# Lucky Stars



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To those who reach for the stars

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# Part 1

# (4/25/2020; 6:30 a.m. EST)

#

A

 haunting breeze blew across the rippled water of a small, pea-shaped lake as each wave shifted to accommodate the slight, airy impact. A modest log cabin sat on its banks, surrounded by a tall canopy of trees, purposefully hiding from the rest of the world. The electricity in the air was palpable, like heat lightning without the ominous flashes. The cool April morning was tranquil, as most early hours were in that part of Kentucky, putting forth few signs of life other than a faint light from one of the cabin’s windows. Moonlight still danced and sparkled, like stars on the lake’s elliptical surface, adding just enough radiance to create the ideal scene, which many rustic paintings reflect.

Stretching out from the quaint setting, a long, winding road bordered the property, allowing the outside world to pass it by. The two-lane highway rolled through the countryside, from the cabin to who knows where, bisecting the wildlife therein. A patient box turtle inched across the asphalt from the lake to the other side of the road. Its body preceded its shadow by inches, as it knew twilight was the best time to make such a move.

Strangely enough, as the reptile crossed the street, its markings became more apparent. The road seemed to be getting brighter, as well, but subtly. The wise, old creature slowly pulled its head back and then upward to gaze at the heavens above. The firmament was as it should’ve been, except for a tiny blip in the western sky. The faint dot appeared to be moving as the turtle lowered its head and continued its journey.

The wind picked up a notch, which caused the lake to sparkle even more. A distant howl from a coyote broke the tranquility as the tall pine trees began to sway. The light from the cabin’s window was warm and constant, projecting life from within the structure's walls. Curiously, the speck on the horizon became brighter as it now resembled a small fireball hurling toward the picturesque countryside. Crickets, locusts, and other simple creatures that gnawed on the tall, wild brush glowed with a cosmic warmth while the phenomenon in the sky became more imminent. In the middle of the street, the patient turtle looked up at the glistening atmosphere for the last time. Its life’s journey of foraging and dodging the occasional car was coming to an untimely end.

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An eerie silence blanketed the chaotic scene as if the discord were momentarily placed on mute to achieve sense and order. Groggily, the setting’s urgency seeped into reality from the background, like a boxer shaking off a blow to the head. It was hell on Earth. Entire pine trees were engulfed from the burning ground to the morning sky. Unmarked, shiny, black town cars, military vehicles, and firetrucks of various shapes and sizes poured down the long highway to a blackened hole where the isolated cabin once stood. The tires of the last car crushed a hollowed-out, charred box turtle shell lying in the middle of the road. The whereabouts of its occupant were unknown.

Giant streams of water blasted from the firetrucks all morning to keep the flaming massacre from spreading. Stern, but terrified men and women, dressed in various degrees of military, professional, and plain clothes, littered the horrific scene, concentrating on the impact site at the edge of the lake, where the cabin once existed. Some were wearing surgical face masks; some were not. The twisted metal wreckage from the dying flames rose from the hot crater. It had faint Japanese writing on it, prompting the military's presence. The first responders were talking on their phones and two-way radios, yelling at each other while making hand gestures.

“Jonathan Simmons,” one cried out to another, holding a radio to his ear. Then others started mouthing “Jonathan Simmons” in slow-motion while pulling their masks down under their chins. They motioned to each other, confirming with a raised thumb and a head nod. They listened to the wire in their ears for further instructions. Finally, a woman in sunglasses held up a melted ID to show the others, while some lowered their heads in the stark realization of life’s uncertain tragedies. The remnants of the ID were attached to frayed ends of what used to be a lanyard.

“The victim and lone resident of the cabin has been identified as ‘Jonathan Simmons,’ a male in his forties,” a tall man wearing a suit and slick-backed hair confirmed to his radio. Another chain reaction of communication suddenly waved through the pockets of personnel as they began to mouth the word “satellite” to each other while talking into their radios.

Eventually, as the fire slowly became contained in the later hours of the morning, different people came and went from the once-peaceful scene. Finally, the charred wreckage of a defunct satellite was pulled from the smoking pit and hulled away on a military truck. The crowd slowly dwindled to just essential personnel as morning became the afternoon and then early evening. The carbonized trees that lined the fiery lagoon were reduced to smoldering sticks of ash that rose from the glowing embers. The whole area became a simmering campsite, prematurely snuffed before the party was over; but little could be done at that point, except to figure out what went wrong.

That night, when the sun went down, fog rolled in from the lake to mix with the smoke from the scorched Earth to form a super cloud. It twisted as it ascended into the heavens. A stillness befell the ravaged scene, with only a few souls rustling here and there. A symphony of sad crickets lamented over the day’s horrific events while tranquility covered the once-happy valley. In the center of the blistered crater, a light, brighter than any cinder, poked through the glowing darkness of the hole’s bottom. Its radiance pulsated as if it were breathing, getting bigger and bigger until it broke its subterranean depths. The sparkling outline of a necklace in the shape of a horseshoe eclipsed the brilliance of the impact site before everything completely dimmed and returned to as it was moments before.

It was the end of one story and the beginning of another.

# Part 2

# (1982)

#

A

 vibrant mix of maple, oak, and pine trees dotted the rolling hillsides of Northern Kentucky, adding much color to the palette of the American Midwest. The country met suburbia and then emptied into the Ohio River at the foot of the Queen City, Cincinnati. The dense foliage turned sparse as it entered the city limits, leaving less shelter from the harsh elements above.

Under one such oak tree in the suburbs, a young boy sat in the dirt on a small hill under an umbrella of fresh leaves, which shielded his tender body from the early autumn sun. He entertained himself with only his imagination and a few miniature plastic spaceships. Twirling the toys around in the balmy air while making ship-exhaust sounds with his delicate, curled lips, he occasionally interjected a threatening taunt from one vessel to the other. Decisively, he held his arm to the sky to deliver the final blow to the loser of the imaginary battle. As he made sharp blaster tones through his teeth, one mighty spaceship bested the other, causing the defeated craft to smash into the terrain from the atmosphere above. He did so in slow motion for dramatic effect.

Down a slight hill from where the boy played, a house fitted with cedar siding sat on a quiet cul-de-sac, away from the street, in a cove of dense foliage. The bright, late-afternoon sun beat down on the imaginative child, but the shelter of trees filtered the light so that a kaleidoscope of glowing shapes danced around him.

Suddenly, a loud crash emanated from the house, grabbing the boy’s attention from his toys. A muffled commotion rumbled through an open window, culminating in a shrill, panicked voice yelling, “fuck you.” Moments later, the loud thud of a metal front door slamming shut befell the tranquil neighborhood as the figure of an adolescent girl stormed from the house...up the driveway, and then the street. A car pulled from the garage of the stunned home and followed behind the troubled teen. The worn faces of a middle-aged couple revealed that they had been through this before but never grew accustomed to it. From the basin of the cul-de-sac to the hill behind the house, neighbors could hear distant screaming, gradually fading into silence: “fuck you” and “I want to die.”

The little boy watched in earnest from the hill behind the house. He picked up his bookbag, lowered his head, and slowly walked to the residence. He wasn’t sure of what he was going to find this time. Unbeknownst to him, a paper fell from his backpack onto the dusty ground as his lonely shape stepped onto the deck affixed to the back of the dwelling. While tugging on the glass sliding door that led inside to the kitchen, he noticed his reflection in the glass and paused to take exception to his drooping head and shoulders. Family incidents involving his older sister were becoming increasingly common, so he tried to make the best of it.

With his hefty backpack draped over one shoulder, he continued to pull at the door, but somebody locked it. A wave of panic came over him. He walked to the front to see if the main entrance was sealed, although he already knew the answer. After a few minutes, he returned with his head lowered in sheer disappointment. Perhaps he couldn’t get a solid footing because of his backpack, but the boy stumbled a bit while walking up the hill. He nearly fell to the ground as his shoe became lodged in the thick swampy mud that bordered the side of the house at the base of the ascent. Eventually, his unsteady movement of pulling at his leg to get it free caused him to fall onto a dry portion of the ground, severing him from his shoe in the process. He sat briefly with leaves in his hair and half-barefoot before extracting his sneaker from the soupy mess. He wedged it back on his foot, pulled himself up, and restarted his journey up the slope. He scurried onto the deck as if to lick his wounds. After crawling onto the hard bench, he rested his head on the clunky backpack and sighed deeply. He felt the cool breeze on his warm tears as he closed his bitter eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Away from the deck, further up the hill, the forgotten paper from the boy’s sack flapped in the wind while storm clouds steadily formed. The sheet danced about the vegetation, twirling in the breeze before getting stuck in a tree above the two spaceships he had played with earlier.

On the paper, the boy’s name, “Johnny Simmons,” was proudly scrawled across the top, along with red writing in a different hand, carelessly scribbled over the boy’s work: “F-You must get this signed by a parent.” A series of red strikes from a pen canceled all the assignment’s questions, except for the last one: “When I grow up, I want to be\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” But the blank was mostly gone, as the corner of the page had been ripped and separated from the rest of the sheet. Eventually, the paper dislodged itself from the tree. It continued its journey into the wind, from one yard to the next, until finally, it disappeared over the horizon into the fading sunset. The question would go unanswered to anyone unlucky enough to find the transient document.

Several hours passed as the cruel sun dissolved into the gray, hazy evening, and the boy’s lifeless body still lay on the hard bench, unnoticed. Eventually, the back door slid open with a grinding push from the inside to let the young boy in. He woke from his glorious sleep, let reality sink in, and then hopped to his feet. Like a lost puppy, he scampered into the dark house with little fanfare. No one would’ve noticed if he had stayed out there all night.

In the morning, when all the school kids emerged from the maze of suburban streets to the illuminated brick schoolhouse in the center of town, the lifeless remnants of summer haunted the cool morning hours, when even the sun was tardy for the first-period bell. Fall was approaching; and with it, all the seasonal festivities, such as hayrides and school dances.

In the classroom, the children lined up in rows and wiped the sleep from their eyes, as they all knew the routine. They yawned and swayed their sleepy noggins while looking forward in their desks, awaiting the first bell. One disheveled head kept breaking the ranks by sporadically turning to look out the window. Neither the piercing bell nor the prospects of another school day could hold the young boy’s attention. He watched a car pull up and stop before a wide-eyed girl jumped out. Her father, the car’s driver, joined her by the hand and led her into the school.

“Johnny Simmons!” yelled the teacher, breaking the boy’s inattentiveness in front of his peers. She was quick to single him out. The class was used to it.

His drowsy coconut whipped around to face the front of the classroom. He focused his blue eyes, which under-scored a twirling mop of not-so-fresh hair, on the adult in the front of the room, who gave him a scornful look. After a moment, a knock at the door bore a small, olive-skinned girl and her dad. She had big brown eyes that flickered at the attention. The class turned to look at them in unison while she smiled back under a crown of tightly wound, brown curls. The kids sat curiously in their seats, not knowing what to think, as they looked around—some making eye contact with her, while others were too shy to do so. Johnny couldn’t keep his eyes off her. He watched with his mouth agape as she confidently left her dad to join the class. She paused and looked around until she found a desk at which to sit. As luck would have it, there was an open seat next to Johnny!

As the young boy walked home alone from school later that day, he kicked rocks through the streets of his neighborhood, thinking about the new girl in his class. He was smitten with her. She revealed to everyone after she sat down that her name was “Jessica,” or “Jess,” as she liked to be called. Different scenarios played out in his young, impressionable mind: one in which they walked off into the sunset together, holding hands on a deserted beach, just like in the movies; one in which they got married, had a large family, and lived in a big house with a white picket fence; one in which they lived a hard life, struggling to make ends meet, but they had each other, so everything was ok. He plotted his future with her all the way home to his cold, dark house, paying no attention to the fact that he had no friends nor family who loved him; so, the idea that he would live a life with her was nothing short of false hope.

It wasn’t uncommon for the house to be locked with no one home during after-school hours, like on that particular day. Johnny stopped going to the front door to let himself in. He just opened a window on the side of the house, the one on the ground level right above the sticky mud, and crawled inside. In times like that, he wondered if all adopted children were treated similarly, but then, he sucked it up and didn’t dwell on it too long.

Once inside the partially finished basement, his thoughts returned to those of Jessica. He flipped on the lights and started rifling through various boxes on giant steel shelves, intently looking for something. He searched high and low from frame to shelf until he found a small, wooden case tucked away behind a box of Tupperware. He blew off a layer of dust and opened the weathered pack to reveal a delicate, old corsage. The silk ribbon that adorned the dried flower had a few snags; overall, the boutonniere was well preserved, since it was one of the few belongings he had from his mother before she passed away. He rarely got it out but felt nostalgic that day, as he knew his mother would’ve liked Jessica. He held it close and basked in the scant memories of her, all the while trying not to think of anything else.

The sentiment didn’t last long, as Johnny’s warm thoughts were broken by the abrupt sound of a car pulling into the driveway. He sat alone in a dark unfinished corner of the basement, curled up on an old sectional sofa that was no longer in use, clutching a dead flower while chaos unfolded on the floor above him.

“I hate you,” a shrill teenage voice erupted before the front door slammed shut. The quick footsteps ran up the stairs from the foyer and then marched down the hallway above the neglected boy. Another slamming door in the bedroom bookended the intrusion. A second set of footsteps, two this time, emerged from the front door and quickly followed behind. A commotion erupted at the end of the hallway, which prompted Johnny to squeeze the corsage hard against his chest, nearly cracking its delicately preserved flowers, as he feared the fighting bodies would crash through the floorboards and crush him along with his mother’s flower.

“Come on out, Samantha. We love you,” one voice pleaded. It was desperate and tiring.

“Fuck you,” his unhinged sister retorted, muffled. “I’m going to kill myself.” A cacophony of clanking and banging shook the ceiling above the panicked boy, causing pieces of plaster to fall onto his stale hair. His increasing grip on the dehydrated blossom would’ve choked any life from it; but it was dead and gone, leaving only a brittle vessel of comfort. He closed his eyes and shook an anxious leg, hoping his mother’s hand would break through the glass-block window above the sofa, scoop him up, and take him to heaven with her.

The knocking, thumping, and yelling back and forth reached an apex when suddenly, a loud crack preceded an intense scream and what sounded like a scrum of flesh and bones.

“Leave me alone,” his sister screamed in a shrill voice.

“Give it to me, Samantha,” a third voice interjected.

“I’ll do it,” the troubled teen threatened. The muffled altercation escalated to a whirlwind of cries until, finally, a loud thud ended it all.

“Jack, we have to get her to a hospital,” a voice screamed.

The human discord quickly clunked back down the hallway to the stairs and out the door via the foyer. A brief lull suddenly yielded to screeching tires down the driveway and then faintly up the street. All was, then, still and quiet.

The young boy lay on the couch with his eyes closed, holding the boutonniere close to his chest. A faint light from the block window traced the outline of his tender face, sparkling against the lone tear rolling down his rosy cheek. It hesitated at the bottom of his jaw before dropping onto the shirt below. After wiping the moisture from his face, he mustered enough energy to pull himself from his guarded position and resume his day. He wanted some degree of normalcy; but, ultimately, his bravery succumbed to the comfort of unconsciousness as he laid back down on his musty resting spot and fell asleep—alone, in the dank, underground room. The corsage dropped to the ground, and a few petals broke away after his arm went limp. The lingering hope of being loved by Jessica reassured him that life was worth living. His troubled sister didn’t feel that way.

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The gray autumnal air loomed solemnly one Sunday afternoon, as nary a soul was around the streets of Johnny’s neighborhood. A cool breeze blew debris down a typically busy road, leaving miscellaneous bags, sticks, and pieces of paper to litter the yards of the lifeless houses that dotted the perimeter. Whipping leaves circled the sidewalk in front of the school where the minds of little ones were enriched, but only on the weekdays; because, on the weekends, the mischievous elements of the universe kick fate down the street like a can.

A traffic light stood before the brick schoolhouse, regulating humanity’s flow. The rhythmic changing of its colors seemed robotic and lifeless: sixty seconds of red, then sixty seconds of green, with a pause in between for yellow. It dictated the flow to an empty audience like a trooper, except for an occasional bird or candy wrapper blowing in the wind. It didn’t flinch but steadfastly changed colors—on and on, into infinity. But, as night descended on the small Kentucky town, there were no slated outcomes from the seemingly random intervention of the light. It couldn’t delay a missed opportunity, or create a new one, if no one was on the road to partake in its game of chance. Sixty seconds sooner, fate had one outcome, but sixty seconds later…something different. The alternating tones of the traffic light controlled so much of the universe.

While dusk blanketed the somber intersection, a soft gust coughed up the day’s last breath. Cardboard, wrappers, and bits of plastic swirled around in circles under the blank, regimented stare of the traffic light. One final twirling zephyr twisted through the school’s parking lot, carrying any vestiges of a child’s school day. A triangular piece of paper spun, like a wheel on its side under the stoplight, then jetted off the ground, higher and higher with the other shards of the debris before losing its propulsion and falling back down to the pavement. It was a ripped corner from a sheet of paper with the word “loved” written on it. The letters were underscored by a thick, black, pre-printed line. It lay dead on the barren asphalt, under the harsh red light from the traffic box above, beating down on it, harder and closer, for what seemed like an eternity, looking into its meaning and whether it was worthy.

As the school day began the next morning, the sleepy-eyed kids shuffled into their respective classrooms; and, eventually, their assigned seats. They came from all directions. Johnny scrambled in late, after the morning bell, but before the teacher’s daily announcements. Everyone was talking amongst themselves, paying little attention to him. He glanced at Jess, who sat awkwardly in her desk since she was new and didn’t know anyone. He had a lump in his throat, and butterflies in his stomach, knowing that—if they were to spend the rest of their lives together—he would have to eventually talk to her. Swiftly and trying to maintain grace, he pushed his belongings under his seat, promptly sat down, and faced forward. When settled, he glanced at Jess from the corner of his eye. She had no idea that he existed other than that she could smell his sour clothes as she looked in the opposite direction.

“Good Monday morning, Everyone,” the teacher announced as she walked into the classroom, holding a steaming cup of coffee. It looked like she was hiding a secret. The older woman continued, while Johnny continued his sideways glance at the unsuspecting girl next to him.

“I have some exciting news. As you may or may not have heard, our school is hosting its first-ever Fall Harvest dance. It’s open to all students at this school,” the teacher revealed with a smile.

The class released a collective gasp as each child glanced around the room at one another. The girls giggled and then blushed, looking at each other in wonder. The boys sat, staring forward, not showing much interest—except for Johnny, who sat at his desk and brushed the floppy hair from his eyes. He stole a quick peek of Jessica, who anxiously whispered to the girl behind her. They wore bright smiles while both took turns flashing glances at the boys. The teacher continued the day’s lesson. It was background chatter since the eager kids, mostly girls, still beamed at the big news. Johnny was excited, too, because he knew it would be the perfect opportunity to steal Jessica’s heart. He switched legs on which he sat and quietly watched her from the corner of his love-drunk eye.

“Mr. Simmons!” the teacher erupted, “Eyes up front and not on the new girl.” She was quick to prey on his vulnerabilities.

The class exploded into laughter at him. He sunk into his seat, wearing a bright red countenance. Jessica’s face matched his as she looked away. She was disgusted. Although he was outwardly embarrassed, he smiled to himself on the inside because she knew *of* him at that moment. It was the beginning.

“Oh, one more thing,” the teacher’s words returned into focus. “It will be held in the cafeteria next Friday. Invitations will be going home with you today. Wear your Sunday best!”

Johnny lifted his shoulders and aligned them just under his perked-up ears as the wheels in his head immediately started turning. The embarrassment faded into a flurry of calculation and self-confidence, knowing he had less than two weeks to prepare. The teacher’s voice returned to background noise while the class clamored down to begin the day’s lesson. The charmed gentleman jotted ideas on the paper before him and smiled in satisfaction. He placed both feet firmly on the floor, crossed his hands in front of him, and looked forward at the busy teacher, occasionally glancing down at his words and then over at Jessica from the corner of his eye. She sat quietly, recovering from the humiliation, with her head buried deep into her textbook, away from the mocking stares. Conversely, Johnny smiled to himself, knowing that he would win over her heart at the dance with a bit of persistence. What could go wrong?

At the end of the day, the proper little schoolgirl stood with a bookbag draped over her shoulder, looking into the vast parking lot with concern for her dad. He was late picking her up. Although she had her whole life ahead of her, she was particularly uneasy about something. She feverishly looked around: up the street, down at her watch. She paced back and forth in the late afternoon under the dying sun. There were other people around, here and there, so she was comfortable in that regard. But she was uneasy because he was so late. A girl her age shouldn’t have to worry about things like that.

As less light poked through the dry oak leaves, twilight fell over the elementary school. A dark figure watched from the second floor of the brick building, right above Jessica, while a pink sports car—a Lamborghini—sped into the parking lot. The petite girl ran to the car in relief. Anxiety over her dad’s tardiness quickly melted into excitement over the dance. She immediately chatted about it as she closed the door and sealed herself from the world. The car stopped at the intersection momentarily before being ushered through by the traffic light that guarded the school. The girl motioned with her hands as she smiled and talked to her dad while they zoomed down the road and disappeared into the setting sun. A fleeting glimpse of the license plate, “CULOOKN,” blessed any living bystander as they passed.

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Knowing that he would need to be on top of his game and look his best to get a dance with Jessica, Johnny found time after school one day to meander into a local thrift store to get new clothes to win over her heart. Although he didn’t have a dime to his name, he flipped through the different fabric textures of tweed, cotton, silk, and others. He liked the sophistication of tweed, as it made him look grown up, like a teacher, but it would be too hot. Silk would be too weird, so he settled on cotton. It was breezy, light, and stylish. Most kids would have a parent to help pick out clothes for a dance, but Johnny was different. He made things happen himself and didn’t rely on anyone else; they would only let him down. He understood that at a young age.

 Since the store was divided into two halves: the retail portion in the front and the warehouse part in the back, Johnny was mature enough to know that if he timed it right, he could walk through the back door, and out of the building, via the loading dock; all without paying. He pulled a few outfits from the rack, matched them against each other—paying no attention to whether they matched—and carried them to the dressing room, conveniently located on the wall next to a door leading to the back. It was a slow weekday afternoon with very few people in the store, so Johnny could focus on getting his stylish outfit together without worrying about how he would pay for it.

