been over a year, but I don't want to think about the time. I don't want to think about the Round Table—how they all sat there and I watched, proud, like a mother.

"My lady," he says. In the moonlight, I can see a gash on his head, blood on the side of it. He's wearing armor. "I would not have disturbed you had my king not ordered it."

"Ordered it?" I ask. My mind swims.

"We traveled to see Sir Lancelot at his home not three days ago," he says. "When we found you gone, we made for Camelot, but traitors ambushed us. We have fought a tremendous battle." Here he pauses. Bedivere is a mighty man who saw battle many times over, and now he

must be sixty at least, and I have never seen him so weak. “Many are dead. Sir Kaye. Sir Gawain. Gareth, Lucan, Bors—and Arthur is wounded.”

I hold my hand up to stop him. My heart is hammering in my chest, but my mind is quite clear. “How badly?”

“Sir Lancelot told us you had come here. We rode through the night. I fear—”

There isn’t really a choice. “Take me to him.”

“He wanted me to say,” he says before I can go anywhere, “that Lancelot came to help during the battle, and has perished with the others. They are reconciled.”

That stops me in my tracks. Lancelot is too selfish for that. I know that and he ought to know it too. My mind, calm despite the storm, threatens to fracture.

“The king is wounded,” Bedivere says.

“Take me quickly,” I reply.

His horse is a few paces away. In the surprise of it all, I hadn’t noticed. He helps me up, swings on behind. With a click of his tongue we go into the night.

It’s a half hour into the woods, leaping across little streams, until we start to slow. My eyes are blurred and watery. My muscles ache. Bedivere says “Woah” to his horse, jumps down, and helps me to the ground. I waver; he steadies me. “This way,” he says.

I follow him, trusting his sure footing over stones and roots. A few yards away, I see a flash of color in the dim light, and cry out. It’s Arthur’s red wool cloak, the one he wears in battle to mark him as their leader.

I rush ahead of Bedivere and practically collapse at Art’s side. He’s propped up against a great oak tree, eyes closed. His face is bloody. I take his face in my hands. “Arthur,” I say desperately, and move to his neck to find a pulse.

His eyes flutter open. I make a noise of distress and he moves to comfort me, stroking my side. “I’m all right, Guin,” he says. “I’m here.”

Not caring for Bedivere at our backs, pushing aside the grief I caused him which always hangs at the edge of my mind, I throw my arms around him and let out a deep breath. “I can take you to the abbey,” I say. I’m delirious with the planning, the details: “There are healers, they won’t betray your location, they’re good people—”

“No, Guin,” he says, and the struggle in his voice stops me in my tracks, sends a pang of dread through me. “I can’t go. When the Lady of the Lake gave me Excalibur, it was here. Do you remember the day we met? I came from this lake. She told me to go to your house. I obeyed.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. I check his head for a wound. It’s hidden by matted hair, but still bleeding. “Art, this looks bad.”

“Feels bad too,” he returns. I want to swat him, but he looks so terrible.

“Let me take you to the abbey,” I say again.

“Listen carefully,” he says, ignoring everything I want to say. “Take Excalibur. Wade into the lake and throw it as far as you can. The Lady will recognize you, I’m sure. She knew you long ago.”

“Into the lake? Art, that doesn’t make sense.” All I want is the warmth and safety of the abbey, to be able to nurse him back to health.

“It must go into the lake,” he repeats, firmly and with great effort.

I look down. The sword is in his right hand, gleaming. He lifts it to me.

I reach for it, but then draw my hand back, searching his face. “Are you sure?” I ask.

“You would have me cast your sword away?”

“Please, Guin,” he says. His eyes are beseeching. “Please. Then come back and tell me what you see.”

I take the sword in my hands. I can barely lift it. With difficulty I stand up.

“Bedivere, watch the lake,” Art orders. “Guin, as far as you can—”

I look back at him. He has never looked so helpless. I have never felt so full of desperation and fear. I understand why people can die of grief, of heartbreak. It is all inside me and there is nowhere for it to go.

So I enter the water. Immediately I’m soaked through. Stab me in the heart, you told me once. I’d ask if you wanted me to step closer for your convenience. I’ll pay you back, this way at least.

Deeper I walk, sword above the water, until my knees are wet, until the water rises to my stomach. I press on. The current moves around me, a force much stronger than I. I have hardly noticed the weight of Excalibur, but soon I am close to exhaustion.

“Arthur,” I say for strength, move my arm back, and throw the sword forward with all the power I possess.

It flies through the air, splashes in the distance. Well, that’s over with, and I’m freezing. I begin to move back to Art when a great light shines behind me, and I turn to look for the source. It can’t be dawn; dawn never came that quickly.

Instantly I’m blinded. I throw my arms up. I don’t know what’s happening. I turn back, surge forward, fighting every pull and tug of the water around me. I have to get back to Art.

When I get there, stumbling onto dry land, Bedivere is there to help me again. “Here,” he says, and takes off his cloak to cover me. I thank him, my eyes searching in the dark for Arthur’s form against the tree, but he’s gone.

“Bedivere, where—” I’m wild, tearing myself away from him, tripping over myself to get to the oak. But there’s nothing.

“Look,” Bedivere says, and points at the light from the lake. I had forgotten about it in my search for Art.

It’s still strong, but not absolutely blinding, and I can make out hazy shapes in the white glow. There are ships—tall, proud ships, greater than Camelot ever owned, a dozen of them.

“What is it?” I ask. My mind catches up to me: “Where is Arthur?”

“Look,” Bedivere says again, and points. I follow the line of his direction to the lead ship. A flash of red—Art’s cloak.

I let out a strangled cry. “They’re taking him—Bedivere!”

“Yes,” he says softly, “to Avalon.”

That gives me pause. I can hear my heartbeat in my chest, the flap of bird’s wings in the distance, the lapping of waves on the shore. “Surely you’re joking,” I say.

“Look,” Bedivere says again, pointing. Again I follow it to the light. “Look there, it is Pellinore—smiling. He is no longer haunted by his beasts. And close by, the Orkney siblings, reconciled at last.”

All is receding in my mind. The knowledge of their deaths is so fresh, seeing them now seems no more strange than greeting them again at the doors to the great hall of Camelot, dressed in all our finery for one of our great feasts. We were all friends then—we all loved each other then. “I see them,” I say. I know their faces well.

“Look, there,” Bedivere says. “Galahad, Lancelot, Bors, and Percival. Together they quested for the Holy Grail. They look as if they have found it.”

“I recognize them,” I say. Lancelot has never looked so young, so free of burdens. All the time I knew him, he was brooding, anxious. Over me—over his loyalty to Art. I was too. We were the source of so much grief.

“And look, the king’s own family, Ector and Kaye,” Bedivere says. I search for them—I find them quickly. “They greet their fallen son,” he says.

Gazing into the deepening dark, a small bright thing, long dormant, awakes inside me. I wonder aloud. “I suppose they are gone to glory. And us left behind. I have seen Arthur again only to lose him.”

Bedivere murmurs an assent. “The Round Table has passed away forever, never to come again.”

Just then Arthur turns toward us. He lifts a hand—a salute, a farewell.

And Lancelot’s voice from near him, a shout across the water: “Don’t be afraid! We’ll come back—when you have need, we’ll come back!”

A shout arises from the ships. Dozens of voices. A hundred or more.

Tears blur my vision. My body aches, my soul threatens to break its bounds and flee into the light with the rest of them.

And then Art’s voice—to me, for me, voice as strong as ever. “Farewell!”