He looked himself up and down in the mirror, strutted, and waived at his image in the tiny room. He pretended to approach Jessica and shake her tiny hand, as he was too embarrassed to kiss it. Then, the big moment came. He knelt to present an imaginary ring, or perhaps his mother’s boutonniere, to the overjoyed girl. He had it all planned. Which was good because the day was drawing near, so he needed to be prepared for it. He decided the white jacket and pants went well with the pink shirt he picked, so he grabbed his clothes and placed his other hand firmly around the dressing room doorknob. He planned to quickly roll to the right and through the back door. Accordingly, he would dash to the loading dock even if anyone in the warehouse saw him. This was it! He turned the knob.

While he frantically exited the tiny dressing room, his young and clever eyes met those of a police officer who just entered the store from the front entrance. Luckily, Johnny was exiting as the deputy was arriving. He quickly ducked behind a rack of shoes with a few hats hanging from the top. Casually, he noted how suave a white, straw Panama hat would look with his all-white suit. He held his breath. There was an exchange of pleasantries before the hard footsteps of polished leather hitting hardwood awakened a fear within the boy. He thought about making a break for the back but didn’t want to make any sudden moves. He waited a moment with his face pressed against a pair of old, worn shoes until he heard the footsteps stop. That’s when he made a run for it.

Fortunately, no one was in his path to the back as he rose from a crouched position and scrambled to the door, like a wild animal; but not before grabbing the cool Panama hat and a pair of white shoes. He moved fast and undisciplined while twirling the hat down his forearm like Michael Jackson and then flopping it on his head with one hand. By the time he reached the loading dock, his feet had fallen beneath him; thus, he had careened off the pier onto the hard pavement below. Seeing stars for a moment, he picked himself up, gathered his hat, shoes, and clothes, and made a beeline for the woods behind the store. As it turned out, no one was in the warehouse to see nor stop him; the police officer didn’t pay him much attention either. It could’ve just been a case of kids being kids. Johnny caught his breath behind a few Birch trees as the sun set over the suburban landscape. His big day was getting closer, and with it, a cosmic sense of hope and optimism.

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In the woods behind Johnny’s house, a bare spot was etched into the forest floor. It was void of all life: trees, underbrush, and animals. It was an area that, despite the lush, evergreen trees that towered over it, was an odd juxtaposition to its surroundings. Like, something was supposed to grow there but didn’t.

On one particular autumn day, a solemn figure emerged from the boy’s house and slowly marched in a slumped position to the ominous clearing in the woods. It was cool out. A troubled girl slung a white cotton bag over her shoulder while she frowned on her journey to the gloomy site. She wasn’t happy, nor did she seem to be enjoying any aspect of the world around her. The saintly white sack contrasted greatly against the all-black attire draped over her dejected body as she tromped through the trees. She brushed the dyed-black tuft of hair behind her ear and sighed. She carried all of humanity’s sorrow.

Once she reached the spot, the somber girl dropped the bag beside her and scanned the area, looking for something long and pointy. Her sullen eyes locked onto a stick leaning against the base of a pine tree and a flat rock next to it. She quickly grabbed both and then dropped the slab, flat side down, in the center of the mysterious area. With a firm grip on the branch, she traced a circle in the loose dirt around the planate stone; and an inverted star within that. She then tossed the stick back into the trees. Frantically and with misplaced excitement, she gathered errant brush: weeds, twigs, leaves; and formed them into a loose ball. Next, she placed them in a tidy bundle on the rock. After briefly glancing at her surroundings, she sat beside the kindling and pulled the sack to her breastbone before dumping it.

Among the items spilled from the sack, a lighter bounced onto the ground and then magically into her trembling hand. She poked around the pile with her bony finger until she spotted an incense stick, and then another. She stuck one on either side of the rock and lit them. The girl watched feverishly as she set fire to the bundle of a loose thicket. She felt the heat on her pale face while it grew. With the remaining items strewn about her side, the tormented girl lined them next to her, taking a brief inventory of each one’s importance. Her eyes were closed. She rubbed oil on both her hands' palms, invoking quietly with her chewed-up lips. Her eyes trembled under the lids, rocking back and forth in harmony with whatever evil force she was beckoning. Smoke rose all around her, higher and higher, as her eyes rolled back into her head. Slowly and precisely, she felt the ground next to her for the items before picking them up, one by one, and placing them in the fire. Her rolled-up sleeves exposed the fresh cuts and old scars on her wrists and forearms. Perhaps, it was too late for her misguided soul to be saved. Different personal artifacts singed, melted on the pyre, and then up into the air for the offering. Her rocking and chanting intensified after placing the last relic onto the flames: a torn picture of an unknown girl. The photograph was odd in that it was ripped in half, separated from the others in the image. The heat reached its apex, with flames soaring to the heavens, as a silent force gobbled up the last of the angry girl’s requests; and then simmered down into a smoldering char, like a tidal wave receding back into the ocean, taking whatever spoils with it. The girl slowly opened her eyes and looked around as if she had an orgasm. Her will was done, and the fire was satisfied. The ritual was over, so she picked up whatever was left over and retreated to her miserable life in the cedar house at the bottom of the cul-de-sac. The love in that house would never be enough for her.

A gentle wind blew over the rolling hillside while the sun set over the spellbound woods, knocking debris loose from different corners of suburbia. A crow perched on a limb high atop a tree, overlooking the cryptic scene in the center of the backyard forest. A small piece of torn paper skipped its way from the neighborhood streets, through a couple of buffering pine trees, and into the vicinity of the mysterious clearing. It twirled around, over the smoldering rock, up higher into the smoky air, and finally down into the glowing embers. A triangular-shaped piece of paper with the word “loved,” underscored by a thick black line, quickly disintegrated into hot dust. Its existence was snuffed out too early. It didn’t give any resistance, like it was relieved to be at the end of its journey. It could’ve blown anywhere in the world; but, fatefully, it blew onto the sinister hearth and then into oblivion.

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The season’s first snowfall abruptly blanketed the elementary school and its surrounding areas with a light, fragile dusting. Everywhere, from the playground in the back to the intersection in the front, sparkled from a million tiny ice crystals, reflecting the rising morning sun. It was unusually frigid for that time of year in Kentucky.

The traffic light stood like a giant frozen nutcracker, dutifully controlling the sleepy drivers by doling out their lives in sixty-second increments. Not even the treacherous weather could freeze the passage of time nor the story that had already been written.

Warm, florescent lights emanated from the oblong windows of the building, like a giant, brick jack-o-lantern. Each window displayed a different diorama of a classroom with a roomful of kids enjoying themselves: playing, joking around, and being carefree children without sorrow. In Johnny’s room, his classmates secretively whispered to each other, excited about the dance later in the week. Conversely, Johnny sat on one foot and looked out the window, waiting for Jessica’s pink sports car to pull up, like a lovelorn puppy waiting for its owner to come home. Eventually, the Lamborghini rolled in, perhaps a little too fast, and the little girl popped out as Johnny’s eyes widened. Like a princess returning home after a long absence, she slowly walked into the school by herself with all the prestige of royalty. Johnny’s gaze followed her until she disappeared into the entrance below. Her dad sped off, but not before revving the engine so everyone would look at him. The boy used the distraction to gain his composure by licking his hand and then brushing down his cowlick to look presentable to his girl. He then watched the door and smiled, waiting for the room to illuminate. Behind bright eyes, he wondered if he should ask her to dance ahead of time—perhaps that day; so that she, too, could be prepared for the big night.

And thus he waited, but there was no commotion at the door. No Jessica to lighten his way. The teacher began class as Johnny worried about her whereabouts. He thought *she was late for class* while biting his lip and wildly looking about. His distress became so apparent that the teacher stopped the lecture and fired a nasty glance at the lover boy.

“Mr. Simmons! Are you ok? Do you need medical attention?” she asked, not expecting an answer. She was waiting for him to act up.

With that, the class laughed at the scorned boy as the door opened. Jessica arrived just in time to see a roomful of her peers howling at Johnny, who sank as low as he could into his seat. He had no one to console or tell him he was more than a punchline. If she didn’t stop at the water fountain to get a drink, his grandiose plans would still be intact; then, he would have a chance.

“Oh, I must’ve missed something funny,” she added aloud, trying to fit in with everyone else. She smiled a mousy grin, tucked a brown tuft of curly brown hair behind her ear, and slowly walked over to her seat, which was resentfully next to Johnny’s. She clutched her books tightly against her petite body before smiling at the girl behind her as she lowered herself into the cold, metal desk. The laughter slowly simmered into idle chatter, which then yielded to classroom instruction. Remnant chuckling and finger-pointing at the pathetic boy remained throughout the first period.

Johnny was a deflated mess of self-doubt, who appeared defeated as he slumped well below the point of even being noticed in his seat. No one paid him much attention except for the teacher, who would occasionally scowl at him when she smiled at the kids sitting in his vicinity. The girl behind Jessica gossiped in her ear as they giggled and pointed their hopeful fingers around the room at certain boys.

At the end of the day, when the school let out, and everyone parted separate ways, Johnny walked alone with his bookbag slung over his shoulder. He tried to catch up with different groups of guys leaving simultaneously, but they just shunned him. They either laughed at his appearance or ignored him completely. Sometimes, they would throw things at him, but not that day. He waited at the crosswalk by himself for the light to change. In slow motion, the luminescence from above shined down on the worthless boy and cast a bright red hue across his tortured soul. The crosswalk sign lit up, and Johnny darted out into the street.

Just then, a screeching noise and the smell of burnt rubber filled the air and lungs of the frightened boy as a car skidded towards him with its brakes fully engaged. His little body froze in fear. His wide eyes met those of the distracted driver. His short breath steamed up the polished chrome of the bumper while his heart raced to the sound of the motor turning. The wheels of time paused to let the child reset his scruples and peel himself away from the intrusive grill. He slowly eased himself from the tight, crouched position and scurried off. The careless driver flashed a look of annoyance at Johnny and muttered under his breath for stepping into the crosswalk. He noticed the boy’s broken body language and cursed at it by rolling down his window and yelling “turd” at him as he ran away. Although he felt like dying on most days, the lucky boy was glad it wasn’t that day.

Johnny didn’t go to school the next day out of embarrassment, but he did go the day after, Wednesday—just two days from the big dance. He didn’t speak to anyone; he kept a low profile, and no one talked to him. The sad boy walked home later that day, not knowing if he was going to the dance. He felt like he was just a big joke, and a rebuff from Jessica would only rattle him further. He had a lot to digest over the next few days, which was too much for his young mind. Someone his age should’ve been thinking about toys, candy, and cartoons—not self-worth. There was only one certainty in his life: no one supported him at home.

After the thirty-minute walk from school, Johnny hoped that his adoptive parents were home; or, if they weren’t, they left the door unlocked for him, since it was unusually cold out. That wasn’t the case on either account, as the handle was firmly locked in an unmovable position. He threw down his arms before heading to the ground-level window on the side of the house. Not only was he an afterthought at school, but he was also at home.

After breaking into the dark room, he fumbled momentarily and turned on an overhead light. Although his official bedroom was upstairs, he spent most of his time by himself downstairs. It was furnished with a television, a worn couch, and even a small refrigerator, which he kept stocked with food and drinks that he snuck downstairs from the kitchen above. It was the perfect arrangement, as he had little contact with his non-biological family. Up until two days prior, he dreamt that he would live there with Jessica, and they would start a family together. After all, it had everything that they would need. But that was in the past, so he lay on the musky couch, turned on the TV, and warmed his face with the screen’s glow. Its soft embrace was the most comfort he had felt in a while. He flipped around before landing on a local news broadcast, at which time he lowered the volume to a soothing level. It lulled him into a state of semi-consciousness, in which he drifted in and out of sleep.

As commercials interwove with the news broadcast, Johnny’s eyes rolled behind his closed eyelids, and his young limbs twitched while he tossed his head from side to side. His unconscious mind was fully active, influenced by whatever emanated from the television.

“So we’re going to continue with another heartfelt story about a local football team,” the news anchor reported. “Here’s Megan Moerlein with more on the Rabbit Hash High School Football team and their pursuit of the state title.”

The boy lay lifelessly on the couch while the humming glow flashed brilliant shadows onto the dimly lit room. An angry coach with flaring nostrils dominated the screen. His barking stirred Johnny from his twilight state.

“I told my boys that this will be the biggest game of their lives,” the coach began. Johnny opened his eyes to what, at first, he thought was a nightmare. His sleepy eyes widened at the enflamed features of the loud coach: his bulging veins, crooked nose, and the spittle that flew from his angry lips. The boy turned up the volume a bit:

“You have to go out there and fight for what you want,” the coach lectured, bringing it down a notch. “No one’s going to hand it to you. You have to go out and take what’s yours.”

With that, the boy’s ears perked up as those words sunk into his punch-drunk brain. His body and soul absorbed those words like a thirsty sponge, which quenched his eager heart. He jumped from the couch and left the room for a minute to return with his biological mother’s broken corsage and a faded picture of her. At that moment, he knew what to do with the dried flower. He had to give it to Jessica, ask her to dance, and then live happily ever after with her; then, he would make his mother proud of him. He slowly turned the TV sound back down as the news faded into a series of obnoxious commercials. The light from the only lamp in the room flashed across the basement walls and his visage. It flickered from one side of his face to the other, making him appear happy one moment and sad the next. He laid back on the couch with his eyes closed, embracing the only items he had from the only person who loved him. He felt contented and ready to fight for what he wanted.

The following two days were pretty uneventful at the school for Johnny, as he laid low and focused primarily on the dance. The excitement was palpable after the final bell on Friday as all the youngsters in his class whispered and giggled to each other, knowing that their crushes would be revealed in a few short hours. No one whispered or laughed in Johnny’s direction, but he didn’t notice. Likewise, he never spoke to Jessica, as she always looked at the athletic boy sitting in the front of the room. Johnny wasn’t sure if she had seen him or not. Nevertheless, he smiled at her when he left for the day.

Once outside, feverish boys and girls receded from the campus for a few hours before returning to the dance later that night. Most kids had families to pick them up on important days like that, perhaps, take them out to eat. Johnny was entirely on his own, with no support from anyone. His parents didn’t know anything about the dance, nor would they care if they did.

Again, an eerie, gentle snow started to fall on the streets leading to and from the school. The young boy walked home alone to get changed, pick up the corsage, and perhaps rest for a few minutes. When he made it home, a blanket of snow draped over his house and front yard. Footprints formed a trail to the front door and then around the house to the basement window. Big fluffy snowflakes landed on his face as he lowered himself into the dark room.

Once on his feet, he put the screen back in the window and closed it. He blew into his cupped hands to warm them up while thinking about everything that he needed to do. After walking over to the TV to turn it on, he went to look for the boutonniere. He returned a moment later with the dried pendant and the ridiculous outfit he had decided on. After placing the flower on the television, he turned up the volume and went into the bathroom to change. It was loud enough to hear from the other room. A breaking weather report interrupted the broadcast:

“We’ll get back to your regularly scheduled program in just one moment. We wanted to update you on the winter storm that is moving into parts of the tri-state. We’re getting reports of heavy snowfall and slick roads in the western and southern parts of the viewing area. This is very historic and extraordinary this time of year.”

A blow dryer emanated from the bathroom while the weatherman spoke to an empty audience. After a few minutes, the door opened, and Johnny emerged, wearing his suit. He knew if he took Jessica’s heart that night, he’d better look the part. He walked back over to the old couch as the weather report concluded:

“Now, back to your program. I am Channel Six News Meteorologist Lance Shapiro.” The camera panned back to the anchor, who welcomed the young meteorologist to his first day on the job before ending.

Johnny picked up the remote and muted the sound. He looked up at the clock, then over at the humming TV. The clock’s pendulum, rocking back and forth, indicated that he still had time to kill. The dance started at eight, and it was only five, so he kicked off his shoes and watched the silent images on the screen as he thought about Jessica’s joy when he asks her to dance. He reasoned that she didn’t talk to him a lot because she liked him too much and was just nervous. He would calm her nerves with his slick outfit and dance moves, which he had not practiced. Slowly, his eyes closed…little by little, with his lids becoming heavier with each closing. The rhythmic clicking of the clock lulled him into a relaxed state and eased his young, worried mind. *Tick*…it continued. *Tock!*

Eventually, he fell asleep to the hypnotic clicking of the clock. The swinging pendulum became more distant as its rhythm faded into Johnny’s dream world. His physical body flinched, but his mind was in another place. *He found himself in a snow-covered world, like that of a snow globe, wandering towards a light in the distance. The snow stopped, but his tender legs felt so heavy that he moved slowly toward the light. When he finally came upon the brilliance, he discovered that it was a candle—on top of which, a flame danced and burned brightly; but, as he reached for it, the spark was snuffed and ceased to be anymore. A loud ticking-and-tocking rung throughout the scape until*…

With an exhaustive wail, Johnny rose from the couch in a disoriented state, not knowing where he was nor the day and time. His hair was disheveled, and his brow was beaded with sweat. He looked up at the clock to check the time. It was eight o’clock. Letting out a shrill, he jumped off the couch, grabbed his corsage, and left out the front door. He reasoned that he would have a shot if no one else asked her to dance.

He ran up the hill from his house, carefully gripping the pavement with the leather soles on his thrift-store shoes to avoid falling on the slippery ground. He kept his composure, with his hands in his pocket and the corsage tucked beneath his bent arm. It was cold, wet, and icy, while the snow gradually increased in intensity, but he soldiered on, running at times when he could. There was barely a soul on the road as the wind picked up. It was an odd, ghostly feeling since it was a Friday night.

As he reached the main road to the school, he lost his footing and fell to the icy ground, landing on top of the frozen boutonniere. He regained his traction and rose to his feet. Beneath him, the corsage lay in pieces on the sparkling pavement. His warm breath spurted from his agape mouth in tufts while his heavy eyes looked down at the carnage. It was like his heart lay there, broken. The snow slowly covered it up, just as the memories of his biological mother slowly faded with each day. He stood there for a moment in the empty street, with the snowy wind whipping his small body around; but somehow, he remained standing. He held back the tears and carried on with his mission. Jessica needed him to be strong, so he left one of the last physical memories of his mother there in the street, gradually fading into the snowscape. It was a quick decision that his young mind had to make. His mother would’ve been proud. He trudged down the side of the highway towards the school to fulfill his destiny. He was just about there. He was starting to feel hysteria in the bone-chilling wind.

As he approached the apex of the highway, with the school on the other side, he could see lights dancing on the horizon. *Man, this is big*, he thought. Weeks in the making were coming to fruition. A light show mixed red and blue colors into the cool night air on the skyline. The squall relented as he reached the summit. He was almost there, just a few more feet. The tension was palpable. He stood there for a moment as the scene unfolded before him. His life would never be the same again.

In front of the school, at the intersection, a pink Lamborghini was smashed into the stoic light post. Flames engulfed the chassis while they warmed the night sky. The license plate, “CULOOKN,” melted from the heat as mournful on-lookers grabbed their faces in horror. Emergency personnel rushed around the scene to contain the fire and the crowd forming. Dozens of boys and girls, dressed for a dance, sobbed into their frozen hands at the tragedy before them. The flashing lights from the ambulance, fire, and police cars highlighted their fresh tears as their blank stares faded into the background. The traffic light continued to dutifully change colors overhead. Perhaps, another second or two sooner, another story would’ve been written. Both occupants of the vehicle were pronounced dead at the scene. Speed was considered a factor.

# Part 3

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*I*

*n no particular town or specific time, an old-timey projector flashed black-and-white images onto a giant screen in an empty theater. An image of a man holding an oversized novelty check made out to ‘Jon Simmons’ for one million dollars from the Kentucky Lottery played on the screen before the machine shut off, and the room went dark. Cosmic footage from the annuls of time kept playing as the planets turned and day morphed into night—over and over again. In and out, events happened; as time progressed, human lives changed forever.*

# Part 4

# (1998)

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ike the soldiers for which the city was named, the tall buildings of Cincinnati’s skyline guarded the country’s northern riches while giving a stunning view from the south. Across the way, at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio Rivers, sat the old bootlegging town of Newport, Kentucky. Along with Catholic churches, many neighborhood bars dotted the urban landscape, shooting their jagged rooves into the sky. The history of Newport had its own stories to tell and secrets to keep.

On one Sunday afternoon in autumn, at one of those corner pubs, an empty taproom witnessed crowds of football fans flowing from the banks of the Ohio River to the street beneath the saloon’s windows. An occasional wanderer would stumble in from the hot, tired pavement outside; but not stay long, owing to the bar’s lackluster charm. The hypnotic clicking of the ceiling fan muffled the murmur of a TV; but, occasionally, matched the rhythm of a Kit-Cat Klock hung high upon the wall opposite the bar, looking down at the patrons. Barely a soul escaped the cat's gaze—including a shadowy figure seated at the bar’s end, in front of a glistening slot machine. Every tick of its eyes and tock of its tail measured mankind’s mortality while hiding behind a sinister grin.

“Another Amaretto Sour, Jon?” a voice broke the silence as a casually dressed man strolled behind the bar and turned up the TV. He turned to look at the gentleman at the end of the long, polished surface. “Another drink, Jon?” He inquired again with a straight-away face.

The man waived him off without taking his eyes from the TV. The bartender left for the back room to sift through boxes of inventory. Meanwhile, the athletically built man dropped another quarter in the slot machine, took a sip from the tiny straw in his caramel-colored drink, and then ripped the handle with a solid right hand. His square shoulders displayed the name “Simmons” across the back of a baseball jersey that adorned the man’s body. He lowered his head and puffed on the drink when his spin failed to pay off. After dismissing the machine’s name, *Lucky Stars*, with a suspicious glance, Jon focused his attention out the window on the fading remnants of summer and the Sunday stragglers who thrived in it. They struggled to contain themselves to the sidewalk; and, thus, spilled into the street, where cars whizzed past the timeless bar. A Lamborghini shot down the road, catching the attention of all within earshot. Jon quickly looked away, pointing his solemn gaze down into the drink. The ticking of the grinning cat clock whiled away the lazy early evening as last-minute revelers returned home to their families to prepare for another monotonous week. Meanwhile, Jon eyeballed a couple of ladies walking down the street, heading towards the bar.

After a few moments of silence, the door flew open to the announcement of a bell placed above the door. The summer heat wafted in, along with the smell of grilled sausages, which filled the room with a sense of what autumn was like on Sundays in Greater Cincinnati: beer, football, and seared wurst. Jon ducked behind the slot machine, so they wouldn’t see him.

“Hi, can I help you ladies?” the bartender asked while entering from the back. Two female twenty-somethings stood before him, appearing to be slightly tipsy. One had long, wavy auburn hair, while the other was blond. Jon sat up and peered at them through a gap between the machine’s base and signage. They went back and forth with the friendly bartender before having a seat at the end of the bar, a few spaces down from Jon, who was still awkwardly peeping at them through the hole. Suddenly aware of himself, he slumped back down to sip his cocktail. He was optimistic they would talk to him, but disappointment tugged at his side, too. His heart was beating faster at the thought of speaking to them. He nervously fidgeted in his pockets before pulling out a quarter and dropping it in the machine. He jerked the handle with a mighty fury, like someone over-compensating for something.

With that, Jon’s sensibilities came to a crawl. He watched in slow-motion as a shooting-star icon filled the first slot—and then the second one. His face lit up, and he grinned while a third star appeared before him. His broad, glassy eyes met those of the girls through the crack in the appliance before he quickly looked away. They were aroused by the anonymous set of peepers longing for them. But, those eyes, hidden behind the game, were too vulnerable to make contact.

His auspicious moment bore cheers from the three on-lookers as sirens blasted the roof off the bar. His senses dulled while quarters poured from the console like a waterfall, filling the coin tray and then spilling onto the floor beneath him. The uproar ended, leaving the room silent, except for the residual cheering from the two ladies, who were enamored with Jon’s good fortune. They giggled and brushed tufts of hair behind their ears as they gawked at the sight of all that money. Having seen what was about to happen many times, the bartender knew the outcome already. He handed Jon a beer bucket to collect his winnings. Then, he patted him on the back and leaned into him as he walked into the back room:

“Good job, buddy,” he whispered, trying hard to mask his pending disappointment. Jon aloofly collected his coins from the floor and placed them in the bucket while the two tipsy onlookers watched and giggled.

As Jon gathered the last of his reward from the ground, he hoisted himself back onto the stool and tried to pull himself together. He ducked behind the slots, knowing they would be talking to him. Just then, one of the girls approached him with a big smile while batting her long eyelashes at him.

“Hey, Big Spender, how about if you buy a couple of girls a drink?” she playfully asked, brushing the bangs from her eyes. He took the bait, so she waived her friend over, who was equally enamored with him, or at least appeared to be. She wanted total control over him. Her big, mischievous grin nearly made his heart melt. His vital signs rose vigorously. His hands shook as he fidgeted in his pockets.

“Sure,“ he muttered, trying not to sound defeated already. He refocused his attention on the ground, hoping to find a quarter or maybe some confidence. The two surrounded him like hungry wolves, eying his square shoulders. Jon wasn’t bad looking, so he was approachable in that way. But, his soul was scarred. The bartender watched from the back, secretly cheering him on.

“Hey, I don’t think that guy’s coming back…so, why don’t you get us some drinks,” the brunette suggested to her friend while warmly flashing glances at the bachelor. With that, the leggy blond woman jumped at the chance to play bartender. While most heterosexual men would fantasize about having fun with both girls, Jon focused on making eye contact with one of them. No man was going to stop either of them.

“What would you like, Big Spender?” the girl behind the bar asked the uneasy gentleman. She was a bit taller than the brunette. Her long tan legs ran from the bar’s floor to her baggy, plaid shorts and then into them. The other girl sat on a stool across from the nervous man. Their knees almost touched, forming an unbroken hole. Jon’s cardiovascular system worked overtime.

“I’ll have an Amaretto Sour,” he answered, sounding more decisive. He cleared his throat and focused on the floor. The girl across from him nodded, hoping he would play along. The blonde woman found three glasses and poured liquor into them while wearing a cowboy hat she found on the wall. They were long, defined streams of alcohol. Then, she garnished the drinks with a handful of cherries before dividing them among the three participants. She handed the first drink to her friend. She then gave one to Jon with a sense of roughness, indicating the torture she would inflict on him later. Lightly, she caressed his back while walking around him, smiling at her friend as she passed. She sat beside her sidekick and watched him as he calculated what he was up against. The brunette worked him in:

“So, do you think you’re getting lucky tonight?” she asked, stroking the slot machine’s handle. Jon took a sip and coughed at the drink’s potency. He shook off the bitter taste and set the glass down. The two girls looked at each other. He was too timid to look at her, but he tried anyway.

“Uh…I don’t think I’m lucky, so I don’t know,” the bachelor lamely retorted. A feeling inside the inexperienced man told him to go for it. The bartender thought from the back: “Go for it, Jon,” he muttered with a clenched fist. Every soul in the bar, living or dead, pondered the same thing: *Go for it, Jon!* *Don’t be Prince Hamlet; go for it!* Jon’s stomach turned.

In a hazy vacuum, the brunette asked him again while gripping the shaft tighter. “Well, do you think you’re gonna get lucky tonight?” Her friend swung around and grabbed her by the shoulder. They both waited for the answer. They were hungry for it! The bartender repeated from the back under his breath: “Say it, Jon, say it!”

With that, the empty room spun like a roulette wheel. Jon tried to grab the handle to steady himself, but he clutched the woman’s hand instead. The girls smiled at each other; but when the dizzy man turned to face them, he opened his trembling mouth and shot vomit from it, nearly hitting their breasts. The puke soared past the hole created by their conjoined knees and onto the floor, where the backsplash wet the women’s ankles.

“Oh my God!” they both screamed in unison while holding back their dry heaves. Time returned to normal as the commotion intensified. “I can’t do this…you freak…what the hell is wrong with you!” the brunette screamed while her friend grabbed their belongings. Jon sat, bent over, defeated by himself and the pressure therein. The girls shouted and ran from the bar, looking for somewhere to wash their feet. The racket slowly faded down the street. The bartender came from the back, pushing a mop bucket. He looked like a disappointed parent while trying to remain upbeat.

“It didn’t work out, huh, Jon?” the tapster quietly asked. “Are you feeling alright? Do you want something to eat?” He mopped the floor, trying to contain the ill patron. He finished cleaning up and returned to his station behind the bar. Next, he pulled a bowl from under the counter and reached for a tin of pretzels. He pushed the dish into the metal drum, scooped out a mound of twists, and took it to the slumped-over silhouette. Jon stared blankly into the slot machine, feeling too numb to do anything else. The barkeeper patted him on the shoulder, placed the pretzels next to him, and walked to the back, leaving the broken man with his thoughts. The TV helped soothe the silence, just like when he was younger. He struggled to stay awake on the barstool as the warm hum of the broadcast lulled his tender senses. After a moment, a distant voice broke the eerie silence, stirring the figure at the bar:

*Hey Jon, pssst….wake up!*

“Huh,” the sleepy customer aroused himself. He wasn’t asleep, but he wasn’t fully awake either. Was he drunk? He looked around, but no one was there. It wasn’t the bartender, as he was in the back.

*Struck out again, huh Loser? Over here, Dickhead.*

Jon looked around but didn’t see anyone.

*I would’ve banged both of them! You’re so pathetic!*

The disoriented man looked above the bar at the image of a middle-aged weatherman wearing a smug grin on the TV screen. He winked at Jon before moving on.

“And that’s your Channel Six weather forecast, and I’m meteorologist, Lance Shapiro.” Then, the screen went blank.

As the day turned into night, the pub’s front window turned into a diorama of one’s man’s tragic life. Jon sat at the end of the polished wooden counter, richer in money but poorer in self-worth and confidence. He hunched over his beer bucket and rested his chin on the brass railing next to him as the cat clock rolled its eyes, back-and-forth, smirking at the man and his misfortune. It knew that Jon would be masturbating later that night.

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The following morning was brisk, blue, and clear, while the sun was bright overhead. A door above the familiar bar creaked, adding to the mix of urban sounds: barking dogs, random exchanges between people on the block, and cars speeding down the street. Jon stepped from his penthouse onto the rooftop and looked around while stretching his upper body. He surveyed the cool happenings of the neighborhood, seeing if anything was new or different. He noticed a man panhandling on the corner down the street from his building. Jon watched him for a moment but repeatedly looked away out of guilt. His gaze always returned to the destitute man, holding a sign for money. He studied his soiled face, scruffy beard, and worn hands. He even scrutinized his handwriting on the board and was impressed with his writing skills. No one paid him much attention when they walked by, nor did he have much cash in the bucket beneath him. Jon lowered his head before turning back inside.

There was a slight pause when he disappeared into his apartment and reappeared in the bar’s parking lot through a rear stairway. He walked the length of the building, a shotgun-style structure, before turning the corner to stroll alongside the pub’s façade. Instead of going inside, as he did every day, he kept hiking to the end of the sidewalk. He waived at the friendly bartender through the plate-glass window in the front while making his way to the displaced man, who was about fifty feet away. Before being satisfied enough to approach the fellow, he felt his pants for something and then his shirt. He walked to the man on the corner and grabbed his shoulder. Jon looked him in the eye and pulled something from his own shirt pocket. It was a hundred-dollar bill. The donor smiled and winked, trying to restore some humanity in the downtrodden man. The drifter smiled at him while grabbing Jon’s arm. The generous bachelor pulled his hand away, leaving the beggar with the bill. The homeless man tried to shake his hand, but Jon turned from him and retreated to the bar, smiling at the man’s boisterous delight and gratitude.

Just over Jon’s shoulder, on the other side of the intersection, a woman watched the exchange from behind a pair of designer sunglasses. She stood and observed in the background. The traffic light played cosmic host to the randomness that led all three people to the same crossing. She stood for a moment, indecisively, like a statue, before positioning herself parallel to the street. A reflection on her shiny black lenses turned from red to green as the traffic flow changed. Her attention never left Jon’s fleeting silhouette. She jumped into the crosswalk in hot pursuit of the lonely man, dodging cars whirling past her. At times, they seemed to go *through* her. When she passed the beggar, she looked down at his hand to confirm the bill’s denomination. She shuffled past him as he pulled his clenched fist close to his body. Her eyes were wide and serious behind the shades. She stormed down the sidewalk to the bar’s entrance, getting her thoughts together while practicing her smile.

Jon had just steadied himself on his usual stool when a glimpse from the window revealed the woman approaching the front door. She flung her black curls over her shoulder while she reached for the handle. Jon didn’t see her. Just then, the bell rang, and the door flew open. The bachelor peered through the gap in the machine, as he does with every visitor, and locked eyes with the mysterious stranger. She looked away before Jon took his seat at the end of the bar, hidden behind the bulky gambling apparatus. He wasn’t interested in romance or socializing at that point. She scanned the room with her stare before ending up on the ominous cat clock high above the bar, peering down at her. It stared back and grinned, like it had a secret. She shook off the odd trinket and waited on the bartender for service, intentionally not recognizing Jon’s presence.

After a moment, the bartender came from the back to greet the newcomer. He patted Jon on the back as he passed him, pointing at the woman.

“Can I get you something, ma’am?” he asked with a friendly smile. He started to make an Amaretto Sour for Jon.

“Um, yeah,” the woman responded. She seemed a little unsure of her presence but then quickly adjusted. She approached the bar.

 “Just give me a beer,” she randomly requested. “Something amber in hue.” She had sky-blue eyes that exuded comfort when someone looked into them.

“A beer?” he exclaimed rhetorically. “I’d peg you as a wine drinker.” She chuckled to herself. He was folksy, so she took no offense.

“My dad was a beer drinker, so I must’ve inherited it from him,” she added while glancing around without moving her big head of hair. The light conversation aroused Jon’s attention. He sat up and glanced at her through the hole in the machine. He wasn’t feeding it coins at that point.

There was a brief lull when the ticking clock was the only thing audible. After a moment, the bartender returned with a pilsner full of beer. As requested, it was amber in hue, with a malty, foamy head on top. It was a big drink for a little lady. They exchanged money and continued to talk, after which time, he walked a drink over to Jon, who kept to himself at the end of the counter. Her eyes followed him.

“And this is Jon. He has at least one of these every day,” he said before setting it on the bar. He winked at Jon and pushed the cocktail to him. She walked toward the bachelor, wearing a big smile, and placed her tall beer next to the slot machine.

“Hi, so I guess you come here often?” she warmly asked Jon while taking off her sports coat and draping it over the back of the stool. She brushed a lock of hair from her face and sat on the wooden seat next to him. Her soft skin molded into the stool’s contour as she made herself comfortable before facing the unsuspecting man.

“Hi,” he nodded, not moving his face to fully acknowledge her. He fidgeted in his pocket for a quarter to help relieve the anxiety. “I live upstairs,” he added while dropping the coin in the slit and ripping a pull from the handle.

“So, you come here every day? Don’t you have a job?” she retorted, trying not to crack a smile. She knew the answer already.

“Thatis his job,” the bartender warmly chimed in, teasing Jon. The bachelor sat on his stool, sighed, and rolled his eyes out of discomfort. All three slots dropped into place without any luck. The woman sipped the frosty lager, licked the foam from her lip, and looked around. Sensing that Jon would contribute nothing to the conversation, as he was too nervous, the bartender connected to the wide-eyed female patron:

“So, what’s your job? What do you do?” he inquired while wiping a mug with a rag.

“I’m a life coach,” she warmly replied with a confident smile.

“A life coach? What’s that?” he fired back, genuinely. He jerked his head to the side, sweeping the floppy hair from his eyes. He had a wrinkled face.

“I’m part therapist, part counselor, and…part friend,” she answered with a big grin while alternating between the bartender and Jon. The single man paid her little attention while sipping his drink and fidgeting in his pocket. He was secretly listening but not looking directly at her. She sensed that.

“Well, I’m sure you got a lot of business because I know a lot, who could use all three,” the tapster added casually. They both laughed together. He was from the hills and hollers, so he drawled when he spoke.

“Well, you enjoy your day, ma’am…and just give me a call if you need anything. I’ll be in the back. I’ll let you talk to Jon for a while,” he expressed while patting the bachelor on the shoulder as he passed. He left the two curious kids alone to their own devices.

“Thank you,” she responded warmly before taking a sip of beer. She looked around with her bright blue eyes, trying to think of a quick way of connecting with the lost soul beside her. He impulsively fed the machine coins out of nervousness. Thus, she started:

“You’re a handsome man. So, what are you doing here alone in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week.” Jon scoffed without looking at her. It was unclear if he was rebuking her or something on the machine. He reluctantly thanked her. She proceeded, as his lack of response was all she needed to know:

“So, are you totally fulfilled…coming to the same place every day? Getting the same drink?” There was no need to analyze him, as she’d done that already. She just needed a connection to make it work. Unleashing a heavy torrent of confidence over him, like a psychiatrist to a patient, she looked deep into his being. She calmed him down instead of making him nervous. He was the snared animal that accepted its own fate.

“I am,” he surprisingly answered, raising his eyes to nearly meet hers, but he still wasn’t ready to commit. His heart still ached. He lowered his head and returned his hand to his pocket.

“Well then, you must be the luckiest man in the world,” she suggested. “Most, if not all, people are unfulfilled. So, what’s your secret?” she playfully sneered before submerging her lip into the frothy beer. Her warm stare waited for a response. He didn’t answer her question, but he did respond:

“Are you fulfilled?” was his feeble attempt at flirting. Without hesitation, she responded:

“One should never be fulfilled; so, no. Life is a journey. When fulfillment ends, thus, does the journey.”

That blew his mind. He met her eyes with his own; and did it without fear: fear of rejection, fear of losing something important, or fear of being happy. They had a special moment together as the ominous cat peered down at them. Jon looked away because he couldn’t handle it. She pierced his soul with her pale blue presence. She lowered the glass and continued to look *into* him after drinking. He ducked behind the slot machine, sipped his drink, and cowered from her. She was too much for him.

Meanwhile, she grabbed her purse and pulled a wallet from it. The obscure woman shuffled through the billfold before landing on something. She grabbed a card, hesitated, and placed it on the countertop. Then, she stood and announced:

“Here. Take my card,” she demanded, pushing it to him, knowing he would take it. “I want you to call me.” She was professional in her delivery while she controlled the situation. She knew he would call her. “I’m Laurie, by the way,” she announced, sliding the card to him and extending her hand to shake.

“I’m…I’m…Jon,” he vaguely asserted, still in a lull. He embraced her fingers in a dreamy, trance-like state. They smiled at each other. She disengaged him, picked up the beer one last time, and finished it with a big gulp while not taking her eyes off him. She wiped the foamy mustache away and watched him inspect the card. Reluctantly, she turned and took a few steps toward the door before stopping. He watched in wonder as she spun herself around to face him.

“Remember Jon. Life is a journey. Where have you been, and where are you going?” she asked, not wanting an answer. She didn’t need to say that, as she already had him. She just wanted to deliver one final blow for fun. The lucky man sat, staring at the card, not knowing anything else in the world, while she turned and valiantly left the building.

Silence fell upon the bar after the door shut. Only the clock’s ticking resonated in the otherwise quiet room. The cat’s eyes were extra big, swinging back and forth, following Jon between each stroke. The sinister feline smiled wide, as if it knew the outcome already. The spellbound bachelor sat, feeling his pockets for coins before pulling one out and forcing it into the machine. The first slot spun wildly before landing on a seven. The second column whirled ahead of stopping at a seven, as well. Lastly, the third place fell to another cosmic seven dramatically. The lucky man sat in an empty bar with the fate of the universe on his side and no one to witness it. To him, it was a sign of good things to come.

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Later that night, Jon climbed the back stairwell to his apartment above the bar. He stood on the balcony before a locked door and patted himself down, looking for the key. First, he felt his pants. Then, his chest. He stumbled a bit before catching his balance. He felt something hard in his shirt pocket and went for it. The key was within the grasp of his fingers. With a tentative hold on the metal piece, he jerked it from his shirt; thus, pulling a small scrap of paper with it. The snippet twirled like a helicopter as it fell to the ground. The card was radiantly white and spun to the bottom of Jon’s door, like an angel descending to Earth. He bent over to see what it was. As he grabbed the paper, a flood of emotions swept over him: the day’s interaction with Laurie, how she looked at him, and how it made him feel. It was her business card. It wafted of flowers under his nose as he sniffed the object. Old feelings emerged. Emotions that he had long suppressed, so he scurried into the safe confines of his living space.

Once inside, he looked around to ensure it was secure before entering the bedroom. It was to the left. He stared at the card again before placing it on a dresser beside the TV. He swung around the chamber after pulling his shirt from his slender frame. The moonlight was brilliant, so he opened the curtain wide enough to let a beam of light bisect the room. It fell across the bed, over the floorboards, and into the fateful closet. He wrestled with something in his pants. It was hard and difficult to extract from the loose pocket. The silhouette of his fist holding a rectangular shape stunk with the smell of human greed. The breathtaking sight of his fingers and thumb clenching a stack of twenties emerged as he passed through the moonlit strip. His ghostly contour glided in and out of the shimmering light before stopping at the closet to throw the stack of cash therein. Under the blue radiance of the room, a suitcase overflowing with money in various denominations stood like a noble-but-mysterious statue at the base of the closet, draped all around by silk, cotton, and tweed. It was barely visible. An oversized novelty check from the Kentucky Lottery made out to Jon leaned up against the back wall of the closet, looming over the million-dollar case.

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The next morning’s sky was vast and beautiful, hanging over Newport like an opaque blue disk. The neighborhood around the bar was quiet, reluctant to start the day. Jon emerged from his abode and looked down upon his kingdom, surveying the locals and their affairs. Eventually, he exited to the cracked sidewalk below. He was early that morning, so he milled around the locked pub before sitting on a short wall adjoining the building. The glassy sheen of his sunglasses hid a pair of curious eyes from the world, while a pair of baggy pants softened the hard outline of cash in his pocket. He abruptly felt his side, ensuring the loot didn’t fall onto the sidewalk. He glanced at the ground and tapped his feet against the hard surface as the occasional car breezed down the street.

Lazily, he sat and watched a colony of ants overtake a decaying lump of grease on the sidewalk. They were in the shadows of his outstretched legs. The insects marched down the pavement in a single-file line to the oily mass, where each one took from it and then moved on. Most made it through the process with a piece of the spoils. They formed a perpendicular line to the street. But a few hapless ones were accosted and robbed of their riches. The strong preyed on the weak, feeble, or broken-hearted as Jon watched intently.

His foray into nature was suddenly interrupted by the rattling of the bartender at the front door. He fumbled with the key to unlock it. The two friendly souls waived at each other through the glass, as one was happy to see the other. Jon stood up, being careful not to squash the pile of ants. He pushed the handle while the bartender pulled. The bell rang, and the two laughed at their teamwork. Cars revved their engines and blasted music into the morning air at the busy intersection down the street. It came in waves.

Jon eased his way to his seat behind the slots, but his gait was different that morning. He was happy-heeled about something. He nodded to the bartender and raised a finger, indicating he was ready for a drink. The lonely bachelor was hopeful, and it showed. He groped his jeans for a quarter as the weathered bartender placed a drink beside him. Jon thanked him while tilting to one side to get the coins from his pocket. He was careful not to drop the twenties from the other pouch closer to the floor. Meanwhile, he felt something else in there. It was thin and sharp, pressed against the cash. He pulled it from his pants with a warm smile. The object was Laurie’s business card; he wanted to look at it again. He brought it for that purpose.

Jon felt a prick on his finger when he removed the card from his pants. He jerked his head to look at the paper as he moved it closer to his face. A blood smear stained the piece above her name: “Laurie Wilkins, Life Coach.” A cut from the paper sliced his fingertip. But that was only temporary, as the warm glow of thinking about her numbed the pain. He licked the blood from his digit, sat on the stool, and grabbed a cocktail napkin from the bar. He dipped it in his drink and wiped the smear from the cardboard. Only a faint pink smudge remained. They were now bonded by blood, and that made him smile.