That breaks the spell. I clamber forward. “Godspeed!” I cry across the lake. I mean it, I mean it with every fiber of my being. “Art, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

The light is fading. Bedivere’s hand at my arm keeps me from falling. I watch until the glow fades, until the ships are gone, until I’ve half-convinced myself I made it up.

“My lady,” Bedivere says.

“I’m all right,” I say. My voice sounds faint to me.

“My lady, what should we do?”

I don't know what to say. I look up into the stars. They shine and twinkle and give no answers.

“Let's go to the abbey,” I say at long last. “Your wound must be treated. And if there are others to help, we must find them.”

He nods. We walk to the horse.

I turn and give the lake one last look. I want to beg the water to give Arthur up again, to return him to me.

“My lady?” Bedivere asks.

“Yes,” I say. I'm thinking I'm sorry, I dragged you down with me when all you did was try to calm the fury inside me, and my rage was never meant for you.

“Let's go,” I say. We mount up and ride back. The wind and the silence pass through me. The hoofbeats are so deafening, the wind so strong and unrelenting, Bedivere doesn't take notice when I whisper, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death,” and he doesn't do anything but ride on when I say, a mantra to myself, again and again into the encroaching darkness that threatens to engulf us, “Pray for us at the hour of his death; pray for us, pray for us.”

Feather or Bone

There comes a time in every woman's life when she has to make a choice.

Dried leaves and gravel crunch under my boots. The call of crows, the humming of summer's lingering cicadas, and Eden's walking stick thumping on the road keep me company. I shift my satchel to sit more comfortably on my hip and loosen the straps on my mask so that I can pull the leather beak away from my face. The early evening air cools my face and tickles my neck with my own wheat colored braids.

"Briar," Eden chastises, her voice muffled.

I don't even bother to glance at her. I know she has that *haven't I told you before* look on her face under her own mask.

The regulated face protection didn't scare me like it did some of the other girls. I never got the nightmares they did. But I hated not being able to clearly see the eyes of my friends or breathe the fresh air directly into my lungs.

"I know, I know. I'll put it back on later." I push renegade hairs away from my brow and stick my tongue out at her. "Maybe."

Eden laughs, shaking her head at me. "I'm surprised you actually made it this far."

I grin, running my fingers absentmindedly over the copper rivets on the mask. “Not without testing the sisters’ patience.” But my smile fades away when we round a bend and the tip of a crumbling stone building peaks out from between the barren trees below. Our journey is ending too soon. I pull the bird mask by its beak from around my neck and tie it to my satchel. “I need one last rebellion. Besides, I can’t see through these blasted eye holes anyway.” I don’t add that I want to see this one last sunset with my best friend.

Eden sighs but I know she’s not mad at me because she switches her walking stick to her other hand and links her arm with mine. “Do you feel ready?”

I snort. “Of course not. Do any of the sisters *really* feel ready when it’s their turn?”

She’s quiet for a moment. “No, I guess not.” But then she smiles – or at least her dark eyes crinkle beneath the glass eye holes of the mask. “*I* think we’re ready. I mean, all we have to do is make one more decision. And then...” She throws her head and arms back, staring up at the sky. “We can be free!”

At the word *free*, I bite my lip and focus on the sun saying goodbye to the day and not my nerves hatching baby birds in my stomach.

Layered hues of orange and gold splay across our path. I wish I could freeze this moment and soak in the sun’s rays warming my face like an upturned sunflower. But I know all too soon the stars will poke through the dark canvas of night and the moon will greet us with her luminescent rays until the sun decides to rise again.

And I don’t know if we will be there to see it.

I kick a rock down the path in front of me.

Our kind cannot live on earth very long.

The air we breathe poisons our lungs, the crops we grow eat away at us, the water we drink drowns us, until the ground we stand on swallows us up. We become the dirt we were born from.

Mortal men live day to day with no fear of death. This is all they have ever known.

But we women of the woods don't have that luxury. Either we choose an immortal life as a beast of the air, knowing nothing of pain and joy for eternity, or we continue on as mortal women, doomed by the earth but blessed with the bounty and suffering that comes with a short human life.

I kick the rock again and follow in its path.

A gust of wind rattles the trees, whirling dead leaves and dirt around our legs. I inhale the scent of dried spices and pine trees, holding close the fleeting warmth of sunlight.

Eden pulls down her own mask and takes a deep breath as well, letting the sun warm her olive face and her ebony hair free in the breeze.

I grin. "Told you it's better this way."

She rolls her eyes and pokes her walking stick at me but misses a step, stumbling.

I gasp, catching her before her face can smash into the road. "You alright?"

Eden nods, suddenly out of breath, her smiles gone. "Yeah, I'm okay." She leans into me. "That *blasted* bad leg."

I glance around. "Do you need to sit down for a moment?"

Chewing on her lip, she glances down the road. "I guess, but only for a minute."

She tightens her grip on my arm, hobbling beside me as I lead her off the path and down a small hill that slopes towards a trickling creek. The sun sparkles gold on the water and the trees provide a little shelter from the early autumn winds.

We settle side by side on a large boulder, its warm surface dispelling the chills that have found their way into my bones.

I glance over at my friend. In this golden light, Eden's dark eyes are more amber than black.

I'm going to miss this.

A crow caws above us, its cries sending shivers down my arms but Eden looks unaffected. Her eyes are closed and her face is upturned, soaking in the sunlight.

I lay back on the rock, arms propping up my head.

"Do you – " I start but my voice tapers off.

Eden turns. "Hmm?"

"Do you ever wonder if we're making the right choice?"

She leans back with me and stares up at the sky. She waits so long to speak, I am afraid she didn't hear me. "Sometimes... sometimes I wonder how I would live if I knew I only had few years left. Growing up with this choice ahead of me, I've always known what the beginning of the end would look like. What it would feel to finally be in that wide blue sky, flying forever into the horizon, no longer shackled to this stupid leg. I've always known I would choose the feather. But what if – "

"What if you chose the bone," I finish quietly for her.

"Yeah. The bone."

I turn on my side so that I'm facing Eden. "Does that scare you?"

She nods, fingering her locket, the setting sun glinting off its golden surface.

“Every moment could be your last. I would be too afraid to live fully.” She finally meets my eyes. “How about you?”

The voice coming out of my mouth sounds so far away, I almost don’t recognize it. “It’s the deep never ending blue that scares me.”

Her fingers find mine, reassuringly squeezing my hand.

I must have dozed off for a moment because Eden is sitting up. She ties her long mask back on. “The sister’s will kill us if we’re late.”

I snort, still staring up at the sky. “Too bad we’re not immortal yet.”

She tugs on one of my braids. “Come on, Briar. Let’s go.”

I hop off our perch and instead of heading back up to the road, I walk over to the creek where something shiny caught my eye. Kneeling down by the rushing water, I pick up a stone. Washed bronze by the clear stream, the rock is perfectly smooth and fits in the palm of my hand.

“You’re procrastinating,” Eden calls behind me.

I chuckle, wiping my hands on my wool skirt and tucking the rock in my satchel. “I know.”

Then it’s a pinch of moss from the ground, a scrap of ribbon tangled in a tree branch, a perfectly dried leaf caught in my hair, and the withered wildflowers by the graves. Little pieces of this world in the palm of my hand.

By the time we reach the crumbling fieldstone building, the sun has disappeared taking its golden warmth with it. I shiver in the cool moonlight and cinch my satchel of treasure tighter to myself.

“The sisters won’t let you take those beyond, Briar.” Eden’s words are chiding but her voice is soft.

I smile and whisper “I know,” before stepping into the cold darkness.

The scratch and hiss of the match makes me flinch. Sister Shiloh lights the tall candles on the table, burning a glow into the fading twilight.

There must be at least thirty girls standing around the table. Ever since we could listen to the stories told by our sisters, we’ve all been waiting patiently for this day.

I wonder how they will all choose to live.

Eden pulls down her mask and slips her shaking hand into mine as we fall into the circle. I steal a glance in her direction. Her head is held high, her shoulders back. Her mind is made up. Although she fears the unknown, she does not fear her choice.

She is stronger than I am.

Sister Shiloh unwraps a cloth, letting the candlelight touch the items now bared to the world.

And so is the choice set before us: the feather or the bone.

The ceremony follows exactly how we were told.

Sister Shiloh announces a name.

The girl steps up.

Sister Shiloh asks “How will you live?”

The girl then chooses her future. Her fate.

Those who choose the feather disappear, the number of bird songs outside increasing.

Those who choose the bone leave with the clothes on their back and start the trek to the local village to start a new – but short – life.

No one has chosen the bone yet this year.

Every time a girl makes her choice and joins the flock, Eden takes a deep breath as if to steel her nerves.

I can't even breathe.

“Eden Wildes.”

My heart skips a beat at the sound of my best friend's name. I force myself to watch her hobble up to the table, her fingers hovering over the items.

But then Eden is facing me with tears threatening to spill over. She envelops me in a tight hug, the smell of sunshine and lilacs woven into her sweater. The shuffling of shoes and crackle of candles fade away as I close my eyes and breathe it in, my arms aching to hug her forever.

Eden steps back too soon, her eyes full of tears, her smile bittersweet.

“Farewell, Briar.”

Tears stream down my cheeks and I raise shaking hands to her face, bringing our foreheads together. “Goodbye, Eden.”

She slips something cold into my palm and squeezes my hand. Without breaking her gaze, she steps back to the table and lets her fingers brush the feather.

I blink and Eden is gone.

My heart hurts so much I can hardly breathe.

A light breeze stirs through the room and out through the window. A crow sits on the window sill, the moon illuminating its ebony feathers, the stars reflecting in its eyes.

It winks at me and flies away into the night.

I go to wipe my tears but something gold catches my eye. I unfold my hand.

Eden's locket.

"Briar Faulkner."

My head snaps up.

I am the last one to make my choice. To choose my fate.

Clasping the locket around my neck, I let my last tears slip down my face and I
step forward to the table.

To the feather and to the bone.

Sister Shiloh's question echoes around me and fills my heart.

"How will you live?"

Emily Schaeffer

Self Portrait of an Artist II

“This isn’t what you promised us.”

The professor looked up at her over the rim of his glasses, and shook one of the drawings so that it crinkled softly. She opened her mouth, clamped it shut as he said, “This isn’t the kind of thing we expect, and this isn’t what we lent our gallery for.”

“It’s his art,” she protested.

“This is barely art,” he said. He turned abruptly, tossed “Come” over his shoulder, and began walking. His shined shoes clacked against the wood of the floor, gavel pounds, and she swallowed hard before following him.

They stopped in front of The Painting, *Self Portrait of an Artist*, every detail precise, shadows and folds of clothing and colors that somehow seemed more real than what existed outside the frame. She looked at it for a long time, taking it in, and then looked down. She noticed something new every time.

How had the painter made the surface of the eyeballs have that peculiar opaque shine?
Not a wetness, not like that, more like the possibility of wetness, exactly how it was in real life...

“You see,” the professor said, comfortable triumph in his voice. “This is art. This is what we would like to display. If he has anything like that—”

“How can you expect him to have anything like *that*?” she asked, her hand snapping out in exasperation. He turned, unmoved, back to the table, and began shuffling the canvasses and sketches into a stack. She turned back, her throat tight, and began, “How can you? That’s...”

“*That* is excellent work. We accept nothing less. You may take these...*new submissions* back.”

“Can’t you just accept them, let him show them,” she whispered. “They are from his heart. They are what he has to give right now.”

“We are coming out of a war, Kate,” he said. “People hardly care about art at all. No one will care about these incoherent splashes of color and shape. They want lofty, impressive beauty, that looks like something real, that they can understand. He can do it, he has proved that. When he deigns to do it again, come back.”

He placed the stack in her arms and escorted her to the door.

He burst from the room, the heavy oak door slamming against the wall with a sound that cracked through the hallway and echoed like cannon-fire. Paul was lit up, alive, flushed and loosened with excitement. “Look at this,” he said. “Look at this. Look at this. Look...”

She took the paper from his hands—fine, precise hands, artistic hands—and began reading the words printed under the university seal. He snatched it back in excitement, unable to wait, and said, “Gallery. All for my work, my own senior art show. Four years to create all the

art I want, with all the supplies they have to offer, and then show it to the world!” He flung out his arms, and she laughed, and he enveloped her in an embrace. He was warm, damp with sweat, a conquering hero.

“I’m proud of you, darling,” she said into his shoulder. She could put from her mind, now, all of the times she had feared he would never achieve the recognition he deserved. He had taken two years before looking at colleges, just doing whatever he wanted. Her parents had begun to think he was daft, and she was senseless for loving him.

Well. That was long behind her now.

“Paul,” she said. She knocked on the door, rattled the knob. Nothing. She placed his art carefully on the floor—did the Ed never have this hallway swept?—and placed her ear against the door to listen. The pound of her heartbeat was louder than anything else, and she pulled away, shaky.

Gathering up the art, she walked down the hall and knocked on the landlord’s door.

“Ed,” she called, panicking, and the door swung open.

“Katie,” Ed said, smiling a smile rife with spaces.

“Ed, I need the keys to get in to Paul.”

Ed looked down, suddenly looking older. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at her, her head tilted. “I look after him, you know. I do. He’s alright.”

“He’s not alright,” Kate whispered. “How can you say that.”

“You know what I mean, Katie,” Ed said. “I bring him food, make sure he eats. Turn the lights on in the mornings, open the curtains. I come for him if he’s...awake in the night. He doesn’t cry out anymore, he’s...” Ed nodded to the art. “Well, you know what he’s doing.”

“A show would help him. If they’d just...give him the gallery. For a night. But they won’t.” She looked up at him and bit her lip.

“Katie, will you take advice from an old man?” Ed asked.

“Ed,” she said, but he pushed on.

“You’re a bright kid, a beautiful one. You have your whole life. This part of it is over.”

“I just want to see him.”

Ed shook his head, reached back and picked the key off its hook. “You should move on.”

She took the keys, turned without looking him in the eye.

“What do you think?” he asked her. She took another few steps into the apartment.

Glanced out the window. The glass was smudged, looking out at an old brick alley with red-rusted scaffolding dangling tiredly from the wall. She looked back at him, her eyebrow raised, and began to smile.

“Unacceptable!” he cried.

“Unacceptable!” she echoed, laughing.

He offered her his arm, gallantly, and she took it.

“Good thing is, we don’t have to find it yet,” he said. “Graduate, marry, then we’ll need it. But it has to be beautiful.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “It doesn’t need to be beautiful at first,” she said.

“If all we can afford is something like this, that is alright to start with.”

Paul laughed. “Come on, Kate. What’s the point if it’s not beautiful?”

“Well. We may have to worry about it being real before we say it has to be beautiful,” she said.

Paul was quiet for a moment, weighing that, and then dismissed it. “Real *is* beautiful,” he said.

“Paul,” she said, softly.