As the morning turned into the afternoon, Jon sat and sucked on his libation while dropping quarters into the slot machine. People came in, had a drink, and then left—followed by a new set of patrons. Jon paid little attention to them as he was too focused, not on the game, nor his drink, but on something else. The bartender, serving drinks to thirsty, fun-loving patrons, was just background noise to him. It was a warm, sunny day. Everyone enjoyed themselves, basking in alcohol and sunlight. But not Jon. His mind was elsewhere. The cat clock ticked away, high atop the room, studying him with a grin, trying to decipher his thoughts:

*Tick.* He rubbed his face, dropped a coin in the machine, and pulled the handle. He won!

*Tock.* This time he lost. He needed more quarters from the bar.

*Tick.* He won, but man, he was unloved as a child. He was so bummed!

*Tock.* He lost again, but who knew what his future held.

Later, around lunchtime, Jon disappeared from the bar and retreated upstairs to take a quick nap. He also wanted to unload a bit of money. He dipped into his closet and then came back out. Thus, he was ready for the second half of the day.

Once back at the bar, on his stool, Jon sat, refreshed. He sipped his afternoon drink and stared into space while fidgeting with something in his pocket. Thoughts twirled around his mind, like a cog, as his fingers twined under his clothes. He nipped at Laurie’s card with the tips of his nails, contemplating his next move like a game of chess. He couldn’t believe she was into him. Thus, he understood the importance of his next move. He didn’t want to mess it up. The young man wanted to call or text her, but he didn’t know what to say. So, he needed a plan, a reason to initiate.

Just then, a small lively group entered the pub. The bartender struggled to meet their demands while keeping Jon hydrated and full of quarters. The bachelor loosened up, dropped countless coins into the machine, and ripped the handle each time while intermittent laughter filled the room. The tapster was a good man and a hard worker, so he met the demands of everyone eventually.

Although he kept to himself at the end of the bar, Jon listened to, observed, and analyzed everyone around him. He processed the information but didn’t use it to be social. He was too scarred. His ears perked up when a voice mentioned Riverfest, the annual fireworks extravaganza on the Ohio River during the Labor Day weekend. The wheels were in motion, as Jon knew it would be the perfect opportunity to woo Laurie. It would be romantic. He wasn’t foolish enough to think he would spend his life with her. But he also felt she would be a good fit because she made him feel special. Labor Day was quickly approaching, only a week away, so Jon had to be resourceful. Perhaps, he needed to invite her over for a drink before going in for the kill at Riverfest. He felt that old, childish confidence creeping back in.

Jon focused on his plan as the crowd and the afternoon moved on. He needed to make contact with her, but what would he say? He sat silently with his phone out, waiting for the right words. He stared at her card, the pink smudge over her name, and then his phone. The bartender recognized Jon’s struggle and left him alone, although he could’ve probably offered some advice. He picked up the phone, paused, put it back down, and then dropped a quarter in the machine. Repeatedly, he did that until he hit a winner. He picked up his phone one last time, clicked away at the keyboard, and pressed the “send” button decisively. That was it; he was done. His life was on the precipice of beginning anew. He just had to sit back, have another drink, and wait for her response. It was probably going to happen at any minute. He waited. And then, he waited longer. His heart sank when she didn’t reply. He started to doubt himself, wondering if he would spend the rest of his life alone. He stared into the slot machine's blank void, wishing he would win the jackpot of love. He had all the money he needed; he just wanted more: to be loved for once in his life. And so, he sat and lingered.

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*Jon’s SMS message traveled from his phone through the cyber world as a little information packet. But it was more than that; it was a little packet from his heart and soul, an electronic form of his vulnerability. It shot past bleeping lights and through cyber tubes, through the internet and through the sky, past other messages of love. Soaring past harmful packets of hate, congregating on cyber street corners, his message of hope and happiness for them in the future was on its way to Laurie’s phone. It shook at warp speed with blurs of light streaking past it, but it was almost there. Just another moment, and…*

A light on Laurie’s phone lit up, indicating that she had an SMS message. She clicked on the icon. It was from Jon Simmons. She opened a small notebook and wrote something down. She read the text to herself:

“Hi Laurie, this is Jon from the bar. I think I love you. Can we talk?”

She smiled to herself, scribbled on her pad, and sat quietly. She was satisfied. To her, it was like watching a movie that she’d already seen. Thus, she knew how it ended, and she liked it.

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A couple of days passed since Jon messaged Laurie to no avail, or so he thought. He didn’t leave his apartment for two days, as he was too bummed to even go to the bar. He lay in bed and watched TV. No *Lucky Stars*, no Amaretto Sours—just lazy, self-loathing. He learned long ago that hope and confidence only led to disappointment. Quietly, he lay there, contemplating, before getting up. He stepped into a pair of corduroy jeans lying on the floor, pulled them up, and fastened them with a belt. Before entering his closet to get some cash, he pulled a hoodie over his wiry torso. He returned as a broken, but repaired man. A very wealthy, repaired man.

In the afternoon, groups of people enjoyed a drink and each other’s company at the familiar watering hole. They were scattered throughout the establishment. Jon was greeted warmly by the tapster when he arrived. He sat at his spot but didn’t put money into the machine. He stared out the window, not looking at anything in particular or thinking of anyone. He was content without any external stimulation. The bartender, however, brought him a drink with a side of quarters, which ultimately broke his moment of Zen. It took a while, but he eventually returned to his old self and quietly sipped his drink through the tiny straw. He also dropped coins into the machine. Seemingly, he was almost over the hump.

As day turned into evening and shadows slid down the wall like bloody remnants of a murder, there was a brief moment of peace and tranquility in the bar. The cat clock clicked back and forth, giving a quick pause for everyone in the room to read each other’s minds. It was that obtuse time of day: gloomy enough to need artificial light but not dim enough to warrant the overheads. So, the shadows played tricks on unsuspecting eyes. The cat’s devilish grin was slick and sharp while it stared down at the masses. It smiled at the uncertainty in the air.

If Jon had been paying attention, he would’ve noticed a car slowly drive by outside the window behind the bartender. It was on the street in front of the bar. The lighting outside was obscure, and the automobile’s windows were slightly tinted, but a shadowy figure inside shifted to peer into the bar as it passed. The car then slowed down. It made erratic motions in the middle of the road before pulling to the curb, two doors down. A silhouette on the driver’s side aroused suspicion by making frantic movements to anyone who noticed. A mess of hair flung from one side of the headrest to the other, brushing the ceiling in the fracas. The shadow was motionless momentarily, looking down at something before exiting the car.

Meanwhile, like a sitting duck, Jon peeped over the machine, watching the TV above the bartender’s head in the corner of the room. The door opened, the bell rang to a nearly empty space, and Laurie appeared in the entryway, like the Virgin Mary descending from heaven. She glowed, and her smile lit up the room. Even the cat clock was impressed. Jon’s heart stopped momentarily, followed by the rest of his body. He couldn’t believe what was happening. She walked to him without saying a word, as if they were reading each other’s thoughts. It was a cosmic rendezvous, a fateful “777” on the slot machine. Jon hit the jackpot of love when she approached him.

“Do you have a minute?” she finally asked. He stared at her without any color in his face. He blankly shook his head. She smiled at him, which was radiant—especially when mixed with her piercing blue eyes and curly black hair.

“Hey, I was delighted with our conversation the other day, and I like you and all, but you shouldn’t throw the ‘L’ word around like that to someone you just met,” she suggested. Although her words were disciplinary in nature, she looked into his eyes as if telling him to stop but then go. He was frozen in disbelief. She giggled uncomfortably, brushed a tuft of hair behind her ear, and looked at her lap. Just then, the bartender walked over and immediately recognized her.

“Hey, I remember you. The life coach from the other day,” he revealed. He almost recited her name, but she beat him to it. They both said, “Laurie,” simultaneously and then chuckled to each other. In a way, the bartender was Jon’s wingman. He broke the awkward interaction between Jon and the pretty woman with his charming, down-to-earth banter.

“Well, what’ll it be, Laurie. Would you like a tall beer?” he asked.

“Yes, please.” She rebutted. And then they said the same thing together: “Amber in hue.” They had quite the connection. If only she were there to see him. They chuckled to each other again before she turned her attention back to Jon, who was getting used to the idea that she was there to see him.

“So, looking back at our last interaction, what did you get out of it…other than that you love me?” she asked smugly. The bartender placed a frothy, golden brown beer in front of her, from which she took a drink without taking her eyes off the awkward twenty-something. She gave him a moment.

“Uh, I don’t know what you mean,” he slowly expressed.

“Well, what do you want out of life? Where are you headed? And it’s not down my pants,” she quipped while watching him. “Because you’re never going to get there,” she added with a wink and a smile. There was a sharp pain in his chest, but he wanted more.

“I haven’t given it much thought. I’m headed nowhere, I guess. I’m fine. I don’t have any wants,” Jon answered with a lie.

“No wants?” she responded with a question.

“Yeah, no wants. Except for you,” he playfully added. She smiled but was annoyed.

“Except for me?” she playfully retorted. “Well, I like a man who has goals, aspirations, shoot…a hobby, at least.”

“I like art, in particular, fashion,” he added. She snickered, looking him up and down, paying particular attention to his corduroys.

“You don’t know fashion,” she mumbled while taking another sip of beer.

“Well, you’re quite the life coach…sitting there, drinking a beer, judging my clothes. What kind of coaching is that?” he fought back. She smiled at his tenacity. It was working.

“Well then, maybe I am wrong. Maybe you could model for me sometime on the catwalk,” she playfully added. He was getting aroused. Thus, he had two stiff objects under his loose cords, including a cold stack of twenties.

Laurie rose from the stool to use the bathroom. As she did, she leaned into Jon, grabbing him by the shoulders to steady herself. She held both hands around his neck for a moment while gazing into his lap. To anyone noticing, like the grinning cat on the wall, she paused momentarily, hypnotized by the hard outline in his pants. She recognized it. Time slowed as she collected herself and broke free of his grasp. The woman then scurried to the bathroom to freshen up. She was so turned on! She nearly had an out-of-body experience.

As the evening progressed, Jon entertained Laurie at the end of the bar, making her feel like a carefree woman. She laughed and waved her black locks as he made her feel comfortable. It was so easy! The bartender was equally astonished at the connection they were making together. Perhaps the stars were aligned right because Jon was about to consummate his new relationship with the bubbly life coach. She touched him on the shoulder again, signaling that she wasn’t shy. At first, he didn’t know how to respond, but he ultimately adjusted. The Amaretto Sours made it easy.

Eventually, the two love birds gathered their belongings and left for Jon’s apartment. The bartender discreetly patted him on the back as they were leaving. They stepped into the August night and then onto the sidewalk, still warm from the afternoon heat. He gently touched her back and escorted her past the greasy spot on the pavement. They walked under the stars to the old stairwell: his Stairway to Heaven. Trying not to let his anxiety show, he led his angel by the hand to his Paradise of Bachelors. He remembered the confident men on the old TV shows when he was younger and tried to emulate them. He unbuttoned his shirt and fluffed his chest hair, making himself feel sexy, while he pulled her up the incline. She didn’t see him do that as she was busy studying her surroundings.

Once inside, he took her room-to-room, gradually exposing his life to her. She feverishly looked around, seemingly mesmerized by the personal aspects of his life. She was intrigued. He pointed to pictures on the wall of an unhappy family and his gothic sister. He showed her pictures of him holding a novelty check, explaining he’d won a “small jackpot.” The amount was not in view. She pretended not to notice the photo, but that was the first thing she saw when they entered the room.

He then pulled her into the last room of the tour: his bedroom. The moment he'd been waiting. It was the pinnacle of his life, so he nervously walked to the radio and turned it on. After pressing a few buttons, slow music started playing in the murky room. He lit candles before approaching Laurie and extending his palm to her as she sat on the bed. Initially hesitant, she rose from the mattress and took his hand. She was relieved that he lit the room, so she could see better. He looked her in the eyes and pulled her close. She hoped he wouldn’t kiss her. And he didn’t, as he was still too shy. But he wanted to, and his face revealed it. They both planted their heads into each other’s neck to hide their feelings.

While twirling under the candlelight, he felt her skull move wildly against his own. As they passed a mirror on the wall, the scant image of her eyes darting around the room to match her head’s movement reflected in the glass. It was like she was searching for something. He thought she was just rocking to his heartbeat. It was all he wanted in life: to feel a woman’s breasts against his chest, and now he finally got it. He was in a state of heavenly bliss. He grabbed her tighter against his body as the song concluded. Then, he warmly rubbed his cheek against her neck and sighed to himself. She moved her shoulders, and then her arms, from his grip and slowly pulled herself from him. She fell onto the bed, and he fell beside her. His eyes locked onto her lips as he went in for a kiss, but she looked away. Unphased, he moved his hand below her waist, into her panties, but she pushed his hand away. Her skin was so soft.

“Easy now, Tiger,” She whispered, not wanting to be too loud and kill the moment. “Nothing worthwhile comes quick nor easy,” she added.

The infatuated man nodded and relaxed his intentions. After all, she was the teacher; and he, the student. He gazed into her rich blue eyes, and she reciprocated, but smacked his hand away whenever he tried to get intimate. They lay side-by-side and cherished the moment. He wanted to tell her about Riverfest but forgot due to his nerves. The moonlight peaked through the window and slowly crept across the room as the evening wore on. It rolled over their breathing bodies on the bed, across the floor…into the closet, where the secret treasure lay, concealed from the world. They fell asleep in each other’s arms until the early morning when she quietly exited before sunrise. He tossed and turned as his eyes flickered under his eyelids, indicating the intense sleep he was enduring. Right before dawn, while light broke across the streets of Newport, he suddenly woke with a forceful gasp of air and looked around the twilight. *My Money!* he thought, while frantically scanning his room and then the closet. It was still there. Whew! He laid back down and thought about the spoils of his victory. For once in his life, he felt satisfied and vindicated; after sixteen years, he finally got his dance.

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Jon woke up later that day a new man. He rolled over and grabbed his phone to see if his new love had sent him a message. She didn’t, but he didn’t let that phase him. He remembered that he needed to ask her on a date to Riverfest. He took the initiative and sent her an SMS message:

“Hey, I had a nice time last night. Are you free for the fireworks on Sunday?” he inquired.

He rested the phone on his stomach as he paused for her reply. He was expecting it immediately, so he waited, thinking about how she smelled. Her scent was exhilarating, like a flower, which gave him a brilliant idea. He jumped off the bed excitedly, as if on a mission. He left his phone on the mattress, partially covered by a loosely draped sheet, and entered the other room. Occasionally, he would pop around the corner to see if the message light was blinking. He was disappointed each time. Finally, he returned to the bed, holding an old wooden box in one hand. He sighed, looked down, and opened it. It was the box that contained his biological mother’s corsage from when he was younger. There were only a few withered petals left. He stared at them momentarily, as the corsage meant so much to him when he was little. From what he could remember, his mother would’ve liked Laurie. She would’ve been so appreciative of the kindness that Laurie lent to her son. He decided to give her a boutonniere on Sunday, a replica of his mother’s, right before the show. It would be so romantic! After all, he reasoned that women love flowers, so why not a boutonniere? He liked the idea, and he thought that she would, too. So, he put the box in his closet, next to the suitcase, and shifted his focus to the big night, which was less than a week away. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the light blinking on his phone.

“Yes, but what fireworks? On the road this week. See you this weekend. XOXO,” she responded.

Jon just melted in his sheets. *XOXO*, he thought. *Wow! This is getting serious*. He quickly replied to her message:

“What fireworks!? You must not be from here. We’ll discuss this weekend.”

She responded immediately with a semi-colon, hyphen, and right parenthesis. He nearly lost it, as he’d never seen that expression before. She winked and smiled at him, and he loved it! He lay there and marinated in his feelings. But he felt different that morning, like he wanted to do something other than waste away at a bar. He had a week to prepare for his big date on Sunday night; thus, he needed to research sex and love at the library, so he'll be able to perform.

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By the time he reached the library, he was a hot, sweaty mess, but he didn’t let that deter him. He had a lot to learn quickly, so he entered the old concrete building, trimmed with weathered copper, and strolled to the boxy computers in the middle of the room. He stood there momentarily, not knowing what to type into the search box on the screen. He was afraid that if he input “sex,” pornography would appear on the screen, and he would then be escorted from the facility. He remembered hearing about an Eastern Indian book about sexual positions but couldn’t recall the name. *Karma* *something*, he thought. He’d heard about karma, so he typed that in. No, that wasn’t it. He reflected a moment longer. *Karma…karma…sut…ture?* He dug deep into his memory. This time it mattered. *Karma suture? Was that it?* he asked himself. He opened an internet search engine, wrote “Karma suture,” and immediately found what he sought. The Newport Library had three copies of the *Kama Sutra* for Jon’s perusal. He was delighted! It was the end of his pathetic life. He was beginning a journey of sex, eroticism, and eternal fulfillment. He went to the books’ location and grabbed a copy. Then, he proudly took it to the front desk, like he wanted to show everyone he was a man. But, it didn’t go as he planned, as the older female clerk seemed repulsed by him. It didn’t bother Jon because of the bright, enlightened future ahead of him. He exited the building and trekked back to his apartment to study. It was Monday afternoon, and he had until Sunday to become a proficient love-making machine.

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On the way home from the library, Jon stopped at a floral shop to get Laurie a corsage for their big date. *It would be so romantic*, he reasoned. *That’s what they do on TV: bring their date flowers.* He was lost in his thoughts, walking down Monmouth Street with the *Kama Sutra* under his arm.

A small bell chimed when he pushed the door open. He was overtaken by the smell of flowers and fertilizer as he entered. In the middle of all the orchids, roses, and Angel’s Breath, a small woman—maybe thirty years past retirement age—looked up and welcomed the rambling customer into the store. Jon smiled and approached her.

“What is it you’re looking for, Honey?” She asked the curious bachelor. Timidly, he inquired about the corsages.

“The cor-what, Hon’?” she responded, as she was a little hard of hearing.

Jon, feeling self-conscious, especially with a book of sexual positions under his arm, repeated himself even louder than the first time:

“Do you have any corsages?” He awkwardly yelled at her.

“Oh, corsages,” she exclaimed as her face lit up. “How I love corsages! You know, back when I was little, my daddy made all my suitors bring me the biggest flower to wrap around my wrist. And if they didn’t bring one, Daddy wouldn’t let me go.”

Jon stepped back and gasped to himself. *What did I get myself into here*? *I need to get a flower and get out of here quickly*, he reasoned.

“Uh, do you have any? Can I see them?”

“Oh, you certainly can. I have a box of them over here. Follow me. You can come around the counter there,” she pointed her bony, crooked finger at the desk and moved it in a hook motion, signaling for him to go around it.

Jon followed her to the back. She waddled to a refrigerator and waived him over. She opened the door and pulled out a cardboard box as he approached. It was lined with beautiful orchid corsages of various colors.

“We don’t get many requests for them except around prom time in the Spring. That’s why we have these here,” she added. Jon ignored her and quietly decided on a color to himself. He landed on purple and pulled at the clear sandwich box, which was wedged in with the others.

“Whoh, I got it,” the senior pulled the cardboard box from Jon and grabbed the purple orchid from it before placing it back in the refrigerator next to a picture of two teenagers at homecoming. She continued to cackle under her breath.

“So, is this for your daughter?” she asked Jon, who was in front of her, walking to the counter. His back was to her, so he pretended not to hear. He was so annoyed. He was in a hurry and didn’t have time for her.

He strolled to the customer side of the counter and placed the book on the surface to free up his hands. The old woman followed behind, inching to the cash register while licking the hair above her lip. As she approached him, she cracked a smile and then spoke:

“You remind me of my first boyfriend, Tommy. He bought me a similar corsage as this, same color and everything.” Jon wanted to shoot himself in the head. He nodded at the poor old woman, hoping she’d stop talking. Of course, he didn’t make eye contact. He fidgeted with the bills in his wallet until she finished.

“But then again,” she laughed to herself, “he didn’t have a choice if he knew what was good for him.”

She looked him in the eye while Jon cowered at her forwardness. *Am I going to be like that when I’m her age?* he thought to himself, waiting for a lull. Finally, it came.

“So, how much?” he patiently asked.

“Hmm?” she blindly stared at him.

“How much for the flower?” he sternly shot back, hiding his impatience.

“Oh, good heavens,” she laughed to herself again. Jon was ready to hit her with the book. “That’ll be $25 even,” she finally answered.

The woman gummed her dentures as Jon gathered his money. She was itching to say something. She noticed his book, so she grabbed it.

“What’s this?” she asked, pulling it close with one hand while adjusting her glasses with the other. Jon snatched it back and replaced it with a handful of cash. He smiled out of pity and then turned to leave. She yelled at him as he opened the door:

“You keep your eye on your daughter. Them boys only want one thing,” she howled at Jon as he opened the door and jumped into the wind. He heard her cries of laughter from the other side of the glass. She could’ve been his grandmother for all he knew.

Once he was back in his apartment, he placed the flower on his bed while he lumbered through his closet for the wooden case to put it in. It was the one his mother gifted him. While the flower she gave him was long gone, he was ready to start a new memory with Laurie. Maybe he’d pass the new corsage on to their children. He felt he was on the cusp of something great, but his work was cut out for him.

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Jon spent the remainder of the week reading through the book, making notes, and preparing for Sunday. He marked his favorite positions, the ones he wanted to try with her—if she was willing, of course. Likewise, he ate a balanced diet, watched inspirational movies like *Rocky*, and tried to get a good night’s sleep. But that was hard because he would just lay there, thinking about her. He was ready to go. Thus, he split his time between the apartment and the bar, taking the book to both places. He wasn’t out of place at all, reading the *Kama Sutra* at the end of the bar while sipping Amaretto Sours behind a slot machine.