He was sitting in a patch of faded bluish light. The air was stale, and the room was cold. She shifted the stack of art to one hand, lifted up a damp towel, and dusted the table before she set the pile down.

“Paul,” she repeated, a little louder, and he looked up.

“Kate,” he said, after a moment, as if it took him a long time to get there.

She walked over to him, sat in the hardback chair beside him. He looked at her for a moment, and she felt her throat constricting and her eyes burning and she looked out the window. Someone needed to clean this window. It was unlike him to allow a thing to become ugly.

She lifted her hand to brush away a tear, forcing the sadness away because the room was already choked with grief, and felt instead a hot flare of anger burst to life inside her.

She turned to him, impulsively, twisted her skirt in her hands. “Paul,” she said. She ran her tongue along her bottom lip and said, “Paul, would you...would you draw something? For me? The kind of thing you used to draw?”

He shook his head, listless. “I don’t do that anymore.”

“You could though,” she said.

“I could, but,” he sighed, “I can’t.” He swung his head over to look at her, and there was something in his eyes that pleaded for her to understand.

“They won’t take that for a show,” she said, gesturing to the table. “It’s not like what you gave them before. I tried.”

He raised and dropped one shoulder, and leaned forward over the drawing board on his lap. There was a thin canvas on it, and he took his paintbrush and began one of the aimless drawings he did now.

A drawing of nothing. She watched as he moved it that his eyes were staring blandly forward, watching the paintbrush. There was no forethought, no planning, no intentional creation. Not anymore.

She looked away, bit down hard on her lip and tasted the mercury of blood.

“I didn’t make it for a show,” he said, quietly, after a long time.

She folded herself over him, leaning down and wrapping her arms around his neck. He smelled like paint. He turned his head to the side, going a little cross-eyed trying to look at her.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Yeah?”

She looked at his painting, marveled at the shine he put on things, the way he saw them that was almost more real than how they were.

“Mm. Yeah,” she said.

She hung up her coat at the door, and her father came and watched her as she pulled off her shoes and let them drop heavy against the floor.

“He can’t love anything right now, baby. You need to stop going to him.”

“That’s not why I go to him,” she said, leaning Paul’s heavy black portfolio against the

door. She wasn't really sure why she had it. He used to say she could take what she liked of his art; today she had finally took him up on that, maybe just so that she could try to like it.

"Why else. You can't say you don't go hoping that one day you go and he's better."

"No," she said. She shook her head, straightened, pushed her hair back. "No, I can't say that. He would get discouraged before, and he'd draw something, and it would make it better for him. And it worked, every time. He could make it better for himself. Because he believed in what he was doing."

"He's not just discouraged before. He's been in a war, Kate. Barely made it out."

"I know," she said. "I know all of that. And I understand it. I'm just...he still believes in what he's doing. He's just doing something now. And I am trying to understand that." She raked her fingers through her hair. "He's different in so many ways, I know that. But there's an important part of him that's the same."

Ed's voice was hoarse through the phone when she got to the kitchen. "He's left, Kate."

She swayed, her matted hair stifflingly close to her face. It puffed away from her mouth as she said, "Where, when?"

"I don't know." She loosed her grip on the counter, her hands yellow-white and shaking, and stumbled out into the hallway, grabbing her coat.

"Ed, he doesn't leave. He doesn't. I don't—how long ago?"

"No. No, no," Ed said, and she heard his age in his voice, hoarse and heavy and mourning. How hard this war was on his generation, Kate thought, seeing and unable to help.

"The war is over," she said, aloud, frustrated. But it wasn't. Not for her, or Ed, or Paul. Not for the people who didn't want to see art that confused them, that wasn't easy to understand.

“What?” Ed asked, his voice small and lost.

“It’s not your fault,” Kate said, and tossed the phone to the side.

She slammed the door shut behind her and froze, uncertain on the steps. It was raining, a light drizzle, and the sky was darkling gray.

Paul.

Where would he have gone, where would he be?

She stood there, uncertain, as he looked around the apartment. She had known he would be different, coming back, but not this much different. His face was lined, his brows were drawn together. His body was lean and hardened. His hands were calloused, and there was dirt under his fingernails.

He muttered to himself as he stacked his artwork, and put it in a box without looking to see how the papers scraped and bent against each other.

“Paul, I like that one,” Kate said quietly.

He shook his head. “They aren’t real,” he said.

She felt her mouth open slightly. These were clearer than photographs, clearer than reflections. “They are real, and they are beautiful,” she said, and he slammed the box shut and shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I wish I’d never made them.”

She started walking, pulling her coat close in the rain. The streetlights glowed against the pavement, and she thought of the shine of *Self Portrait of an Artist*, how real it was, how beautiful.

“Mm, very handsome,” she said, laughing.

“Oh, no, don’t say that, it was supposed to look like me,” Paul said. “First piece for the gallery. If it is *Self Portrait of an Artist*, it has to look like me. Unless I don’t go.”

She laughed. “It does. I love it.” She composed herself, knowing as an artist he valued the specifics, and said, “The way you look when you are seeing something, really seeing it, to make a likeness. It’s the way your eyes are. Not the way they are, what’s in them. That’s you.”

She was crying now, thinking of how he had spoken of the gallery, how he’d looked when he imagined it. Suddenly she realized that is where she had been walking, and the college was before her, and she opened the door and walked in and moved forward, in a dream, rain-heavy, her hands out in front of her in the dark, the cold clump of her hair against her face...

“Ed, I have to go see.”

“They’re not going to take that. The stuff he does now...”

“He’ll remember that today would have been his show. He’ll remember, and he needs it.”

“Kate, kiddo, he doesn’t remember anything. The war—”

“He’ll remember this. He’ll remember this.”

She thrust the door open, and the light was on.

And Paul was there.

Paul was there, in front of his self-portrait in its impressive frame, destroying it.

She felt a scream rise in her throat and swallowed it, reaching out to lean against the dark oak table.

“Paul,” she whispered, too low for him to hear her. But he looked at her, and he looked at her begging her to understand, and then he lifted his palette and kept painting.

She watched him.

She watched him wipe his face with the top of his wrist, his hands stained with paint; she watched him lean in and continue, painting over his masterpiece with the wild patternless colorings he now used.

Aimless, meandering, unintentional—only, it did not seem so now.

She saw his eyes now, and she saw that they were the same. Only now they were turned inward. He was painting a likeness, same as he always had. Painting something beautiful, and real. Fighting his war the way he always had.

Paul was just stepping back, rolling down his sleeves, when his old professors (prominent among them the one who had denied the use of the gallery) rushed in, and, behind them, the police. Kate was stiff from sitting, and hearing the steps and voices, she rose, and looked at them, and watched the color drain from their faces as they saw the finished work.

“What,” her friend from that morning asked, “What is *that*?”

Kate smiled, bit her lip that she would not laugh. Behind the professor, she could see the faces of the policemen and professors changing—the hardness, the confusion, becoming something soft with comprehension.

We are coming out of a war, Kate. People hardly care about art at all. No one will care about these incoherent splashes of color and shape. They want lofty, impressive beauty, that looks like something real, that they can understand. He can do it, he has proved that. When he deigns to do it again, come back.

“What is that?”

Paul looked at it, cocked his head to the side. A faint smile flickered across his face.

“*Self Portrait of an Artist II,*” he said.

Lydia DeGisi

A Circle Has No Beginning and No End

The mall was dead. Because it was 1pm on a Tuesday, but also because it was a mall, in 2019. At least, Pete Grayson thought it was 2019, based on the latest phone models on sale at the Sprint store.

He wandered through the hollow building for several minutes. He passed only a handful of other people, and none of them were who he was looking for. He stopped at a bone-dry fountain and sighed. It was time to enlist some help.

He got annoyed just *looking* at the lavender-haired, multi-pierced teen texting at the perfume kiosk, so he headed to the next nearest place of business, a glasses store.

The woman behind the front desk was typing something on her computer. She glanced up without smiling. “Welcome to ClearSee.”

“Good afternoon. Has a huge man covered in blood come by here?”

She stared at him pointedly.

“He’s six foot three, thirty-one, dark hair, blue eyes, covered head to foot in blood.”

She continued to stare.

“Well, then,” he said, “I’ll—”

“Was he wearing a watch?”

“What?”

“Was he wearing a watch?” she repeated.

Grayson coughed. “Um... no.”

“Well, if you’re not sure, I’m not sure how I would recognize him. *So* many people come through here.” She waved her hand at the empty store.

Grayson stared at her until finally catching a slow, wry smile making its shadowy appearance at the edge of her face.

“Oh,” he said. “No watch.”

“Afraid not,” she said. “Hope you can find him.”

“Thanks,” Grayson said. He glanced at his reflection in the long mirror that covered the wall as he walked out. He looked tired.

He ran his thumb over his wedding ring and sighed.

The lavender-haired teen was standing expectantly outside the clinic. Grayson balked. “Hey,” she said. “You’re with the bloody guy?”

“You saw him?”

“Yeah, I snapped him for my friends like fifteen minutes ago,” she said, holding out her phone. It displayed a picture of Rand, blood streaked through his hair, spattered on his face, and soaking his formerly-white sweatshirt. It was overlaid with the caption, “this guy at the mall might be an ax murderer lol.”

“What did you do when you saw him?” Grayson wondered if he’d have to have another awkward conversation with the police.

“Told you. Snapped him for my friends. So what’s his deal?”

Grayson looked beyond the teen farther into the mall. “It doesn’t wash off. Which way did he go?”

“Toward the escalators,” she said, jerking her finger in their general direction. “Are you, like, a detective?”

“No.”

“Good. I hate cops.”

Grayson huffed. “Can’t imagine why. Thanks for the help.” He avoided making any more eye contact as he strode away. Then, not unlike Lot’s wife, he glanced back and saw her taking a photo of him. He gave his wedding ring a fruitless tug and wondered what she captioned it.

Grayson was a good person. He didn’t deserve this nonsense.

He found Rand in the fudge shop on the upper floor, as the distressed clerk tremblingly handed him a sample of peanut butter swirl.

“Get out of there, Rand,” Grayson said.

Rand popped the tidbit of fudge into his mouth. “I wanted chocolate.”

Grayson rolled his eyes. “Of course you did.”

“I’ll take a quarter-pound of this flavor, please,” Rand told the clerk.

The clerk shoved an entire brick of it into a paper bag and shoved it over. “No charge.”

“No, really, I want to pay.”

“I-it’s fine,” the clerk stammered. “Really.”

Grayson grabbed Rand by the arm and pulled him out the store. “You’re going to get the police called on you, you know that?”

“It’s fine. I told him it was paint. And it would have been rude to take a sample and then not buy anything.” Rand yanked his arm away. “I think most people can’t even see the blood this time.”

“Well, some people can.” Grayson *knew* that Rand’s soaked sleeve wouldn’t leave any blood on his hand, but he still instinctively checked. Clean. “I thought I was going to find you standing over another dead body.”

“Hey. That hasn’t happened in a long time. I’m getting past that.” Rand took the fudge out of its bag and bit off a corner. “So what happened to you in 2019?”

Grayson sighed and looked at his ring. “I think this was the year I met my wife. What about you?”

“I graduated high school, got a job at Panda Express, learned to play the guitar. And I threatened my stepfather with a gun, so.”

“The Panda Express in this food court?” Grayson said.

“No. The one near the community college. But I did work here for exactly one shift,” Rand said. “They were short-staffed and other stores were sending them people.”

“Maybe today’s that day,” Grayson said. “Karen and I used to come to this mall when we were dating. We might have eaten there before.”

“Okay. Let’s go see.”

Grayson winced. “Why don’t you wait in the bathroom?”

Rand snorted. “I told you, people aren’t freaking out about the blood this time. I’m coming with. Besides, I feel like orange chicken.”

“Does your stomach dictate *everything* you do?”

“Hey, I was an active teenage boy in 2019. We teenage boys like to eat.”

“Fine,” Grayson said. “Well, let’s go down and see what there is to see. Don’t make a scene and focus on the task at hand.” Whatever that task was. Sometimes, what he and Rand had to change before vanishing into the next stop was obvious. It usually wasn’t.

The food court was on the other end of the mall. They walked in silence for a minute or two, past shiny shops each containing one employee and zero customers.

Grayson hoped that this would be a short stop. He wasn’t sure if he or Rand were anywhere near completing their goals, but transitioning to a new stop at least gave the illusion of progress.

“I’m glad I get to travel with you,” Rand said. “Even if finding each other after each transition is a pain.”

“I just hope we get out of here someday.”

Rand sighed. “Murders are supposed to be the hardest to undo, aren’t they?”

“Apparently.”

“Then you’ll probably get out of here before I will. You didn’t get all-the-way murdered.”

“It was pretty close.” Grayson gave his ring another tug and considered cutting his finger off. Maybe that would be what would finally free him and send him back to the present.

When even was the present?

“I’m really jealous of you, you know,” Rand said, his voice too serious.

Grayson jerked up and saw Rand staring at him messing with the ring.

“That’s all you have to carry with you. A ring. Easy. You don’t have to jump through every important and not-so-important event of your life like *this*.”

Grayson looked down. “Well. That might be because I didn’t do anything.”

“You mean this is my own fault.”

“I don’t know,” Grayson said. “I don’t know what any of this means.”

“I’m trying to make things right. That’s why I’m here.”

“I know.” Grayson felt a twinge of discomfort in his stomach. He had been grateful to find a fellow traveler, and they were apparently supposed to be together, since they kept leaving and entering different stops together. But there was something off-putting about—

—About a man covered in human blood? What did Grayson *expect*?

“Ta-da!” Rand waved his blood-stained hand dramatically at the scene before them.

“That’s you, that’s Karen, and that’s me. We’re solving this one in record time.”

The food court was a little more populated than the rest of the mall, with most of the restaurants having at least a couple customers. And there was a younger Pete Grayson, sitting across from his then-girlfriend, who was staring into a compact mirror touching up her makeup. Behind the counter was a teenage Zack Rand, taking another customer’s order.

“Perfect,” Grayson said. “So let’s figure out what we’re supposed to do.”

“You know, we’ve really come a long way,” Rand commented. “A hundred stops ago, you would’ve yelled, ‘Leave her, in fifteen years she’s gonna poison you for the insurance money!’ in front of everyone while I stabbed my 18-year-old self to death with a pair of chopsticks, and then we’d have to spend a month undoing the mess before we could move on and try again.”

“We haven’t been together for hundred stops,” Grayson said. “Please don’t tell me it’s been hundred stops.”

“Probably close. It’s impossible to count them, but time flies when you’re flying through time.”

“Oh geez.” Grayson felt a headache coming on.

“I’m going to go get my orange chicken.”

Grayson scoffed. “You’re going to order orange chicken from yourself?”

“Why not? You keep acting like paradoxes might happen. They won’t. We would’ve caused one by now.”

Grayson jammed his left hand in his pocket to avoid touching his ring again. “Right. You’re right.”