When Saturday finally came, he was a tiger ready to pounce. He strutted to the bar with the book under his arm. He prepared to start a new chapter in his life. It was mid-afternoon, and he would enjoy the night as a bachelor. One more night to himself before the ol’ ball-and-chain returned. People came and went, and the bell rang every ten minutes as their lives progressed, but Jon tuned it out. Pretty women smiled at him while ordering their drinks, but he wasn’t interested. He had his eyes on one girl and one girl only. He didn’t let himself wander while she was away because he wasn’t that kind of guy. Thus, he smiled politely, pulled the book into his baggy shorts to hide the graphic pictures, and didn’t engage them. The more he looked away, the more they wanted him. He was confident, and they liked it; but he was too involved in his book to notice. Calmly, he continued to sit there, staring into his lap while sipping his drink for a while longer, when finally, the bell rang after a long silence—only to be followed by a brief lull. Jon felt the urge to look up.

His eyes met those of Laurie, whose stare shot through him like a laser beam. They looked at each other, motionless, from across the room, smiling at one another. He was numb, not expecting her until the next day. Casually sliding the book down his leg onto the floor, Jon ditched the evidence behind the bar. The confidence he had during the week was gone. He was a shriveled-up sausage on a stool—a 23-year-old virgin, and he looked the part. She stood a moment longer, allowing him to soak in her arrival. She then strolled to the seat beside him.

“Hi-ya,” she said with a big, warm smile. “Not expecting me, were you?” He nodded in disbelief, like he’d seen a ghost. He pushed the book farther behind the bar with the tip of his sandaled foot.

“How have you been?” she asked, sighing, returning to Earth. The inquisitive woman looked at him, expecting an answer. She resumed her dominant role as he struggled to get himself together. He managed to pull through.

“I’m good,” he quipped while shaking off the awkwardness. She smiled, nodded, and looked down at the polished counter. But then something came over him: a wild streak of confidence, and he blurted out:

“Actually, I haven’t been good,” he started. She refocused her prying eyes on his face and listened as he continued.

“Without you here,” he shook his head back and forth, “I haven’t been well.” She smiled at his antics and was impressed by his creativity. He went on with the ruse:

“I had no one to….” Then he slumped over his seat, feigning death. Her smile beamed as his shtick worked on her. She shook his body to wake him from his eternal sleep.

“I have something to tell you,” she revealed, arousing him enough to sit up straight.

“Do you know why I came here tonight?” she asked him.

“To make sweet love to me?” he quickly retorted, still doing his routine. She smiled but was irritated.

“No,” she quickly dismissed with an air of seriousness. “I came here tonight without telling you because this is a test.” Jon sat up further and tilted his head sideways—the way a dog does when it doesn’t understand something.

“This was a test to see if you are committed to me. And so far, from what I can tell, you’ve passed the test. I don’t see any beautiful women hanging off you, so good job!” she grinned. Jon followed her through the whole statement, not knowing what to make of it, but he ended with a smile when she finished. He just wanted to know when they were going to have sex. To him, that was the real test.

They talked into the evening at the end of the bar until they climbed from their stools to leave. It was Jon’s chance: the moment he’d been waiting for his whole life! Surprisingly, he wasn’t too nervous. Even though he was a little anxious, he acted like a perfect gentleman, placing his hand on her back, between her shoulder blades, as they made their way to the door. People noticed the energy between the two while they walked past. Even the cat clock saw, of course, swinging its large eyes back and forth, trying to get a glimpse of them in between rotations. Perhaps it was the shadows on the wall from the setting sun, but the cat appeared to wink at Jon when its eyes swung toward the door. Its grin left much to be revealed.

Once outside, he escorted her to the back of the building, towards the stairway to his apartment. As he did, he pulled at the black curls that fell down her back, but she quickly grabbed his fingers. She fumbled a moment before deciding to hold his hand as they walked.

*Oohhh yeah*, he thought, *she is so into me!* *This should be easy. What position should I try first: The Tigress, Splitting the Bamboo, or Ballet Dancer?*

He became lost in his thoughts while they walked hand-in-hand to his apartment. He had to remind himself that she was a lady, and it wasn’t *all* about sex. He had to care for her needs, as well.

Upon entering his apartment, there was a casual tone, unlike her first time there, which was more formal. They were both relaxed, although her eyes darted around the room when they entered. She relaxed when he announced his plans for a shower. He was maturing fast. The bachelor contemplated his next move while she sat on his bed. He hoped she’d join him in the shower, but that didn’t happen. So, he thought about kissing her soft lips, but he didn’t. It was his move to make. They made eye contact, and he winked at her and pushed his face into a smile, but she could’ve been more receptive. She leaned against the headboard, stared at the ceiling, and waited for him to shut the bathroom door.

While isolated in the bathroom, Jon turned the shower on and cranked up the heat; so that the room became steamy, like his relationship with Laurie. He had a shower radio, so he turned on some rock and sang along. The upbeat crooner lathered his hair into a shampoo horn while he enjoyed the booming echo of his voice from the tiled walls. Hoping Laurie was listening, he belted out all the hits from the ’80s and ’90s. He was the proverbial Eye of the Tiger, the one they called Dr. Feelgood.

While he turned off the water and the music with it, he thought he heard a sudden thud from the other side of the wall, but he dismissed it because he didn’t hear it again. He figured Laurie was probably getting ready for the hours of lovemaking ahead of them. He cracked the door to let some hot air out.

As he opened the door slightly, he saw a foot fly past the opening. To validate his thoughts, he pushed the door open even further, only to meet the wild eyes of Laurie, who was still lying on his bed, facing him, close to where he had left her. She seemed to be panting and hiding it. She had a dazed look, like she had seen the devil. She appeared mesmerized by his presence, so he swooped in for the kill, quickly jumping on the bed and snuggling up against her, ignoring her suspicious breathing. Perhaps, he thought, she was just really turned on. He started kissing her while moving his hand slowly down her pants. She wanted him, pulling his tongue into her mouth as they kissed but stopped short of letting him in her panties.

“We haven’t even had our first date yet. Let’s wait until tomorrow. All good things in all good time,” she suggested in her usual authoritarian voice. He complied and held her close to his wet body.

They snuggled with each other overnight, intermittently drifting in and out of sleep, turning the TV on and off. It was tough for Jon, but they waited until the following day to make it official. They didn’t leave each other’s side that night except when he took a shower. He thought it was odd that some of his clothes were on the closet floor. He picked the shirts up and hung them where they belonged: just over the suitcase. He pondered that as he dozed off, but the feel of Laurie was all he could ultimately think about. *So, this is what it’s like to sleep with a woman*, he pondered as he fell asleep in her soft arms.

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The bar didn't play host to thirsty patrons during the overnight hours. From two until eight in the morning, it entertained odd sounds and urban flights of fancy within its walls. Bright headlights from lonely cars turned shadows into animate objects, while lights from neighboring businesses also added to the menagerie. Street lamps, fireflies, and the occasional cigarette spark from a late-night traveler also mixed with the fantastic sightings. Serenity shrouded the sleepy bar in the twilight, interrupted only by an occasional ping on the glass or creak of a loose board. Long shapes danced across the plastered walls—like a colder, quieter version of hell. The cat clock gently clicked side-to-side, giving time for no one; but keeping tabs on everyone. It didn’t fear the shadows. It dreaded what was hiding behind them. Its smile, high upon the wall, revealed nothing.

The air was stagnant, almost electric, which lent itself to a fertile atmosphere for questioning one’s senses. Dark silhouettes blended into the night, occasionally moving across the street, as seen through the bar’s front window. Like a finger on glass, a faint tapping seemingly echoed through each corner and then stopped. A sudden flicker through the back window flashed down the hallway to the bar area in the front. But maybe it was just a giant moth. It was a period of dreaming for the occupants above the bar, and the echoes of humanity etched into the walls below.

In the moments right before dawn, the tapping returned; but once again, it suddenly stopped. It was a lifeless rap and didn’t have a human rhythm. The room was so still that it appeared to be moving backward in time. A faint whisper could be heard on the other side of the wall, but maybe it was just the wind. There was another movement in the front window, and suddenly all was calm. The clock hung out of focus in the periphery, as it was the only movement or sound in the room.

*Tick.*

*Tock.*

*Tick.*

*Tock.*

Then suddenly, a loud crash rang out, sending flocks of birds from the treetops to even higher ground. A security alarm screeched into the early-morning air as the scene of the bar spiraled into oblivion.

Jon’s silhouette rose into the dark room, madly panted, and looked around. He was haunted by his demons.

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Jon awoke the following morning to an empty bed. Initially alarmed, he remembered Laurie was an early bird and probably left to get donuts. Laying there, he cherished the moment, his one small victory. He watched in satisfaction, instead of dread, two turtle doves perched on the balcony’s railing outside his bedroom window. The male pigeon fluttered around, chasing after the female, trying to keep up with her elusiveness. For once, he lay there, full of contentment, relating to the bird. He was so close. He, too, was engaged in the chase. His long journey from an awkward kid to a full-fledged man would end that night. He was on third base, waiting to steal home.

He continued to lay in bed—oblivious to everything but his thoughts of love. His reflective moment was overshadowed by a car pulling up and then driving off down the road, but still within earshot. A stunning black vehicle with tinted windows sat idle one block from the bar on the same side. A ghostly figure in the driver’s seat seemed frantic, moving in jerky movements before settling down. Strangely, the silhouette appeared to grow a couple of inches before the engine shut off and went quiet.

Still nestled into the soft mattress, enjoying the warm morning breeze, Jon quietly wished Laurie was still there. The titillating thought of her numbed his senses, as a car door slamming down the street didn’t register with him, nor did the clicking of heels up the pavement. The tapping got louder and closer until, finally, it was outside his door; then, it stopped. Jon writhed in ecstasy, wrapped in his own world and a few sheets when a sudden tap at the door brought him back to reality. He looked up to see Laurie emerging from the entrance.

“Hi,” she said in a soft, sweet voice. “I have donuts.” She pulled her arm from the hallway to reveal a rectangular box.

Jon smiled, not at the pastries, but because he *knew* she was out buying donuts. He was getting to know her so well! He motioned her towards the bed—which she obliged, batting her big, blue eyes at him. She faithfully lay next to him, throwing her bouncy curls into the fold of his arm and pushing her face into his body. A thick wave of hair rose a couple of inches from her head before falling into his nook. They lay there, breathing as one, feeling each other’s heartbeat, knowing things would only get better.

“Would you like a donut, Love?” Laurie asked while rising from her position. Her smile was big and contagious, prompting Jon to sit up to meet her infectious tone.

“I would love one,” he responded. “Feed it to me.”

She sighed as he lay with his mouth agape. She quickly adjusted, blinked once to reset her focus, then broke off a piece and pushed it to his lips. She pulled it away and pressed her lips against his, breathing his breath but not kissing him. She nipped at his tongue with her teeth and then opened her eyes to look at him. He seemed confused or, perhaps, inexperienced. He was becoming more confident, but the game was still new to him.

“So tell me about this Riverfest. Is it like a fireworks show downtown or something?” she asked while leaning away from him. She continued to break apart the donut and feed it to him.

He resisted the urge to say something clever, as he was adapting to his new semi-virgin swagger, so he shook his head in disbelief and tried to be nice to her:

“You really aren’t from around here, are you?”

She just rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

“A barge on the river shoots off these huge fireworks over the city. People swarm the riverbanks on both sides to watch them overhead. Something, like, half a million people spill out into the streets and party all day and all night.”

“Yeah, I noticed a lot of people walking around already,” she added.

“Oh yeah, people start early. Usually, everyone is off the next day since it’s Labor Day. So, everyone parties all day long. It’s nuts,” he revealed. “It’s been going on every Labor Day weekend since the seventies. My parents used to take me as a kid.”

Laurie dutifully listened to him, feeding herself a donut between warm smiles in his direction. When she was curious, she would ask a question:

“So, do we walk down to the river, or stand outside the bar, or…what were you thinking?”

“I figured we could just watch them here. We’d have a clear view of ‘em. We could even go out on the balcony,” he suggested. She nodded in agreement, wanting to be with him. “We could walk down a few blocks to get something to eat later. It should be dark by the time we come back.”

“What do we do in the meantime?” she asked suggestively in a hypnotic tone while spreading her legs. He smiled devilishly and moved towards her like a lion pouncing on its prey. They started kissing, which prompted Jon’s hand to venture into her skirt before being stopped by her hand. She pulled her lips away and playfully made a demand:

“You have to buy a girl dinner first.” Jon frowned but understood. He’d have to wait until later that night. They continued kissing while the horny bachelor kept his hands beside her on the bed. But he had a nagging question on his mind:

“So…where *are* you from, anyway? He whispered while pulling away to see her face. “You never answered me.”

She looked deeply into his eyes as if casting a spell on him. She sucked his kiss deeper and pulled his hand close to cup her breast. All questions faded into the passion that she created. They sat longer with their eyes closed, feeling each other’s excitement with their lips. At one point, Jon peaked slightly to find Laurie side-looking at something in the room.

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From Cincinnati to the corresponding towns in Kentucky, the hysteria was palpable each year on the Sunday before Labor Day. As the afternoon progressed, dark shapes moved further up the bedroom wall, over their bodies, past the closet, and into the twilight; waves of humanity swelled around the river on both sides. Bodies filled the streets, laughing, drinking, cheering—all waiting until sundown for the Midwest’s largest fireworks display to begin. It was a tradition in the Queen City.

Jon and Laurie listened to the crowds of people shuffle below their window. After some motivation, they pulled their bodies from each other and dressed. A slight chill was in the air, so he pulled her close as they walked down the stairs. They walked past the bar as he pulled her big head of hair into his chest. The bartender gave him a thumbs-up and a wink while they were passing. Jon reflected on his many years at the bar and how it was becoming less important to him. He had Laurie and didn’t need the bar anymore. They casually strolled down the street, eager for the night to begin.

After a stop at a local pizzeria down the street, they continued their stroll up Monmouth Street to his apartment. It was getting darker, and the crowds were getting bigger and more raucous. They held hands and weaved between people. Jon thought to himself, ensuring he was sticking to the game plan. He was nervous about penetrating a woman but quickly devised a strategy to put the condom on. They continued to embrace while walking up the stairs. She could feel his sweaty palms, and that excited her. They were almost to the top. There was no turning back. He was going through that door and coming out a different person.

His anxiety grew as they entered his apartment and closed the door. He panicked and made a beeline for the bathroom to empty his bladder and put the condom on. He wanted to be prepared. Laurie went to the kitchen to make a drink, not knowing what to make of Jon’s behavior. The night was nearly upon them; thus, the fireworks were ready to begin. Loud music from the barge’s PA system blasted, like a public warning siren, while roars from the crowd added to the cacophony. Jon struggled with the prophylactic while he was in the bathroom, but the music and cheering from the public pumped him up—so he was ready to do it. He put his hand on the bathroom doorknob, took a deep breath, turned, and pushed.

Laurie stood at the edge of the kitchen, wearing a warm smile and holding a drink. He approached her like a victorious matador, grabbed her by the waist, and kissed her on the lips. Fireworks exploded over them while radiance illuminated his apartment through skylights in the ceiling. The crowd cheered him on, as it was *his* time. She offered him the drink, and he took it with one hand and grabbed her by the fingers with the other. He led her into the bedroom, but they stopped short for a kiss. She pulled herself away and forced the glass up to his lips instead. He took a drink and tried to kiss her, but she fell backward onto the bed and quickly rolled onto her stomach to face his crotch. He took another gulp and placed the cup on a nightstand beside his bed. She was tugging on the zipper of his shorts with her teeth before pulling it with her silky digits. He peered down at her in wild amazement while she gazed up at him, watching with a need to please. A boom suddenly rocked the apartment, exploding a fiery brilliance from the walls to the ceiling. It made them jump, but they quickly settled back in. Jon was ready. She pulled down his pants and took his penis from the folds of his clothing. The dark room masked the look on her face when she felt the condom, but she quickly pulled it off. Any disgust at his amateur move was quickly lost in the moment. She started on him.

“Are you ready, My King?” she softly whispered to him while another boom rocked the residence, preceded by a splash of light. The crowd roared and cheered him on. He was on the cusp of becoming a man; thus, he nodded and stared down at her. Another bang shook the penthouse as the bursts became more frequent, leading to the climax. The room was in a state of constant flashing lights. The apartment was convulsed by overhead fireworks. Loud music pumped through Newport, and the crowd's rumble applauded Jon as he got his dick sucked for the first time. It was quite a celebration!

After a few moments, he started feeling a little unsteady, so he laid himself on the bed and let Laurie straddle him with her hands and mouth. She picked up the pace to the music while the chaos had no effect on his erection. He lay there in pleasure until a thought surfaced; thus, he motioned for her to stop. She glanced at him with slight irritation. He rolled over and pulled a small box from under the bed. He opened it to expose the corsage. It was a part of the plan, and his mother would’ve been so proud of him. She would’ve liked Laurie, so he wanted her to have it.

“What’s this?” she said, trying to hide her agitation.

“It’s something that’s important to me, and I want you to have it,” he softly answered, trying not to kill the mood. He tied it to her wrist while the pops overhead colored their bodies. She rolled her eyes and sighed a “whatever” before continuing the blowjob. He peeked at her, watching her hand jerk with the flower attached, which changed shades as the hues intensified. He tried to caress her thick black locks, but she pushed his hand away. Jon laid back and enjoyed himself for the first time in his miserable life.

He felt himself stiffen while she worked him like a porn star. He was feeling very woozy, though, too. *Was it because all the blood rushed to my penis?* He thought. The fireworks grew louder, the lights became brighter, and his heart beat faster. The bursts increased as they reached a crescendo. This was it: the grand finale! The crowd heightened as Jon was nearing his first orgasm with a woman. Everything turned into slow motion.

He...was...about...to:

*Bang.* A shell exploded overhead as the first spurt of ejaculation shot to the back of Laurie’s throat. Jon let out a sharp grunt, like backfire. The room lit up all red.

*Boom.* The second burst shot across her face, like a flair, as the room shook from another shell. He only saw green.

*Thud.* The third spritz shot into the air and then onto the flower. Again, he groaned in relief under a spiraling blue haze. But he was starting to lose consciousness. The room was spinning. *Have I been drugged?* he thought.

A series of popcorn-like fireworks erupted quickly, signaling the show’s end. His contractions petered out as Laurie, just a shadowy figure in the room at that point, still milked his orgasm. With his heart racing, Jon collapsed onto the bed, shaking and feeling dizzy. He looked over at the glass on the nightstand and wondered why it was fizzing.

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The following day was calm and peaceful, with an opaque-blue summer sky, which seemed extra brilliant in the morning hours. A gentle breeze blew through Jon's open window, past a lone bird perched on the balcony’s railing. His body was lifeless and naked from the waist down. His face was covered by a sheet that also entwined the upper half of his body. His bedroom was ransacked, and the suitcase full of money was gone. His front door was ajar, with a few stacks of cash on the floor leading up to it. A long, black wig with black curls lay on the threshold of his balcony door like a dead animal. The boutonniere’s remnants were ground and stuck to the floor, next to the wig and a few business cards. It was all gone...everything.

A faint commotion erupted below and broke the scene’s odd tranquility. The homeless man from the street corner was crying and laughing, holding a stack of cash to the sky, announcing that he was the luckiest man in the world. No one else was around to dispute his findings. Another pile was farther down the sidewalk, next to a few business cards and a grease spot on the pavement with dead ants.

“I’m the luckiest man in the world,” again, he loudly exclaimed to the brisk morning air, which prompted the sad bird to scurry away. A sudden jolt, or movement, slowly rolled from the mound of fabric on the bed. A trembling hand emerged from the folds, pulling the swaddling sheet away to reveal Jon’s face. His head was pounding, so he pulled out his other hand to soothe it. For a moment, he lay there, not knowing who he was nor where he was at. As he slowly started to piece it together, he was overcome with a debilitating dread. He rose from his position and looked around in horror. All color left his face as his mouth dropped open. How could he have been so foolish? He fumbled for his cell phone on his nightstand and frantically searched for her number. He started hyperventilating while finding it. He pushed the “call” button repeatedly.

Outside, the homeless man sat on the curb, crying, clutching his two bricks of cash. A cell phone, randomly lying in the street, flashed and rang in front of him. He jumped to grab it, but a car, a Lamborghini, came racing down the road, waking the sleepy residents of Jon’s neighborhood and crushing the phone to pieces as it ran over the device. His corner of the world slowly retracted from him, soaring high above the treetops, the whisps of cloudy air, and the homeless man cursing at the sportscar. Up into the sky, where shooting stars grant at least one wish, so everyone has a chance to get it right.

# Part 5

# (2020)

#

*I*

*t was the past, but it was also the future. It was vague but also vivid at the same time. Something wasn’t quite right, as displayed by the squiggly lines of haze that outlined the electric images, which told an unclear story. A man feverishly searched for something on a shelf of books in an escape room resembling a library or study. There was a door in the center of the room. Sometimes it was an iron gate, and sometimes it was clear with a sky floating through it. The room changed from dark to light, depending on the door. Over and over, the man found a golden key and attempted to unlock the portal. Each time he thought it would work. And, each time, it didn’t. He was surprised at each outcome. The impending sense that he needed to break through intensified, and the cycle continued until a red light intermittently flashed above the gateway, and a loud siren sounded. In rhythm, over and over, it blasted: red light flashed...and the siren sounded. Over and over. The man stared in disbelief. The light flashed, and the siren sounded.*

*It sounded...*

*Sounded...*

*Sounded...*

*Sounded...*

The steady beeping of an alarm clock caused a twisted sleeping figure to stir. It groggily inched its way closer to the nightstand, on which the alarm clock was placed, next to a disheveled bed. An unkempt man in his forties finally rolled over and shut off the obnoxious sound. He rubbed his eyes and forehead as the reality of waking up alone and facing a new day sunk in. He reached for the remote control beside the clock and clicked on the TV. It was on a dresser in the center of the room at the foot of his bed. He lay back on a pillow against the headboard as the warm glow of the television lit up the room. The worn lines on the man’s face, especially around his eyes, became more prominent as the radiation from the screen frosted everything in the room. He stared at the muted images before reaching to the bedside table for his phone without taking his half-cocked eyes from a silent news broadcast. He scrolled through his messages a few times, clicked on his day planner, and then held it close to his face:

“Hello, Jonathan. You start a new job today. Click here for the directions,” displayed on the phone’s surface. He hesitated to click it; and, instead, opted to turn the sound up on the TV just as a commercial ended and the broadcast resumed.