“Ciao.”

Grayson’s eyes flitted back and forth, as he watched Rand buy food from Rand on one side, and himself date Karen on the other.

Earlier on, there had been a lot to think about whenever his stops let him see his relationship with Karen before everything went wrong. *What was I thinking? What was she thinking? Was there ever any hope for us?* But now, such big questions didn’t even occur to Grayson, he had been through so much. Changing things was so much more complicated than he ever imagined—he couldn’t just go back and undo one decision. The world had to force him to change thing after thing, sometimes seemingly unrelated things, with no end in sight, as if to punish him for some crime he had never committed. After all that, the big questions didn’t matter. All he was trying to remember was what the two of them, both adults in their 30s with jobs, were doing at the mall in the middle of the afternoon, on a weekday, in 2019.

“Got my chicken,” Rand said, holding up his tray. “Let’s sit.”

“That was fast,” Grayson commented, choosing a table far away from his younger self.

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause the staff here is so awesome.” Rand plopped down across from Grayson. “So, I asked myself what the date is. It’s October 22. I don’t threaten my stepdad until late November, so... I don’t know how that factors in.”

“How many people have you threatened to kill?”

“Enough,” Rand said. “Whatever we’re supposed to do, it’ll probably be easiest if we do it now, while our past selves are still in the same location.”

“True. So how did your experience working at Panda Express play into your murderous feelings toward your stepfather?”

Rand laughed. “Shit, this is like a therapy session in Hell, isn’t it? I dunno, it was a long time ago. I was an angry kid. And then an angry adult.”

“And Panda Express probably didn’t have anything to do with that.”

Rand twirled his chopsticks thoughtfully. “The job was good for me. But the personnel...”

“Yes?”

“I think I know why I’m here. There was this guy I smoked with, a coworker, and I always complained about my stepdad and we talked about how I should kill him.”

Grayson grimaced. “Really?”

Rand shrugged. “Teenagers talk about stuff like that. But it... probably didn’t help.”

“So what’s your plan?”

Rand jabbed his chicken with a chopstick. “I don’t know. Maybe I have to get myself away from that coworker, but I don’t know how. It has to have something to do with all three of us, right? Because we’re here. In the same time, same place. What do you think you’re here for?”

Grayson squinted at 2019-Karen and tried to remember thinking she was pretty. “I suppose I could ruin our date. How do you feel about mugging us for me?”

“I feel like violence keeps consistently not being the answer every time I try it. What were you saying earlier about *not* wanting to find me standing over a dead body?”

Grayson studied the blood smeared across Rand’s face, to remind himself it was there. Sometimes he nearly forgot to notice it. “What did your past self say when he saw you?”

“He didn’t recognize me. He just said, ‘How on Earth did you get like *that*?’ and I shrugged and ordered my food.”

Grayson started idly shredding the paper napkin in front of him into even strips. “I guess you get used to deflecting questions about that.”

“Do you know what I can’t get used to?” Rand asked.

Grayson raised an eyebrow.

“The wetness. Especially on my clothes.” Rand pointed to the other occupied table. “Hey, look, you guys are matching.”

Grayson stared at himself for a minute before catching on to what Rand meant—his younger self was shredding a napkin, too.

Grayson sighed stiffly and rolled his napkin shreds into a ball, then got up and threw it in the nearby trashcan. “They’re probably going to leave soon. They’re mostly done with their food. What can we even do?”

“Have you listened in to what they’re talking about?” Rand asked.

Grayson sat back down and shrugged. “Even when Karen bothers to look up from her damn phone, we’re not talking much.”

“You two were hardly madly in love, were you?”

Grayson looked down. “We’re eating Panda Express inside a dead mall. Nobody’s on all the time.”

“I wasn’t just talking about now.”

“Yes, I was in love with my wife, for some misguided, unfathomable reason. And then she tried to murder me and I ended up in this place,” Grayson said. He glared at Karen, who was looking at her phone. Then he glanced back at Rand. “Stop looking at me so closely. The blood makes it disturbing,”

Rand dropped his gaze down to their hands on the table and didn’t say anything.

Grayson looked at Rand and then avoided looking at Rand and then looked at himself and Karen and then avoided looking at himself and Karen. He got up to ask young Rand for a cup of water.

Nobody was behind the counter. Teenagers.

Grayson leaned across the counter to spy young Rand hiding behind a corner with his phone. “Hey, Rand,” he said curtly, “can I get a water cup?”

Young Rand looked up in alarm and hurried over, staring incredulously at Grayson. Grayson had to smirk at how much he had succeeded in freaking the kid out. The younger Rand had the same blue eyes and same huge stature, but had an air of innocence lent by youth or by not being covered in blood. “Here you go, sir,” he said, handing over the cup. “I’m sorry, do I know you from somewhere?”

“No. Thank you.”

He continued to stare. “But you know my last name.”

“You and I have a mutual friend, is all.”

“Who’s the guy covered in blood?” young Rand asked.

“You don’t need to worry about him yet.” Grayson turned away, cup in hand, but before he could get far, young Rand’s voice pulled him back.

“He... he looks a lot like my dad,” young Rand said, hesitantly.

Grayson wondered how much he should say, or if he had already blown it by even addressing young Rand by name. Rand was right, they didn’t need to worry about paradoxes, but Grayson had already tried the heavy-handed approach to interactions during his first few stops, way back when. It never worked.

Grayson glanced back at Rand and swallowed. “I suppose he does.”

“Why are you with him?” young Rand asked.

“Well, because... we were both travelling in the same direction.”

Young Rand looked hard at Grayson. “Who are you people?”

“My name is Pete Grayson,” Grayson said, since that was useless information, anyway. “I’m travelling through here. You’ll find out about my friend later.” Grayson glanced back to check on Rand and himself and Karen.

All three of them were gone.

“Oh, no,” Grayson said. “Kid, did you see where that couple went? They were the only other ones here.”

Young Rand shook his head. “Uh, I wasn’t paying attention to them...”

“What about the guy who looked like your dad?”

“N-no, but I saw him a second ago, so he must have just left. Do you know that couple, too?”

“Well—yes. I need to run. Here.” Grayson grabbed a random bill from his pocket—it was a ten—and shoved it at young Rand. “That’s a tip. See you later.”

Young Rand gaped at him, but Grayson speed-walked away.

He looked around the food court in dismay for a couple minutes before regaining the presence of mind to recall that it was *him* he was looking for, so he should be able to guess where he went. He had no recollection of this date—none—but where *would* he and Karen go, back when they were in their early 30s, if they were in a mall at 2pm on a Tuesday? Out to the parking lot? Or shopping?

Karen always liked shoes. Maybe they went to browse the shoes. Grayson ran in the direction of the nearest shoe store he could remember. He hoped that Rand was tracking them, too.

The shoe store was dead. He wanted to ask an employee if anyone had seen a 30-something couple being stalked by a man covered in blood, but the staff were all nowhere to be seen, so he hurried away.

Was he on a wild goose chase? Maybe they had already left the mall, and the longer he stayed here, the longer they had to go who knows where. But if they *were* still here, and he left without doing whatever he needed to do—

And then Grayson was leaning against a trash can by a gelato place, gasping for breath. He was too old to run across an entire mall.

Suddenly—“Hey, Mr. Grayson, sir!”

Grayson looked up to see a kid in a Panda Express uniform running towards him.

“Rand?”

Young Rand caught up to him and took a breath. “I texted my buddy who works in the Auntie Annie’s upstairs. He said he saw the blood-covered guy walk into the Barnes and Noble. We can probably catch up to him.”