"And now, let's send it over to Lance Shapiro for our New Year's Day forecast," the newsman directed. An older gentleman with wavy white hair and a dimple in his chin smiled at the camera and waved his arms around while holding a clicker in his left hand.

"It is going to be a mild start to the new year, with highs only reaching 48 degrees. We will start this morning with a low of around 34 degrees..."

Jonathan wiped the sleep from his eyes and looked around the cold, dark room. He woke up, just like any other morning, and dreaded another day of work; but on a day when most people were off. To him, New Year's Eve and the following day were just another set of dates on the calendar. There was no partying the night before, as he had nothing to celebrate. He turned his attention back to the news:

“And that is your New Year’s Day forecast. And now back to you, Tim,” concluded the meteorologist.

“Thanks, Lance,” the news anchor picked up. “I hope 2020 brings you much prosperity and excitement. I know you’re looking forward to the Lyrid Meteor Shower in a few months.”

“Yes,” Lance could be heard in the other studio, excitedly, off-mic and camera. After a moment, he was plugged back into the soundboard:

“Yes, starting in April, we will see an impressive light show in the Northern Hemisphere. The Lyrid Meteor Shower will start in the middle of April and run through the end of the month. I’m very excited about it. Everyone, get your wishes ready.”

The camera panned back to the anchorman, who was wearing a warm, impromptu smile before resuming the broadcast:

“Yes, we will, Lance. Thanks for the reminder. In other news, a disturbing report out of China details a new pneumonia-causing virus that has doctors there baffled. For more on that, let’s head over to our foreign correspondent...”

Jonathan clicked on the remote and turned the television back off. He lay there in the dark, with enough moonshine peeking through the closed blinds in his bedroom window that he could see his bellowing breath in the cold room. Plumes of carbon dioxide shot from his chiseled jaw into the abyss and then curled into tufts that floated through the air just below the ceiling. His body was motionless, as if submerged in a sarcophagus, while the lifeless figure contemplated getting up. Another year of scrubbing other people’s shit off toilets while they slept in. It was the last remaining drop of hope that a new year would bring him something different, which ultimately got the broken man out of bed. He brushed his hair and teeth because he decided 2020 would bring him prosperity.

Under the sliver of an orange-creamsicle sunrise that broke on the horizon, Jonathan loaded the back of his pick-up truck with the day’s necessities. He slung a mop bucket over the side and dropped it into the bed, breaking the silence of the foggy winter morning. A dark silhouette milled around the back of a dimly lit log cabin that sat on a pea-shaped lake and was partially hidden by majestic pine trees that dotted the property. The shadow slowly faded into a worn image of a broken man, barely clinging onto life, searching for his purpose, happiness, and lavender-scented toilet cleaner.

His truck was packed and ready to go. He jumped in the cab and turned on the ignition. He pulled out his phone, clicked on his day planner, and set it on the dashboard, wedged against the windshield. It glared against the transparent partition as he adjusted it and clicked on the directions. The reflection made him feel like he was on a spaceship with advanced controls illuminating on the glass. The sherbet-colored sunrise pushed higher into the atmosphere while Jonathan pulled onto the long, winding road that swept past his quiet corner of the world. A lone shooting star arched in the fleeting night sky as he sped up the road into the distance and then slowly out of sight.

As his beat-up Ford Ranger traveled north on US 25, the morning was becoming less dark and more lit while the hood of his turquoise-colored truck warmed up and beamed the early-morning rays from it. Like he did every day, he pulled into a gas station up the street from his house to get a coffee. It was one of the few joys that he had in life. He swung into the vacant station and parked over a grease spot next to the station’s dumpster. His lanyard danced around his neck as he jumped from the cab. The bold letters conveyed his name, “Jonathan Simmons,” to the clients who hired his janitorial services. He was a shell of the man he once was, who was only a shell then.

“Hey Jonathan,” the attendant behind the counter waived at him as he entered.

He nodded but kept his stride to the coffee counter in the back of the store. The roasted, burnt smell of freshly brewed coffee perked his senses before even tasting its nutty flavor. Like he did each day, he pulled a large cup from a stack, placed it next to the machine, and poured a steady stream of steaming hot brew into the narrow Styrofoam cup. Although he fumbled through the various creamers under the counter to his right, he ultimately grabbed an amaretto-flavored cup. He added it to the coffee to cut its bitterness, making it more tolerable. Such was life to Jonathan.

Jonathan had a lot on his mind but also nothing on it at the same time. He escorted himself to the counter to pay for his coffee, paying little attention to the attendant, who accepted his payment. The small, effeminate man looked up to Jonathan when handing back the change with his milky, fragile hands. He always smiled at the downtrodden customer and engaged him, but Jonathan rarely responded with anything other than a grunt. As he exited the building, the clerk pushed a customary “Have a nice day” from his thin, peach-fuzzed lips, which provoked a nod from the janitor.

Once again, the old pick-up truck traveled north at speeds too fast to maintain the body’s integrity. The morning light revealed very little traffic on the two-lane highway as the old chassis violently shook, flapping its rusty parts against the asphalt—prompting an occasional spark that shot upwards, just behind the cab. Jonathan was a road warrior, a cosmic traveler looking for toilets to clean.

He was approaching his destination: the industrial shipping yards of suburban Florence, Kentucky, just a stone’s throw away from the big-city lights of Cincinnati. His space-truckin’ journey slowed to a cautious pace as he turned up the GPS on his phone to listen carefully to its directions. He wanted to make sure that he reached the new client promptly, even though very few people would be there on New Year’s Day, he suspected. He turned right onto a side road, per the app’s directions, leading to a warehouse and factory community. Chain-linked fences, some topped with barbed wire, lined the pot-holed road, occasionally opening to let the workers through to their jobs.

As he slowly rolled down the road, scanning side-to-side, the sun shone brightly overhead, signaling that it would be a good day for him. His phone revealed he would reach his destination in 100 yards, so he slowed to a crawl, anticipating a right or left turn. Suddenly, a blip in the sky, like a glitch radiating from the sun, accompanied by brief but sharp static on the radio while the GPS paused and then recalculated. He slowed to a stop and tapped the monitor in frustration as he needed to make a turn. The screen blinked, recalculated, and then reset itself. Jonathan tapped it again until it finally revealed the destination was on the left. The frustrated janitor turned left onto the long driveway that emptied into a vast parking lot. A hulking warehouse towered over the pavement and anchored a fleet of tractor-trailers, like calves to their mother. Once again, the GPS blipped and then recalculated. Jonathan sighed and stopped the truck until it finished. Luckily, no one was behind him. After another tap on the screen, the app announced that he was finally at his destination; thus, he turned it off, and the radio, too, as it was starting to give off static again. There were barely any cars in the lot, except for a few close to the building. He searched for a convenient spot to unload, preferably in the front. He noticed a door propped open in the back on a patio, where people would smoke on lunch breaks, so he steered his truck to that area. He parked near the veranda and jumped out to unload the bed.

Having grown used to the uncomfortable feeling of being a stranger to others in the workplace, he strolled past the unlocked fence that caged the patio from unlawful intruders. It wasn’t working that day. Jonathan pushed open the door and moved the two-by-four on the threshold out of his way with a sharp kick. He rolled his bucket through the door by pressing the mop hard into the reservoir and steering it with the wooden handle. His ruckus was immediately muffled by the deafening sound of a thousand rollers twirling on conveyor belts and other industrial sounds. There were a few people around, but no one seemed to notice him, so he proceeded to unload his truck and get working.

It took him all morning, but he finished with the facility after having difficulty finding it at first. He wanted to reward himself for a job well done by getting lunch at his favorite fast-food restaurant, an indulgence he seldom took due to his lack of income. He hoped his luck would change and he would get more work from that day’s assignment. He kept his fingers crossed.

After a long wait in the drive-thru, the exhausted janitor placed his order and excitedly pulled up to the window to get his favorite greasy sandwich, fries, and a Coke. The older woman at the window greeted him with a friendly smile and handed him the drink. He passed his credit card through the window, and she grabbed it from him, swiped it, and placed her other hand on the bag that contained his delicious sandwich. She shoved the food out the window for him to grab when the cash register started beeping, causing a commotion. She pushed her chubby face towards the opening with a disgusted look:

“Sir, your card’s been declined,” she smugly relayed to him as he firmly grabbed the greasy packet. A tug-of-war ensued over the meal while others watched in irritation at what Jonathan was trying to pull.

“Let go of the bag, sir. Do you have another form of payment? Hand me back the Coke, sir,” she demanded. He looked out the window, but not directly at her, as cars started to beep at him. Eventually, the sack ripped, and the sandwich fell to the ground under the window. He swiftly put his truck into gear and pressed the gas, pulling away from the woman but still with one hand on the torn container of food. Fries showered the drive-thru while the sack wholly separated, but he managed to hold onto a handful of fries through his end of the pack. He pulled in the booty and pushed his vehicle into second gear as he rounded the building and exited onto the main street. He was hungry, so he gnashed the greasy fries in his mouth and washed them down with the carbonated beverage. He wiped a tear from his eye and promised the next day would be better.

Once at home in his tucked-away cabin, deep in the hills of Northern Kentucky, Jonathan sat in a chair, licked his wounds, and tried to keep it together, but every day was getting increasingly more challenging to handle. He definitely needed work, so he decided to return to the new, prospective job site on a day when the decision-makers would be in; so he could solidify a long-term contract with them. He figured the next day would be best; thus, he planned to return for a brief follow-up meeting in the morning.

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 Tufts of fog filled the gaps and valleys of the early-morning surroundings near Jonathan's cabin, like balls of cotton, snagged on the ragged treetops and stretched across the canopy of dormant branches. The first rays of sunshine cut through the haze and lit it up; low-lying areas, such as his front yard, resembled heaven on Earth or individually conjoined Gardens of Eden. It was a pastoral exhibition capturing the earliest merrymakers of Kentucky wildlife.

Conversely, a less-carefree animal stirred from a window of the reclusive cabin the following day as Jonathan awoke from his nightly slumber later than he wanted. Like clockwork, he flipped on the TV and muted it, so he could play his own soundtrack, whether music in his mind or dialog. He closed his tired eyes and lay in bed, listening to his environment: the rustling of some unknown creature outside his window and the cool winter breeze blowing against the cabin. It was the perfect atmosphere for a damaged mind to play tricks on itself.

*He suddenly unmuted the television to help begin the day. A commercial of a man driving into a business, wearing sunglasses and a confident smile, flashed on the screen. He pulled up to the building. Another man came out of a glass building to meet him. He was wearing a white suit from head to toe and smoking a cigar. The man heaped praise on the visitor, pointing back at his business, smiling, and patting him on the back. He then pulled out a fistful of dollars and forced it on the guest. They both looked at the camera and then...*

"Shit!" Jonathan exclaimed, waking from his trance while throwing back the covers. He should've been on the road by then, so he jumped out of bed and hurriedly rushed around the house to prepare himself. He felt good about his performance the day before and was confident that the bigwigs would feel the same way. He visualized a positive outcome of the meeting with them, practicing his handshake while getting his things together. *Not too tight*, he thought, *but not too limp, either*. The TV played in silence as he scurried out the door. All was still and silent, briefly, before Jonathan barged back in and walked over to the nightstand to pick up the remote control. He then turned off the glowing screen.

Pulling out of the gas station with his coffee in the cupholder on the dashboard, he raced down the two-lane highway toward civilization, feeling good about himself. He banged his fist on the steering wheel to the beat of his rattling speakers. He turned off the GPS since it was chatting over his music; plus, he knew where he was going anyway. Internally, he felt he was on the cusp of something great; he was going to turn his misfortune around. Once paved with gold for him, the road of life now led to another destination: someone else's filthy bathroom. He was going to change that around. He approached the side street and slowed down to negotiate the turn. There were no solar flares that day.

He glided down the side street with his eyes locked on the warehouse. The giant steel structure rose from a sea of stationary cars—not an empty lot like the previous day. He was their savior coming to save them; he couldn't park his vehicle quick enough. There was a spot close to the main office area for visitors, so he pulled into it. He waited in the truck to let the suspense build. He was going to control the conversation and situation.

He glanced at the office window, opened the door, and jumped out. A finger forcefully opened the blinds behind the glass, and a pair of narrow eyes peered out. They squinted at him and the company logo on his door before the slat closed. Jonathan walked to the back of his truck to check his equipment's security and buy himself time to figure out what he would say. He collected his thoughts and turned to the sidewalk. Within a few steps, he was met by an irate man, who stormed from the main door, followed by a dozen professionally-clad corporate goons. The man started yapping at Jonathan from afar as they approached each other.

"Hey!" the man yelled at the unsuspecting janitor. "Are you the dipshit who cleaned my bathroom yesterday?" The man moved closer to him.

Jonathan was taken aback. He didn't respond but only stood in embarrassment. All the corporate goons surrounded the needy man and angrily glared at him. They were disgusted by his shriveled, inadequate demeanor. To them, he was a flaccid penis. Jonathan cowered at the powerful men.

"I'm not paying for that. You imbecile," the successful man shouted at Jonathan while waving his fist in the custodian’s face. "I didn't order your services, moron. You have the wrong address."

Jonathan somehow unfroze himself enough to pull a phone from his pocket and tap on it several times to access his GPS app. Nervously, he dropped it on the ground, which prompted laughter from the smug men, who delighted in the janitor’s misfortune. Once he recovered the phone, he clicked on the address from the previous day. The laughter subsided as everyone anticipated the GPS' directions. They looked around at each other as the phone recalculated. They couldn't wait to put the final nail in the coffin of Jonathan's hope and dignity.

*Your destination is 200 yards behind you*, the phone revealed.

The men looked at each other in silent satisfaction, savoring the kill infront of them. They released another man's soul from his body. Jonathan turned slowly to find a group of men watching him from the business across the street. One man was dressed professionally, while the other two were dressed in uniforms. They stood next to a janitorial services truck.

*Your destination is 200 yards ahead*, the phone confirmed out loud.

Laughter erupted from the men surrounding him as Jonathan lowered his head in shame. The man across the way shook his head in pity while the other two started a job Jonathan couldn’t do the day before. The angry man returned the hapless custodian to the seriousness of the situation:

"Now, get the fuck off my property before I have my CFO kick your pansy ass," he threatened while thumbing back to the character behind him. Jonathan looked down at the pavement like a scorned dog. He managed to scurry to the cab of his truck and ignite the engine. The men turned around as one and returned to the massive building. Jonathan carefully pulled from his spot and drove to the end of the row as he licked his emotional wounds. He was surrounded by metal, whether it was cars or warehouses, which led to a state of disorientation. He was almost out of the steel jungle. Just one more turn until the main road, and... Bam!

Jonathan clipped the front end of a car as he was making the final turn. Both car and truck came to a complete halt, blocking the only way in and out of the vast lot. Still in shock from the confrontation, Jonathan seemed unphased while the other car sat motionless. Its windows were too dark to see inside. It was all the better for the broken businessman, as he was expecting a burly man to get out of the car and do what the mob did not: sock him square in his pathetic face. With his eyes closed, he waited for his comeuppance. The door to the other car slowly opened. He cracked one eyelid but then quickly closed it. He listened.

Footsteps started from the car and became louder as they approached Jonathan's truck. They seemed somewhat quick and rather clacking. A woman's voice rang out, much to his surprise:

"Oh my God, are you alright?" a younger woman yelled at Jonathan through his window. "Are you alright?"

He just sat in his cab, non-responsive, with his eyes closed, too defeated from life to open them. She gazed at him in horror. Her beautiful, goddess-like demeanor was grief-stricken at the thought of vehicular homicide. There was a moment in time when it stood still. Two people came together by chance and cosmically altered one another before the encounter returned to normal speed.

"Pookie...is that you?" a voice shouted behind the truck.

"Daddy!" the girl responded. Jonathan opened an eye in disbelief without her seeing. *Daddy*, he thought to himself. *Oh no!* The big, angry boss was her dad!

"Pookie, are you alright?" the voice shot back. It was getting louder. She ran towards it as Jonathan shifted his rearview mirror to see his fate coming. This was it; he was going to die.

"I think I killed that man," he heard the female voice exclaim from a distance.

"You killed him?" her father snapped. "What do you mean?"

*I might as well be dead*, Jonathan thought to himself.

Her dad fidgeted while fuming under his breath. *He should've killed me while he had the chance, so his daughter didn't have to,* the scared man thought. The big wig’s backup, the Corporate Mafia, trickled out from the building once again. Jonathan could see them from the mirror. They had business in their eyes. He just sat there quietly and played dead.

The group of people watched the damaged truck from outside the building, trying to understand the situation. The beautiful young daughter pleaded with her bullish father to stay calm, as she didn’t want his cardiovascular problems aggravated.

"Dad, just let me handle it," a female voice emanated from the group in a low, strategic tone. "I'm not your little girl anymore. I'm a grown-up woman. I can handle it myself."

Jonathan peeked at the mirror from his upright position without moving. He watched the daughter cautiously approach his truck on the driver's side. She could’ve been a beauty queen or a scrappy brawler. He lay there lifelessly to let her reach him. She inched closer to his window with her mouth open and fists clenched. She was nearly upon him.

"Hey, Mister...are you alright?" She pleaded. She poked him in the shoulder. He remained still. She looked worriedly back at her father and his employees, fearing the worst.

"Mister," she sheepishly asked again after taking a deep breath. "Are you alrig..."

Suddenly, Jonathan sneezed, and the woman jumped. She let out a shrill cry. They both looked at each other before she scrambled back to her father, who was held back by one of his goons. They aggressively whispered to each other as Jonathan turned the key to start the car. It didn't start! The ignition cranked but wouldn't turn. The whispering increased to subtle pleading. Jonathan panicked, turning the key, trying to escape to save his sad life. The engine still didn’t ignite. The daughter turned to approach the distressed man. He watched her in the mirror as she came to him with resolve in her eyes. She was going to handle it.

"Hey, I'm glad you're alright. But I'm afraid that will change if you don't leave here soon." Jonathan stopped cranking the engine and looked at her like a confused puppy. "We can take care of this at a later time. You really need to watch where you're going. Let me get your number, and we can settle it with our insurance companies."

Jonathan stared blankly at her, trying to surmise his role in the cosmos. He glanced down at her bare chest while she spoke, noting her diamond necklace as it sparkled against her golden skin. It was shaped like a horseshoe and radiantly shined in his eyes.

"Can I have your number?" she sternly reiterated to the stunned driver. She nervously looked back at her father and his crew and then again at Jonathan. She tilted her head sideways and waited for his answer. Thus, her disposition was dire. Her hazel eyes accented her soft, olive skin and straight brown hair. Consequently, her beauty begat a need to be taken seriously. No one was going to take advantage of her, and if by chance they did, her father would see to it that they didn't.

"Hey!" she yelled and banged on the door, snapping Jonathan from his trance. He rattled off his number and turned the key again. This time, by the grace of God, the truck started. The feisty woman wrote his number down and noted her satisfaction with the engine starting. She didn't want any further problems.

"I'm going to give you my card, as well," she instructed him, like a mother talking to her child. "We'll work out the particulars." She handed her information to him with genuine concern in her almond-shaped eyes. He took it like a beggar does a cup of soup. He would've taken anything at that point.

"Let me know if you need anything," she stressed with a hint of empathy as if she was compensating for her father's social shortcomings. She walked to her car to move it from the road. Neither of their vehicles was seriously damaged, except for a crack in her passenger-side fender. It dragged on the ground while she backed up to let the sorry sack-of-a-man through. He awkwardly waved to her while passing, but she just nodded. It was her natural way of making him feel better, not worse. She parked her car and returned to work. Jonathan peeled out of the lot and scurried down the road like a wounded animal. He couldn’t get home and in bed any quicker.

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As days turned into nights and then weeks, Jonathan lay in bed for the bulk of January, looking back on his life and feeling sorry for himself. Days were metered out by glowing images on the TV screen. They changed, of course, but they were pretty much the same: news broadcasts, images of scared people suffering, depictions of spikey virus molecules, and pictures of shooting stars captioned with the words "Lyrid Meteor Shower." A cyclone of emotions circled his bedroom for weeks while he shuttered himself from the outside world. He thought that 2020 was going to be different, his last chance to salvage what little hope he had for himself, but it was turning out like all the others. The thought of having something and then not having it cut deeper into his soul than not having it in the first place. He reasoned *one could choke on just the very taste of something* as the hurricane of thoughts and feelings bore down on his fragile mind, snuffing out all sense of time and space. He wished he *would* choke to stop the cycle of disappointment.

After the first week, a light on his phone began to blink, a beacon to the outside world. Jonathan was in no state to notice it; but if he was, he would’ve known who was on the other end of it. A business card lay next to the device, highlighting the details with every blink: "Lydia Barrister, Accountant." A younger version of him would have viewed the flashing light as an opportunity to court a young lady, but that ship sailed years ago. Those items were just a reminder of what a loser he was. He had no insurance nor money to pay for her damaged car. He could lay in bed for months, and nothing would change that.

The cyclone spun lower over his ravaged mind as the storm approached its zenith. In the first few weeks of the new year, Jonathan reminded himself daily that he had a gun in his closet. Over the weeks, he deduced that he had nothing to live for and didn't make a difference to anyone. He thought about his life: his terrible childhood, winning a million dollars, and then getting suckered out of it. Thus, he wondered if ending it was the only solution.

 After the Martin Luther King Jr holiday, Jonathan rose from his bed to finally get the gun from his closet. It was time. He thought about the kids in his class laughing at him when he was younger and his parents locking him out of the house as he slowly walked to the closet. There was no fear in his eyes, only weariness. The memory of that burning Lamborghini wrapped around the telephone pole made him clench the doorknob even tighter. He opened the closet and looked around for the pistol. Then, he pulled it from the shelf and held it to his chest as if in pain while he recalled the sight of his ransacked room. He walked back to the bed to stick the barrel in his mouth, thinking about Laurie's beautiful long black hair and how it lay in his doorway. Neither Laurie nor her hair was real.

As he sat on the edge of the mattress and placed the cold, hard barrel in his mouth, he remembered the homeless man's words outside his window that morning: *I'm the luckiest man in the world*. He gripped the trigger firmly, believing that he had never made a difference, nor would he ever. He cleared his mind and slowly started to pull the...