It took Grayson a second to register the teenager's words, then he grinned. "Thanks. Let's go."

As they hurried toward the bookstore, young Rand said, "Are you stalking those people?"

"What? No. Why are you helping us if you think—?" Grayson gave up before finishing the sentence and breathed heavily instead.

"Because you knew my last name. And that other guy is obviously connected to me or my dad somehow."

Grayson took another gasp of air and said, "Well, you're not wrong about that."

They arrived at Barnes and Noble and were finally able to pause. "Wanna split up?" young Rand asked.

"Sure. Shouldn't take long, if they're still in here."

Young Rand nodded, and Grayson thought how odd it was to be working with his companion's younger self, a future murderer. But Grayson pushed the oddness aside and made his way to the gift section while young Rand headed toward Nonfiction.

Unlike the other stores, there were actually shoppers in Barnes and Noble, so Grayson slowed his pace to avoid drawing too much attention. He finished searching among the journals and coffee mugs and headed toward the children's section when he heard Rand's voice from a few aisles away: "Hey, you, wait up!"

Grayson hurried toward the voice and found them—both Rands, together.

"I was afraid I lost you," Grayson said. "Where'd you go?"

"Karen and—uh, her date were leaving," Rand said. "And you were talking to him."

Rand pointed his thumb to his younger self.

"Are we still here?" Grayson asked.

“Yeah, they’re in the store Starbucks. I didn’t want to hang too close.”

Young Rand looked at them both with confusion. Grayson turned back to him. “Hey, thanks, kid. You’re a lifesaver. Do you need to get back to your job?”

“I guess eventually. Um, so if you’re not stalkers, are you guys...”

Grayson wondered what would happen if he got the right answer.

“...guardian angels?”

Grayson laughed. “You see me and a guy covered in blood and you assume we’re angels?”

“Well, you’re looking out for me and for that couple. And there’s something supernatural about you, I know there is.”

“That’s a good guess, kid,” Grayson said, content to leave it at that.

“It’s also a correct guess,” Rand said. “But I’m not your guardian angel, or theirs, I’m *his*.” He shoved Grayson’s shoulder.

Grayson snorted. “Sure you are. I’ve spent all day chasing you around the mall—twice now.”

Rand smirked. “And yet, without me, you’d still be stuck a hundred stops back, not knowing up from down.”

“Stops?” young Rand interjected. “Hey, are you gonna explain this to me or not?”

“Sorry, bud, probably not,” Rand said. “But you’ll get there eventually. So you helped my friend out?”

“Yeah. He was looking for you, so... I dunno, maybe Panda Express will fire me for leaving my shift, but this felt more important.”

At the word *fire*, Grayson suddenly felt a wave of disassociation sweep over him—already? He nudged Rand. “Hey. I feel like I’m done.”

Rand furrowed his brow. “But we haven’t even done anything to your life yet.”

“Yeah, I don’t know.” Usually he could only move onto a new stop after doing something to change his past. “You don’t feel it, too?”

“No. Maybe... maybe we swapped. You did whatever-it-was for me—” Rand gestured to his younger self, “—and now I’ve got to go to that Starbucks and do something for you.”

The world around Grayson began to get a little fuzzy. “Okay. I’m definitely moving on soon. When you catch up to our next stop, could you make it a little easier for me to find you? Don’t get fudge. Just find me.”

Rand shrugged. “This is my *life* now. I’ve probably been going through this stuff for... well, we can’t keep track of it, but cumulatively, it’s been years. Longer than you. If this is my entire *life* now, I’m gonna stop to smell the roses. And smelling roses means eating fudge.”

Grayson scoffed. “You’re like a kid.”

“And you’re like a grumpy old man.” Rand grinned, but his smile seemed a million miles away. Grayson was about to fall out of the world; he could feel it.

“Uh, wait a minute, what exactly—?” young Rand said.

“Sorry,” Rand cut him off, “but I need to talk to my friend alone for a minute before he goes.”

“I’m not sure you have the time,” Grayson said, but he couldn’t really hear his own voice. Everything was foggy, and he felt that prickle of anxiety of not knowing where he’d be dropped next. Oh—Rand was dragging him away.

Rand shook him, and Grayson managed to focus in on his face. “Why can’t you take off your ring?”

Grayson blinked in slow motion. “What?”

“We’ve been through a million stops, man. We need to make progress. I know why I can’t get this stuff off me. Why can’t you get that off you?”

“You... you can’t get it off you because... Are you saying this is my fault?”

“No. I’m not saying that. I’m saying that we’ve been through stop after stop, and maybe you need to think about whatever you did—or whatever you are— that brought you here.”

Rand’s voice came in and out like through a fuzzy radio, as more and more of the world around Grayson faded to black.

“A murderer is lecturing me right now,” Grayson cut in. “You remember you’re a murderer, right?”

Rand shook his head. “I just want us to get through this, man. And if I’m gonna help you, I need to know.”

The world fell apart. Grayson dug at his ring with his nails until his hands were bloody.

Rosey Mucklestone

Buckets Unkicked

Greenhaven looked like the perfect place for someone in the business of death. It was a dusty town filled with frail old ladies sitting on their porches in blustery weather and children playing tag in crumbling old buildings. Dry prairie stretched out endlessly in all directions. There wasn't a doctor within at least a hundred miles. And there certainly was no funeral home.

Jake Villin was confident he'd found the perfect place to set up shop.

After two months, he wasn't so sure.

Jake tried to make good use of the time. He put a sign out front: "Peaceful Valley Funeral Home," putting the words in a font he thought was pleasant and comforting. He mowed the lawn every couple of days. He made sure everything was in order so that the minute he got a customer, things would run like a well-oiled machine.

But no one came.

No one so much as walked up and said hello.

The first couple of weeks, Jake didn't mind. After a month had passed, he was starting to wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to change his sign. At a month and a half, he noticed that people were crossing the street to avoid him.

He had been so ready to make Greenhaven his home, but he was burning through his savings at an alarming rate without getting any business. He couldn't find anything within city limits by way of a cemetery. And every week, his newspaper arrived missing a page so he couldn't find the obituaries.

What were they doing with their dead, anyway? Burying them in their own backyards?

Jake Villin was sitting at his desk, seriously considering losing his mind, when Gus Schultz walked in.

Gus wasn't the type of person a lot of people would be happy to see. He was short, squat, and his forehead was deeply furrowed from a long lifetime of scowling at everyone. Before Jake had showed up, he'd been the proud titleholder of "most avoided person in Greenhaven."

Any funeral for Gus Schultz was unlikely to be much of an affair.

But in Jake's eyes just then, Gus was an angel.

Jake scrambled to get out from behind his desk, knocking his knees on the underside and overturning a cup full of pens as he did so. "Hello sir welcome to Pleasant Valley Funeral Home how can I help you?"

The words had been waiting to come out for so long that now they tumbled all over each other as Jake spoke them. He winced, straightening out his long limbs and running a hand over his hair to smooth it down. He gave Gus a shaky smile, his eyes open a little wider than he intended.

Gus stopped just inside the door, wrinkling his nose. His gaze flicked around the interior and seemed to settle anywhere but Jake's face. He scrutinized a plaque on the wall that read "Death is only a new beginning" for an especially long minute.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, pursing his lips.

Finally, he looked at Jake.

“So, what exactly is it you do?”

Jake took a breath before starting in, making sure his words came out slowly this time. “Well, I’m a funeral director, sir. I help people organize funerals for their loved ones--or plan ahead for their own.” Gus, with his wispy white hair and unsteady gait, was probably in the second category. Jake had seen corpses with younger faces back when he had worked for his father.

He mentally ran through his coffin stock. Gus would fit nicely in the wide mahogany with the brass handles.

Gus gave a slow nod, narrowing his eyes slightly and looking almost like he could see what Jake was thinking.

Jake quickly continued his pitch. “I’m just there to... um... try to make the rough transition easier, as much as I can. Give people a sense of security and help them embrace the unknown.”

He had spent hours polishing that last sentence, but under Gus’s sunken gaze, it came out like a lame excuse for late homework.

“Hm.” Gus glanced past Jake down the hall, working his jaw thoughtfully. “How’s it go?”

Jake’s brow furrowed. “It... depends how the families or individuals want it to go, really. There are a lot of different ways, based on the...”

“Nah, like in general,” Gus interrupted. “Just the stuff that’s always the same in all the funerals.” His voice had lost some of its dullness and he leaned forward slightly as he spoke, his eyebrows raised.

“Would you like a tour, sir?” he asked. “I... haven’t had much business yet, so it’s pretty empty back there. I can show you how it goes.”

“Sure.”

So he walked Gus into the back to show him around. Seeing it while he had someone along with him served to make the whole place look a lot less impressive in Jake’s eyes. Everything seemed much shabbier, now that he imagined seeing it for the first time.

But Gus was enthralled. The mortuary room he found especially interesting, despite its lack of bodies. The last stop was the showroom with the coffins--at least, what few nice ones Jake had managed to get in on a tight budget.

Gus walked around, taking time to eye each one individually. He poked at the cushioning inside. “Looks pretty soft in there.”

“It does,” Jake agreed. “Sort of adds to the whole... resting-in-peace effect, I think.” He stood a few feet away, his hands clasped behind his back. A respectful distance was always key, so the customers felt more comfortable as they made their important decisions. Gus nudged the padding in a few other coffins with his thick fingers. Turning back to Jake, he raised his eyebrows. “And these are for sale, you said?”

“Well, I... would hang on to it until the ceremony of course, but yes sir, they are for sale.” Jake pulled up a wan smile and nodded.

Gus grunted thoughtfully and eyed the coffin again with a frown. “The ceremony, huh?” He paused. “So, after you... die?” The last word came out in an odd, slow way.

“Yes, that is usually when funerals take place, sir.”

Gus rubbed a hand on his chin, the furrows on his brow deepening. “Hm.”

He was still interested, which was good. But they still weren't even getting past the basic concept of death and on to the funeral planning yet. In his father's shop, they would have had half the ceremony planned out by now.

Jake was stuck halfway between curiosity at Gus's behavior and maddening frustration at still being unable to get a read on him.

"Is there anything else you'd like to know, sir?" Jake asked. His tone was polite, but the strain underneath his words was obvious.

Gus was silent for a second, still watching the coffin, then he spoke. "Yeah. Is it good?" His gravelly voice sounded strangely confused. He turned to face Jake. "The whole dying thing? That sign out there said it was only a new beginning. But a new beginning where? How's it 'part of life,' like you said?"

Jake blinked.

He was used to discussing prices and dates and tie colors with adults. These were questions he'd hear from the few kids who tagged along sometimes. These were questions he himself would roll around in his mind, staring up at the dark ceiling at night. Gus was a very old man. He should have come to terms with this on his own long ago, shouldn't he?

Or was he just one of those older people who liked to randomly start meaningful conversations? That wasn't completely out of the question.

Jake took a breath and let it out. "No one is... exactly sure where we go after we die, sir. But death is part of nature. You live more purposefully, knowing that one day you'll be gone. And in the end, dying and having your loved ones commemorate your life and carry your

legacy forward... that's important. It helps you affect future generations and leave more of an impression. So... yes, sir. I do think it's good, all things considered."

"Hm."

Gus's expression hadn't changed much, but he'd watched Jake closely as he spoke. His frown at least looked like one of deep thought rather than confusion now. Jake counted that something of a success.

"Do you have family, sir?" Jake asked.

Gus blinked, his expression surprised at first. Then he shook his head. "No. Not exactly." He narrowed his eyes over at the coffin. "Not here. I live by myself."

"Oh."

"You're sort of an expert on dying, are you?" Gus turned his scrutinizing look back to Jake's face.

"Well I've never done it myself. But I've been around plenty of dead bodies in my time. It's my livelihood."

"Right. Then how do these people--these bodies you're with--how do they usually die? How does it happen?"

Silence hung thick in the windowless room for a few heavy seconds.

"Um, they... it all depends, really, sir," Jake stammered. "Sickness, old age, accidents and injuries... I mean, surely you've encountered death before yourself, sometime in all your years of living?" It was not a sentence Jake felt should have ended with a question mark. At this point, he wasn't at all sure which one of them was more confused.

"It sounds interesting, but no, I haven't." Gus pushed his tongue into his lower lip, narrowing his eyes. "And this dying is usual, you said?"

“Sir, everyone dies eventually.” Jake was starting to feel just a little lightheaded. He wheezed out nervous, slightly panicked laugh. “It’s... part of being human.” Gus stared at him for a few seconds, tilting his head before he spoke again. “Son, I don’t think you’ll be getting a lot of business in Greenhaven. We don’t do that here.”

“Don’t... die?”

“Yeah.”

The single, nonchalant syllable rang in Jake’s ears.

“Oh, God,” Jake muttered weakly. He needed to sit down. Thankfully, so did a lot of people picking out coffins. Jake sat down on one of the chairs he’d so thoughtfully placed against the wall, burying his face in his hands.

It couldn’t be. But it made so much sense with everything else he’d run into in Greenhaven. This had to be some weird dream. The last two months in their entirety. He’d wake up back at his father’s house any moment now.

“Y’know, you don’t actually have to only make money off people dying,” Gus broke into the panicked whirl of Jake’s thoughts, his scratchy voice having an oddly grounding effect.

Jake halfheartedly pulled his hands back from his face to glance up at Gus. “Oh?”

Gus still kept his position close to the coffin. He poked at the padding. “You got any more of these around? ‘cuz I’d love to get one for a new bed.” He paused, eying Jake’s pale face. His craggy features softened a little. “You could advertise nice beds and I bet people’d come.”

“They’re coffins.”

“Ain’t nobody heard of coffins around here. And it’s a waste of a nice, soft box to keep ‘em all locked up in here, if you ask me. Take the lid off, and it’d be a perfect bed. How much

do they cost?" Gus bent over, looked at the price tag for a few seconds. "Yeah, I could do that." He shot Jake a questioning glance.

A coffin salesman.

Jake Villin: Coffin salesman, in a town full of immortals.

Because that's what people who didn't die were. Immortals.

Immortals didn't need a funeral director.

Jake cursed under his breath, dropping his head back into his hands.

Gus leaned over a little closer. "What was that?"

"How?" Jake muttered, "Why do none of you die? How did it happen?"

"That's just how it goes around here, I guess. Nobody's ever known different. You gonna sell me that coffin or what?"

Jake shrugged.

Gus pulled out his wallet and there was the crisp crinkle of bills. He set them on the chair cushion next to Jake, giving them a gentle pat.

This was still a nightmare. Even if he did have money for groceries now.

"I think," Gus remarked, "You'll find folks a lot friendlier to you as long as they know what you're selling." A smile widened on his round face. "And you can still say you're helping them rest in peace, right?"

"Thank you," said Jake. "I appreciate it, but I don't think I'm staying."