*I'm the luckiest man in the world.*

A shot rang out and resonated piercingly through the room as the gun dropped at Jonathan's feet. He fell to the mattress on his side, alive, holding his weeping eyes. He did touch someone's life: the homeless man. And the money that he spent went on to touch other lives. That was *his* money, and it went to help sustain countless other souls. He found value in himself, like a lifeline cast to him in the last hour. But, it was only temporary. He lived another day. He pulled himself into bed and sat up against the headboard to catch his breath. Relieved, he looked around the cold, dark room in a moment of clarity as if he had woken from a long slumber. He curiously looked at the blinking light before the veil was lifted and remembered who it was.

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**1/6/2020 5:11 PM**: hi jonthan this is lydia the one you hit. lol. Can you txt me back your insurance info? thx

**1/9/2020 5:32 PM**: jonathan this is lydia again. yo really need to txt me your info. please text me back

**1/13/2020 5:01 PM:** this is lydia again jonathan if you don't text me back youll force me to take legl action. please txt me back

**\*1/21/2020 10:41AM:** Hi Lydia. Sorry for the delay. Can we meet somewhere?

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Jonathan swung his old pick-up truck into a parking spot and bounced back after hitting the curb with his tires. He quickly turned off the engine to avoid the embarrassment of it backfiring. Quietly, he sat to calm himself while peering into the Starbucks window directly in front of him, searching for Lydia. He vaguely remembered what she looked like, nor did he really care, so he surveyed the lobby before noting the woman he recognized as her. He didn't know what he would say regarding his lack of insurance, so he would wing it and roll with the punches, as he did most of his life. Humbly, he scrounged enough change to buy a medium coffee, separated the coins, and placed them in different pockets to eliminate the desperate look of too much change.

He jumped from the cab and closed the door while noticing her wrecked car at the end of the walkway. As he approached the front door, an older couple, full of contentment, exited and brightly smiled at him. They held the bulky glass door open for him. He was too numb to thank them properly, so he entered the store to pay for his medium coffee with a handful of change just to get the meeting over with. Luckily, there wasn't anyone in line, so he crept up to the counter with little confidence and placed his order. While down on his luck, Jonathan wasn't an unattractive man; in fact, he seemed to get better looking, at least on the outside, as he settled into middle age. So, the younger barista flashed a couple of glances while helping him. The distressed man didn't notice. He just tried to maintain a sense of normalcy—long enough to not embarrass himself. She smiled at him and didn't get sad or disappointed when he walked away without smiling back.

Jonathan walked over to put cream in his coffee and empty his frantic mind. While doing so, a figure in the background noticed him. It was Lydia. She sat up straight in front of a laptop computer, brushed the bangs from her eyes, and waved at him to get his attention. He noticed her, cocked a half-smile, and started toward her. She didn't take her eyes off him while welcoming him warmly. He was awkward and struggled to make eye contact with her. She stood and confidently stretched her hand to greet him upon his arrival. He gripped her tiny palm as if pulling on a door knob, forgetting what it was like to be with a woman. He then sat down in a chair across from her. She eased herself back into the seat, as well.

"You have quite a grip there, Jonathan," she laughed, trying to lighten the mood. Nice to finally meet you again." He nodded in agreement and looked down at the tiled floor, trying to be pleasant. He then looked over her shoulder at the TV hanging from the ceiling in the background. It was playing a news cycle.

"Well, thanks for coming out to meet me today. I was beginning to think that you were going to bail on me," she followed up with another chuckle, trying to get his response. She wrapped her glossy lips around the straw that jutted from an iced beverage and looked at him. The silky tones of her iced latte underscored the bronze complexion of her skin and hazel eyes. She was intelligent and beautiful, and she knew it. Although her dad was the owner and president of the company, she could've landed the job herself, just on her skill and charm alone. Her long tan legs crossed at the thighs and stretched into pointed heels at the ends. Her straight dark hair, which tended to become straw-like if not adequately treated, hung over a brown leather jacket and danced when she moved her head. She playfully studied him like a spreadsheet, waiting on his next move.

Feeling anxious and awkward, Jonathan felt compelled to say something to prove he was still capable.

"Hey, I'm just going to be straight with you," he started. "I don't have any insurance, so there's no way I can fix your car." The playful look in her eye subsided as she sat up intently in her chair.

"I don't have any money either,” he continued abruptly, interrupting his thoughts. He unskillfully smiled before looking back down at the floor. She stared at him, not entirely surprised, choosing her words as if she were speaking to a subordinate during a meeting. She moved her tongue around her closed mouth and looked around at the floor to gather her thoughts and convey them precisely how she was thinking. Jonathan couldn't look at her, so he stared over her shoulder at the TV, like a scorned child when lectured by a parent. The sound of it was just barely audible.

"Jonathan, do you know how irresponsible that is?" she asked him. "What if you would've killed someone." The poor man just sat, staring at the news, occasionally floating his eyes to match hers before quickly re-focusing on the TV.

"Who is going to pay for my car?" she demanded while shifting the conversation to herself, as she sensed Jonathan was checking out. "And what if Dad finds out? He will kill you, Jonathan," she added while putting the focus back on him. The scorned man just gawked at the images on the screen. It was a defense mechanism to preserve his little self-worth.

Time slowed down for Jonathan; thus, the room froze in time, except for the TV. It continued to play, revealing images of people dying in hospital beds while doctors in hazmat suits tended to them. A scene of bodies covered in sheets, stacked side-by-side, next to a brick wall, outside of a hospital, was next...followed by images of people crying, some with their faces in their hands, while others shouted to the heavens. Disease and death played to the coffee bar as everyone went about their lives in slow-motion, briefly suspended in time. Jonathan's eyes crept from the screen, across Lydia's face, to her lips, as he felt his consciousness start to crack and leak. He focused on her lips and the words that she was saying:

*Novel Coronavirus.*

*Huh?* he thought to himself. *What's that mean?* He focused hard on her face and studied her mouth. It was moving so slowly, and he could barely hear her:

*Novel Coronavirus* came out of her mouth again. Jonathan looked puzzled.

"Hey, are you listening to me?" Lydia's voice echoed as if he was underwater. She looked at his face, waiting for an answer, trying not to laugh but showing little concern for his mental well-being. He blinked and shook his head as time returned to normal around him.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" he asked, too bewildered to show any inadequacy. She laughed and repeated herself:

"Is there anything you do...to compensate me for the damage? What do you do besides clean toilets?" She asked, matter-of-factly, not mincing any words.

He struggled to answer her and just looked at the floor for the words as he was still a little out of it. She smiled and watched him intently, wanting an answer, displaying perhaps a hint of personal interest. Slowly he formulated something:

"Uh, I build things, I guess." She waited on him, like a schoolgirl, before unleashing a smart retort.

"You build things? she laughed. "What do you build?" She blinked and waited for an answer.

"I don't know," he replied uncomfortably. "I build things out of wood." Not a hint of confidence was in his voice.

"So, you're a carpenter?" she asked. He shrugged.

"I guess you could say that?" he answered.

She thought for a moment with her tongue in her bottom lip, glancing at the floor, thinking to herself. Jonathan looked around, hoping for a break in the conversation so he could leave.

"You know," she started, still looking down. "I was going to buy a new entertainment center for my boyfriend. Do you think you could make me one instead...for Valentine's Day?" She looked up at him.

Jonathan just stood before her and nodded. "Yeah, I could do that. What kind of wood do you want it made out of?" he asked.

"I don't know, what do you think?" she asked, as the vulnerable schoolgirl resonated in her voice again. She wanted a hero to save her.

"Maple would be nice. You need it by Valentine's Day?" he responded. She shook her head innocently, begging for his help with her eyes. Jonathan was too detached to notice. They both stood up together. She sucked on her silky drink in satisfaction at the deal she had arranged.

"Ok, so I'll pay for my car, and you build me an entertainment center in the next two weeks. It's a deal," she confirmed. "And I won't tell my dad either." She then winked at him.

Jonathan nodded in agreement and turned to the door. She closed her laptop and took one last drink before tossing the cup in the garbage. She extended her arm and open hand out to him.

"Well, it was nice to meet you again, Jonathan," she said with a warm smile and a sparkle in her eye. He noticed the same twinkle in the diamond horseshoe necklace draped over her tender collarbone. He remembered it from the accident. He reached for her hand and grabbed it.

"Don't break my hand," she playfully warned. As hard as it was, he looked her in the eye while gently shaking her hand, and she appreciated that.

The two walked out together while she did most of the talking—particularly about the details of the entertainment center. Jonathan just listened as they walked out to their respective cars. He didn't have an agenda or underlying amorous motives; he simply listened to her talk. “What do you think about this new crazy virus in China,” she could be heard saying as their conversation drifted into the background.

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February snow blanketed the morning hours and the hills surrounding Jonathan's cabin. As the sun rose, ice crystals sparkled against the morning sky, blinding any snow-bound traveler in the area. A small rabbit hopped along the perimeter of the shack, making tracks on the smooth, ivory surface. It made its way close to the foundation of his house, which contained small windows that peered into the basement. Therein, Jonathan was hard at work, constructing the maple entertainment center to satisfy the debt he incurred from hitting Lydia. He didn't have much, but he did have his word, so he used his hands and proceeded to make something out of nothing.

With arms flailing, attached by various saws, hammers, and chisels, Jonathan was focused on the wooden cabinet. Blood dripped from the sawblade and was smeared on the hammer. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his right arm, leaving a crimson smudge under his gray widow's peak. He blew breath from puffed-out cheeks as time didn't move in the basement. Perhaps, it was a place of cosmic refuge from the bitterness of the outside world, where he could retreat to his warm, innocent thoughts. While his ideas always drifted to hopeless, romantic musings when he was younger, that wasn't the case in his older age. As he dragged the brush against the thirsty wooden surface, the stain formed a straight line downwards, quickly and without effort. He was fascinated by the beautiful edge that revealed something in progression, an unfinished object suddenly becoming complete. He, too, was half-stained, but that didn't bother him anymore.

As the weeks melted away with the snow outside the basement window, the small tracks vanished alongside the cabin. Thawing icicles dripped from the dwelling's overhang, punching holes in the frozen patterns and erasing their curious memories. The bright sun twinkled its late-winter radiance over Jonathan's residence, offering hope that Spring was just around the corner. The entertainment center sat in the cellar, only visible from the window when the sun was out. It was drying and waiting for Valentine's Day, so he could deliver it to a beautiful woman, who would give it to another, less-deserving man.

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**\*2/9/2020 3:01 PM:** Hey Lydia...this is Jonathan. I'm finished with your entertainment center. It looks great! Can I bring it over?

**2/10/2020 12:09 PM:** thats fantayic! thank u. yes bring it over if u can.

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It was an afternoon in February when Jonathan loaded his truck with the entertainment center, using a dolly and a piece of plywood to run the monstrosity up and into the vehicle's bed. It was chilly out, but pleasant for late-winter in Kentucky, so Jonathan dressed in a plain-white undershirt and overalls that sat loosely at the bottom, draped over a pair of old gym shoes. What he lacked in superficial presentation, he was endowed, physically, for having to push his way through middle age, knowing that it could’ve been better. Perhaps the contrast in appearance was appealing for some but not to Jonathan, who viewed it indifferently, if at all. As he pushed, the veins in his bulging biceps were primal, almost sexual; but at that moment, he didn’t care how others viewed him.

Riding down US 25 with the bed of his old truck swaying back and forth between the road lines, Jonathan pulled into the usual gas station to get his familiar cup of coffee. He jumped from the cab and hustled into the store, nodding to the clerk behind the counter while heading to the back. The store was empty because it wasn’t quite quitting time at the local factories, so the smell of fresh coffee hung in the air. He grabbed a cup and then a creamer. He pulled the carafe from the base and guided the golden stream into the receptacle. Next, he pulled back the film on the amaretto packet, dumped it into the brew, and mixed it with a nearby stirrer. Nothing particular was on his mind. He finished and walked to the gentleman with the milky hands, who probably worked there for years and will almost certainly retire there. The worker was always happy to see him and nearly always engaged in a hopeful conversation with him, like he had a vague underlying motive for wanting a response from the aloof customer. Perhaps, it was admiration, maybe romantic. Still, it wasn’t important to Jonathan, who noticed the Valentine's Day trinkets for sale in front of the cash register: plastic roses, cheap jewelry, and heart-shaped boxes of chocolate.

“You probably have lots of ladies to buy nice gifts like that for, I bet, Jonathan,” said the clerk, referring to the gaudy presents that littered the counter. Jonathan looked slightly bothered by the banter but just shook his head. The clerk was probing the customer.

“No,” he said with a sigh while peering down, trying not to make eye contact. The clerk smiled because he received something other than a grunt. He waited in earnest for more from the soured man.

Jonathan raised his attention slightly from the floor to match the face of his inquisitor and expressed his heartfelt feelings, something he never did, especially in his older age:

“They will only let you down.”

And with that, Jonathan left the establishment with a chip on his shoulder. The clerk was a maelstrom of feelings for his apparent idol, who he felt, perhaps, wasn't living up to his potential. The conversation confirmed something to him, and that made him sad.

After driving down the highway, turning onto a few side roads, and traveling further south into Kentucky, he arrived at his destination: the cabinet’s drop-off point, Lydia’s house. It was a rustic Bluegrass estate, nestled on a sea of sprawling emerald hilltops that broke like waves on an ocean. Her dad was the company’s founder and owner, so he could afford a lovely hillside residence of many acres for his family. Her directions led him up a gravel pathway to the driveway’s fork once he passed the concrete lion statues that guarded both sides of the entrance, next to the mailbox on the main road. His trajectory took him upwards through the forested surroundings of maple, oak, and pine trees, all smashed into a random, wooded backdrop. The day was slowly turning into night, which made the journey more challenging as his rusty truck bounced from side to side, making him nauseous with every bounce and turn. Eventually, he reached an opening at the top of the hill, gradually revealing a clearing with a house in the middle. The structure was newly built, or at least appeared so, and it overlooked several other hills that popped up like islands over the vast meadows and valleys. On the nearest ridge over was an even bigger dwelling that oversaw the entire estate. A small pond sat in the basin between the two homes. Both places were dimly lit, with Lydia’s house slightly more illuminated. As he jumped out and took in the view, he deduced the other residence was probably her father’s, and she lived in the guest house. Lydia’s silky face appeared in one of the wooden windows. She smiled warmly in his direction, watching him unload the beautifully stained cabinet. She appreciated his chiseled body, even if his personality was no longer attractive. Thus, she watched him from behind the glass, without him seeing, to gaze at his candid, sexy male ruggedness—the primal hunter-gatherer side of his being. That was titillating to her, so she reluctantly let the curtain go.

“You’re right. That does look great!” her voice echoed from the wooden porch covered by a simple tin roof. Jonathan looked surprised and peeked around the giant piece of furniture, as he didn’t feel her presence. He was just there on business; thus, he was focused on getting the piece from his truck and into her house, so he could return to his place by dark. He didn’t respond to her, only shook the cabinet gently from the truck’s bed onto the gravel surface below the tailgate. After a moment, he steadied the rest onto the ground. She watched him with a welcoming smile while her hands sat motionlessly in her pockets. She seemed casual and comfortable. Jonathan didn’t.

“Thanks,” he quietly responded while walking towards her, looking at both palms of his hands for any damage. “It was fun to put together. I picked up carpentry about twenty years ago but seldom use it anymore,” he added, already saying much more than he usually would.

“Well, my boyfriend is going to love it,” she reinforced, still grinning. They were standing about twenty feet apart. Jonathan was sadly unmoved by her smile. An observer might’ve assumed he was her farmhand, not someone slightly above a stranger.

“Well, why don’t you come in for a moment, so I can show you where to put it for now,” she motioned with a thumb that she pulled from her sweater pocket and pushed toward the open front door. Jonathan just nodded tentatively and followed her into her house.

He entered her country abode and looked around, not really expressing any interest one way or another. She watched him but then focused on an appropriate location to temporarily store the gift for a few days. With a firm, decisive mind, she wouldn’t be lulled by his unassuming boyish appeal. She was the daughter of a successful businessman and a shrewd businesswoman herself, so she would take charge of the situation. He followed her around the house but stopped short of the hallway to her bedroom. This was a business transaction, a paying-of-debts. She pointed to where she wanted it placed, and then he stormed out the front, on a mission, with the entrepreneur in tow, like a giddy schoolgirl.

She followed him as far as the porch while he went to the turquoise pickup to manhandle the bulky media console himself with the help of a dolly. Mindlessly, she put her hands back in her front sweater pockets; and, once again, smiled at him while he worked—like an old wife looking after her long-wedded husband. She loved his look of determination and focus as he steadied the cabinet on the carrier. Then, with sheer brute force, he pulled the solid maple cabinet back against his body and pushed it forward to the house, where Lydia was waiting for him. He grunted and broke a sweat on the short dusky day while the veins popped from his meaty arms. His thick, shaggy head of salt-and-pepper hair shook while he struggled on the uneven ground. Luckily, he didn’t drop the cabinet, looking like a true champion in the eyes of the on-looker. She quickly stepped out of the way so he could hoist the dolly up the short three-step incline of stairs.

Pulling up the first step, he didn’t speak; instead, he concentrated on not tilting the carrier. He struggled over the first step and then onto the second before getting stuck on the third and final step. His muscles twitched, he growled with guttural force, and he shook from the difficulty of pulling it up the final grade. Lydia suddenly jumped on him in a quick burst, straddling his sweaty swollen muscles across his shoulders with the entire span of her tiny arms to give him more leverage. Impulsively, he cried out and let go of the dolly, forcing Lydia off him while he caught the cabinet from falling over. She jumped back as he turned to scold her:

“What are you doing? Get the fuck off me!” he growled. His sad eyes pierced her with many years of heartbreak, disappointment, and abuse—prompting her to back off and let him finish the job. She struggled to compose herself.

He shook his head, pulled the cart up the third step, and maneuvered it around her and into the house. It hurt him too much to be touched, physically and emotionally. He just wanted to drop the furniture off and be done with it and her. He placed it inside the doorway, where she insisted, and pulled the hand truck from it. He tried to smile at the floor, prompting a slightly warm reaction from Lydia, who felt sorry for the man.

“So this is it,” she told him in a firm but non-aggressive tone. “Our transaction is complete, and your debt is erased.” She offered her hand for him to shake. “It was nice meeting you.” He looked slightly dazed and little glassy in the eyes, but he gently shook her hand and then left out the front door and down the fateful steps to his automobile. She followed him to the threshold of the door and watched him for a minute before feeling compelled to shout something to his fleeting figure:

“I hope you find happiness, Jonathan. You’re a great guy!”

He stopped his stride for a moment but didn’t turn around. That didn’t surprise her. He closed his eyes to subtly shrug off the pain of her words. He said “thanks,” which she heard, but not intentionally. It was for himself. He continued to get in his truck while she turned around, went inside, and closed the door. Why was he taken advantage of if he was such a great guy? Why was he neglected? None of which was Lydia’s fault.

He stuck the key in the ignition but didn’t turn it. He sat, slumped over, looking down at the floorboard, thinking. He anxiously tapped on the steering column as his eyes paced around his surroundings as if looking for an answer. “Damn it,” he muttered before opening the door and darting to Lydia’s house.

He cleared all three stairs with one step and approached her door. He paused and knocked forcefully, three times, like he had something to say. Lydia opened the door, not too wide, and just stared at him, not saying a word.

“Hey, listen,” he started, staring at the ground. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. You were just trying to help.”

“It’s ok, Jonathan,” she nearly interrupted. She genuinely shook her head at him, staring into his eyes, trying to take the discomfort away from him. “I understand,” she concluded.

“It’s just that…uh, you know. I haven’t been so lucky with people,” he stammered on, gazing down at the wooden planks on the porch, occasionally looking up at her. “I have issues with trust and abandonment, I guess,” he revealed, like he was working out his problems to himself. She just nodded along with his words.

“It’s ok, Jonathan. From what I know of you, you seem like a great guy. I hope you find happiness,” she offered with a sense of empathy. Unlike her father, she cared about people. “You take care of yourself, ok?” she watched his face until he shook his head in agreement, and then she closed the door. He just sat silently before turning around and heading back to his pickup. It was a slow process, as was his life; but he returned to his old, worthless truck, turned around, and retired to his cruddy world. Experience taught successful people to take advantage of opportunities and not fear them. With the curtains pushed open, Lydia watched his truck disappear from her view while she reflected on the courage it took for him to open up to her.

It turned her on.

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Later in the week, a few days after meeting with Lydia, Jonathan was driving home from a janitorial job that he managed to scrounge up when he noticed his phone beeping on the torn seat next to him. He picked it up to see who was calling, immediately recognizing Lydia’s number. He dreaded the call, sighed a bit, but reluctantly answered it to see what she wanted. He had no feeling one way or another. She could’ve been calling to thank him again or to complain about the craftsmanship of his work. He didn’t know why she would be calling, nor did he care, but he answered anyway.

His greeting was directly met with uncontrollable sobbing on the other end. It was indeed Lydia, who was frantic and crying without pause. Jonathan was patient with her, allowing time to get out whatever upset her.

“He…broke up…with me,” she struggled to say, tapping the ear of the jaded man. He sat and listened while keeping his eyes on the road. He didn’t want anything from her, so it was unusual for him to continue the conversation. He drove his beat-up truck down the highway with one hand clutching the wheel while the other was attached to the side of his head. He occasionally interjected a brief word or phrase to calm her and get more information.

“Why?” he asked into the phone and then listened in disbelief. *She was so beautiful; who would break up with her?* He thought. Her voice was so loud and distraught that he extended the receiver away from his ear to soften her trembling murmurs.

“He didn’t give you a reason; he just said it was over?” he probed. The voice on the other end just sobbed and affirmed the question.

“I’ll tell you what, Lydia…Let me get home first, and I’ll call you back. Can you just hang tight until then?” Her voice had no other choice but to agree. He hung up and focused on the road. It was getting dark out, so he wanted to make it home safely. He wasn’t too worried about Lydia and cared even less about himself. He pulled into the driveway of his hidden cabin with no intention of calling her back. She was a big girl and decided to get involved with someone less deserving of her. He fulfilled his obligation to her and humanity and only planned to get into bed and turn on the TV.

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That night, Jonathan lay in his bed, protected from the outside world by his heavy blanket. The TV glared over his shriveled body. He had no jobs lined up, so he could’ve stayed in bed forever. Lydia was no longer a concern for him; she was in his past, like all the others. Gentle pecking at the bedroom window from a solid mist temporarily aroused his senses. Still, he quickly pushed it deep into the back of his thoughts, like everything else. Was it going to rain? Was it snow? Too much of life, and his past, was like the droplets on his window: not definite.

He drifted into a semi-conscious state as he thought about his painful experiences. The TV became a low whisper, a slight soundtrack to his sad life, while the tragedy played on a loop to a one-man audience. His tortured soul relived the taunting gazes of his classmates, laughing at him. The lack of loving parents dug deep into his broken heart and made him shift positions out of discomfort. The uncertainty of a future with Jessica would’ve brought a tear to his half-opened eyes if he had the strength to shed it, but he didn’t. He didn’t have any romance left for Lydia, even though he felt she was interested in him. Unfortunately, he had no love or ambition left in his being. All he had was robbed of him many years ago, along with a million dollars. He was no longer interested in sharing his life with anyone. The moment he had waited for was finally there, but he wasn’t. He fought so hard for nothing in the end; he could’ve laid there the rest of his life and been perfectly content.

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As February ended and faded into March, the last fragments of winter blanketed the land. Traces of snow rested in melting patches scattered over the Kentucky hillside that bordered Jonathan’s cabin. Wild Daffodils grew in patches from the dead grass, inch-by-inch, week by week, until they eventually blossomed into beautiful flowers. Their trumpet-like buds announced a new season, calling for a fresh start, like a beacon on a hill for many a weary traveler.

On one such flower, a random ant traveled the length of its fleshy stem from the chilly dirt to the monkey-jawed petals at the top. It was a soldier on a mission, broken off from the others, to explore the hollows of the beautiful golden blossom. The curious bug struggled to let go of the stem and transition to the floret. Still, it swung its small torso unto the giant cream-colored blade and then into the massive cavity, disappearing to feed its sense of curiosity.

With the inquisitive ant inside, the March breeze shook the top-heavy flower slightly, but the insect did not fall out. Instead, it wandered from the flower with a lone grain of pollen stuck to its back. It felt around with its antenna and decided to retreat into the pistil, back towards the stamen. Again, it disappeared, only to be seen climbing on the inner workings of the bud with the speck still on its back.

The snooping bug reemerged without the dot of pollen, which was inadvertently left in the pistil. Eventually, the ant swung back under the lowest part of the flower and then unto the stem to progress back down to the ground. It rejoined the colony without anything to contribute, as it left the precious gift at the flower’s ovary and away from the hoarding activities of the other ants. From the window, Jonathan watched the social interaction of the bugs and envied them. The buzzing in his ears and the deafening silence of too many years gone wasted planted a seed in his being. Lifelessly, he stared from the glass at the thawing countryside, not owing anything to his past or future.

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*She stroked his chest hair as he lay there. It was dark in the room; so he could only feel her; But the room slowly started to brighten, like the house lights of a theater. She moved her hand downward, between his pecks, over the slight curve of his belly to the buckle in the center of his pelvis. She pulled at the leather belt and its buckle, tugging and pulling, frantically trying to get it undone. Just then, a floating door appeared above the two figures, levitating and changing colors. It was vague and could’ve not existed at all, but it hovered in circles above the vivid, star-crossed lovers. They watched in awe before moving their eyes back down to his midsection. Quiet fireworks then proceeded to explode over their heads, lighting up the void that they were in. Their bodies were a lucid, creamy white, like there were no blood in them, yet they continued to move toward bodily delight. They waited in anticipation and earnestness while so much was happening above them. A loud knocking emanated from behind the invisible door while bursts erupted behind it. The knocking became louder, so much that their ears started to ring. Piercingly, the ominous sound took over the room while they covered their ears and writhed in pain. The woman straddled the man as her face distorted. The visage was uncertain to begin with, but it suddenly morphed into the exact shape and features of Lydia Barrister. They wrestled with the knocking while the room grew brighter, and the cracks of the fireworks became more apparent. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a sound—like that of a nosediving plane—increased as a rocket shot through the door, aiming right at the two silhouettes. And then...*

*All went blank.*

\*\*\*

Jonathan abruptly sat up in bed, taking big breaths of air as he looked at his surroundings. He was disorientated, having just woken from a dream. Groggily, he struggled with his environment, not knowing where he was, nor the day; reality slowly crept in with each gasp. He glanced over at his phone, which had flashed a red light for a while. It beckoned him to join the rest of the world, but he wasn’t ready. He knew who was on the other end of the pulsating glow, and it excited him, like when he was younger. Maybe he was coming around.

He grabbed the remote control of the TV and pressed a few buttons. The screen illuminated, and then the lonely man picked a local news broadcast from earlier in the day. After a brief pause, it played the recorded program as two figures sat and greeted their viewers: a man and a woman.

“Good morning, everyone. We’ll get you to your March 15th weather forecast, but first: the headlines,” the female anchor announced.

Jonathan glanced at his phone again, which was still on the dresser beside the TV. The side of it blinked, tempting him to listen to the message. He knew why she was calling; he just wasn’t ready to listen to it yet.

“And now let's get you over to Lance Shapiro with today’s forecast,” the woman facilitated.

“Hello, everyone,” the gray-haired meteorologist greeted,” It’s going to be a nice, sunny day today with mild temperatures.”

*What if she doesn’t really like me?* Jonathan ruminated to himself. *Or what if she leaves me...or our relationship doesn’t pan out.*

He sunk into his bed and covered his sad body with a quilted comforter. The broadcast was just gentle background chatter. He pondered his past and future and decided which one Lydia would be factored into. He was on the fence because his heart was already too tender.

“And that is your March 15th forecast. Beware the Ides of March,” the meteorologist said with a devious smile. “And now, back to you, Ben.” Jonathan’s ears perked up as he watched with his mouth agape.

“So, we have a big announcement today: It is Lance’s last day with us. He is retiring after today,” the male anchor revealed. The camera panned over to the older gentleman, who wore a warm smile for the audience.

“Tell us what you'll be doing upon your retirement, Lance.” the younger man questioned.

“Well, not a whole lot will change. We have the Lyrid Meteor shower in about a month, so I’ll be watching that. It’ll be quite the show in our hemisphere.”

“So, it sounds like you’ll be busy, just not coming to work,” the anchor added. The retiring weatherman agreed off-camera, with the microphone barely picking up his acknowledgment. “Well, good luck to you, my friend, and stay healthy and safe. You have the rest of your life ahead of you,” the journalist conveyed before going on a commercial break.

With that, something deep within Jonathan’s soul awoke: a spark that had been missing for years.

*He’s right...I have the rest of my life ahead of me. What am I doing lying in bed, especially when the light on my phone is flashing?* Jonathan thought to himself. *I have a chance with Lydia, so why am I not responding to her? I have the rest of my life!*

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**\*3/15/2020 10:16 AM:** Hi Lydia, this is Jonathan. Sorry I haven’t txt in a while. How have you been? Are you hanging in there?

**3/16/2020 12:02 PM:** Good to hear from you jonathan.Yess Im hangin in there. How r u doing?

**\*3/16/2020 12:05 PM:** I’m hanging in there as well. Would you like to get some coffee sometime soon?

**3/16/2020 12:55 PM:**  I’d like to but Im just not redy. This new virus is scaring me plus I'm not over my ex. You take care of yourself jonathan, Youre a great guy!

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While the damp Spring day melted into night, Lydia sat quietly in her living room. The long shadows spread across her weary body. Her tiny frame remained motionless except for her trembling hands, which fidgeted on her lap, draped in a country-styled quilt. The patchwork of rustic stars and stripes comforted her nerves. She stared out the window blankly at her desolate surroundings with a heavy mind. It was the calm before the storm.

Her lifeless gaze fell upon an old, turquoise pickup truck quickly approaching her house. She didn’t respond and showed no difference to the vehicle as it parked directly in front of her porch. She knew who it was but was too hollow inside to react. The caverns of her soul echoed with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Jonathan jumped out of the truck and slammed the door. His face was contorted with gumption like a football coach's before a big game. He was there to win Lydia’s heart and wasn’t settling for less. He stormed up the steps and went straight to the door.

“Lydia, Lydia,” he cried out as he banged on the door. He rattled the doorknob, but it was locked. He was desperate and needed to profess his love, but the melancholic woman was inside without emotion.

“Lydia, I want to talk to you,” he pleaded, grabbing the knob again and shaking it passionately. “Are you there?” he cried out.

The knocking stopped, but he appeared in the window with his hands cupped around his eyes. He peered in, scanning the inside, but it was hard to discern anything. Ominous clouds formed overhead, adding to the twilight. The sad woman remained lifeless in the front room.

“Lydia,” he howled one last time. He couldn’t see the dark figure in the room. He punched the front door and grunted, relieving his pent-up emotion. Pacing back and forth like a caged tiger, he planned his next move. A tear rolled down Lydia’s cheek from her fixed eye. She didn’t flinch nor wipe it away, only staring into the distance. Jonathan jetted from the porch to his truck and milled around it, thinking. He wasn’t going to let this one slip away like the others. It was *his* time and *his* destiny to bring this one home—because 2020 was *his* year.

With that, he frantically approached the porch again but didn’t knock on the door. He wasn’t sure if she was in there or not, but he primed himself for a performance of a lifetime:

“Look Lydia, I don’t know if you’re in there, but I need to tell you something if you are.” The rain started gently falling around him as the porch kept him dry. She sat on the other side of the barricade, looking down at the floor. Gravity pulled the tear from her smooth chin.

“I don’t have much experience with women,” he revealed to the closed door. “And what little experience I’ve had has been filled with pain. It’s hard to tell you this, but I feel compelled to do so.” The rain increased as the wind blew it onto the porch, wetting his face but not from tears. He had none left to shed. He wasn’t sad; he was angry.

“But, since I have no experience,” he continued, “I would mold myself around you. Your heart would be the shape of my soul. Just remember that,” he added while solemnly looking at the ground. A second tear rolled down Lydia’s cheek but from the other welled-up eye. Her mouth quivered as she re-focused her gaze on the inside of the house. She was beginning to distrust everyone, whether they would break her heart or make her sick. Everything grew silent while Jonathan's footsteps, retreating from the porch, broke the uncomfortable stillness. The frightened woman sat, sobbing. She heard the truck door open and then shut before the engine started. The raindrops eased at the windows, and the darkness crept in. Jonathan backed up his truck and started toward the exit. The cracking and popping of gravel tested the concentration of his thoughts. He drove off with an image that played in his mind throughout most of his life: a football coach telling him to fight for what he wanted—to take what was his. Thus, he sped down the driveway, knowing it wouldn’t be the last time. He smiled at the two lion statues that guarded the entrance to her estate. Then, he drove off into the dying sunset, knowing he would spend the rest of his life with her.

Pastel streaks of crimson and orange parted the darkening sky as Jonathan rolled down US 25 on his way home. Steering his old rusty truck into the familiar gas station, his mind was on Lydia and how to finally connect with her. He pulled into the empty lot and disabled the engine, but he didn’t turn off his heart because that was beating too wildly with unrequited love. He was there physically, but his mind was someplace else.

Upon entering the store, the gentleman was working, as usual, but he didn’t raise his head to greet Jonathan. He peered at the ground, paying little attention to anything but the floor. Jonathan passed him, and neither individual noticed the other. The love-struck man went to the back of the store for a coffee while the cashier simmered in low self-worth. After a moment, Jonathan approached the counter, set the cup down, and mumbled a customary greeting under his breath. The clerk pressed the buttons on the register without making eye contact with the customer. As unusual as the employee’s demeanor was, Jonathan didn't seem bothered by it. They exchanged currency while the distracted bachelor eyed the various trinkets that littered the countertop. A display of faux-silk roses grabbed his attention as he wrinkled his face like he was concocting a plan. The scorned cashier finally raised his eyes to meet his counterpart. He watched the reluctant consumer formulate his plan like he could peer inside Jonathan's mind and see the sprockets turning. The two were frozen in time for a moment before Jonathan laid a handful of roses on the counter.

“She’s one lucky girl,” the cashier felt compelled to say insincerely.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jonathan grunted while the two exchanged money. The clerk seemed distraught, as if the interaction reinforced something to him.

“Thanks,” Jonathan managed to retort before grabbing his coffee and exiting the store.

“Have a good night,” the cashier flatly yelled out while the door closed. Jonathan opened the door of his truck and jumped in.

He sat in the cab and took a drink. He started the engine, backed up, pulled onto the two-lane highway, and then drove into the night toward his isolated cabin. Decisively, he had his work cut out for him.

The lonely worker leaned on the counter and consoled himself inside the store. It stung like a coffee burn or a prick from a plastic rose. The store was lit up like a starship’s cockpit in deep space, illuminating the inner workings to a cold, dark outside world. It was sad to the clerk because he couldn't obtain his own desires in a world where anyone could buy whatever they needed. All he could do was watch the outside world pass him by.

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Jonathan woke early the next day. The bright Spring morning was conducive to his task at hand. He sat focused at the kitchen table and feverishly wrote on small pieces of paper. Relentlessly, he penned poems, limericks, and anecdotes and attached them to the roses from the gas station. He had a woman’s heart to win over, just like when he was younger. He was confident she wouldn’t resist him after a day or two of his faux-floral charm. But he had no time to waste, so he gathered his roses and headed out the door.

It was a peaceful, clear morning with little traffic; thus, he quickly made it over to the Barrister estate. He pulled next to the lion statues that guarded the entrance. They were stationed on either side of her driveway. He thought about the best way to deliver his messages but couldn’t devise a definitive plan. He wanted to be direct but not irritating, subtle but not wishy-washy. He had the rest of his life but didn’t want to wait that long. The stone creatures watched him writhe in doubt. When he finally got an idea, it was romantic with the right amount of pomp.

He jumped from his truck, grabbed a rose, and walked along the side of the road to her driveway. Like a shining knight wielding a mighty sword in front of the lions, he walked to one of the statues, raised his clenched fist to its face, and wedged the flower and message into its ferocious jaws. He turned around and walked back to his vehicle, picturing the look on Lydia’s face when she sees it. To him, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. He drove off, looking at the sight in his rearview mirror: the concrete feline gripping the silk rose in its mouth—a striking image to all passersby. He placed more plastic blooms in the beast’s gullet in the following days.

As the days passed and March turned into April, a collection of unrequited flowers sat on the side of the Kentucky road, guarded by a stone lion effigy. Only one person noticed they were there. No one wanted the roses, so the statue’s purpose was unnecessary. What started as a daily conveyance of love turned into a small heap of garbage littering the beautiful hillside.

Jonathan moped around the house, teetering between grand over-confidence and near self-loathing. He was trying hard to be that football player, driven by the powerful words of a coach, but he could feel the hairline cracks in his delicate façade begin to form. Like a caged animal, he started feeling desperate and decided he had few options left. He was frantic. The road which led him to that point was full of curves and rough terrain. It was supposed to lead to a wide-open pasture where he could think more clearly and weigh his options.

Jonathan drove toward Lydia's estate one tranquil evening during the first week of April. His truck, sputtering down US 25, shook as he pushed his trembling foot on the gas pedal. One rose with a message attached to it sat on the passenger’s seat. Next to that, his gun. He fought back the tears while thinking about his life's difficulties. He took wide, erratic turns around each corner, swaying over the center line while clutching the steering wheel. Luckily, no one was coming the other way since the factories hadn’t dismissed for the day and the roads weren’t as busy; but he didn’t care. Like his thoughts, time was racing; but then, it was not. Shapes appeared in the corners of his eyes and disappeared when he looked at them. He approached Lydia’s driveway and pulled to the side of the road—perpendicular to the first lion statue: the one without a pile of fake flowers under it.

Jonathan sat back in his seat and closed his eyes. He tried to clear his mind of all his past experiences. He blindly reached over, grabbed his gun, and pulled it onto his lap while thinking about the perceived injustices done to him. Angrily, he gripped the trigger as he thought about the classroom full of children laughing at him. His heart pounded in his chest, and he started to sweat, feeling the cold, unforgiving chrome with his shaky index finger. The laughter echoed through his ill mind as he looked forward at the stone lion, which also appeared to be laughing at him.

Just then, a police cruiser pulled behind him with its lights off. Jonathan sat in his seat, peered into the rearview mirror, and pulled the gun tightly into his belly. The laughing was still there but quieted down and fell into the background. A moment passed before the patrol car’s door popped open, and an officer stepped out. With wild eyes, the desperate man’s heart beat even faster, and sweat rolled down his face as he gripped the gun’s trigger tightly with his finger. Time was distorted, and it slowed while the children’s laughter in his head became more pronounced. The officer cautiously approached the old Ford truck while adjusting his mirrored sunglasses. His hand was at his side as he inched closer to Jonathan, who was all tensed up. This was it. The downtrodden bachelor was ready for anything—whatever fate threw his way. His trigger finger trembled.

The bewildered man looked forward in his seat. But out of the corner of his left eye, he witnessed the impossible: the officer sauntered past his truck, seemingly not even noticing Jonathan. He walked over to the pile of roses, pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket, and placed the artificial floral pieces into the sack. It was still and silent. Jonathan just watched in amazement. Like clumps of mud, the officer pulled the roses from the ground and carefully placed them in the receptacle. One of the notes fell to the pavement. He leaned over and picked it up, being careful not to topple over in the process. He stood for a moment on the side of the road to read the note. Jonathan continued to observe. The officer paused while looking down at the love letter and then smiled to himself. It touched his hardened heart to see such beauty thrown away on the side of the road, but that didn’t stop him from placing it in the sack with the rejected flowers. A wave of rage swept over Jonathan, so he sat up and gripped the gun. His right orbital socket twitched while he made eye contact with the officer. The laughter of children, once again, filled his head. The hard butt of the pistol dug into his belly. It was unclear for whom the bullet in the chamber was meant. Confusion reigned eerily in the cab of the truck. The officer approached and looked him square in the face. He grabbed the side of his government-issued belt with one hand and the bag with the other. It was tense as the officer inched forward. Jonathan clenched his teeth, closed his eyes, and gripped the gun tightly. He didn’t breathe. Two men’s lives intersected at that moment, and one was going to die. The images of children laughing at him and the teacher’s disgustful gaze swirled around his head as their mimicry echoed loudly in his brain.

Then, it suddenly stopped. He slowly opened his left eye to see the officer pass in front of the driver’s-side window, inches from him. The sheen from the deputy’s polished belt glared in his bloodshot eye, forcing a wave of calmness over him. He quickly sat up, released the hammer on the gun, and watched the retreating man in the rearview mirror. *Why am I still alive?* he thought. The patrol car sped past him on its way to more pressing matters. His breathing was mixed; he was so confused: *What more do I have to give?*

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Once he got home, he immediately slid into bed and pulled the covers over his head to block out the world from his tired and chaotic thoughts. Everything around him, every sensation, was blocked from his senses, except for one: the raindrops tapping at his window. The pitter-patter of water on glass aggravated him and made him restless. He tossed and turned under the soft comforter like his soul had an itch to scratch. His head was an intersection of a thousand racing ideas. They were cars on a busy freeway, and he just wanted them to slow down. He reminded himself a bullet to the head would do the trick, so he kept his gun on the nightstand next to his bed—which held his waning body like a coffin does the dead.

As the shapes from the moonlight gradually stretched across the creaky floorboards and lifeless lump on the bed, Jonathan stirred a bit at the sound of crickets chirping as the rain occasionally relented but then resumed. His thoughts quieted, so he didn’t need the gun. He had only one assessment: bad things always happened to him. Fate dealt him a hand he was too inexperienced to play, so he lay there like a boxer with two counts left. He was exhausted and wanted to fade into oblivion and let the universe do as it wished. He believed it was out of his hands, so why bother doing anything. Nothing mattered, life was pointless, and he didn’t have much left to give. He knew, in the morning, he would have to make a choice—a decision that was becoming easier to make with every waking moment.

In the overnight hours, while the moon mixed with raindrops to form an animated light show on the painted glass, the looming storm intensified and eventually fell on Jonathan’s roof, heavily blocking out any lunar brilliance and false shadows that watched over him as he slept. His chamber was dark when suddenly a crack of thunder shot him straight up in bed. He wasn’t awake, but he wasn't asleep, either. He was in that perfect subconscious state—one more in tune with the cosmos than his own pitiful awareness when awake. The atmosphere was cool enough to produce visible breath that shot out like tufts of pure smoke from a shaking, bewildered silhouette. The rain came down hard while it ferociously tapped at the window. A sense of dread hung over the room as if something terrible was about to happen. He thought he heard a sound, possibly outside, between the cracks of thunder. The light flashes that preceded them eased his mind that no one was in there with him. He sat straight against the headboard and woke himself up. Instinctively, he knew something wasn’t right—like his body and mind were keeping a foreboding secret from his sleepy consciousness. He thought he heard something again outside, so he slowed his breathing to listen when a flash of light suddenly lit up his room again. Quickly, he looked over to what he thought was a shadow moving outside his window. Increasingly, he was getting scared. He braced for another boom as he reached for his gun. For someone who found little value in life, he was quick to protect it. A loud crack of thunder rocked the cabin and nearly made his trigger-finger slip; then, all was quiet.

Jonathan’s heart raced, beating from his heavy chest. The rain fell in sheets as he glanced wildly around the room and gripped his icy gun under the warm comforter. He felt another one coming, so he braced himself—when suddenly, the room illuminated in slow-motion, highlighting every cob-filled corner and dead stink bug on the floor around him. He immediately heard a loud bang, which sounded like thunder. *It came too soon*, he thought, as the room was still afire with electricity for what seemed like an eternity, and then it was dark.

 While time returned to normal speed, and the room was dim and motionless, he realized the loud noise wasn’t thunder. The blood drained from his face, and his limbs quickly turned to stone as he heard knocking on his front door. Another bang shook the room, so he pulled the gun close to him and cocked the trigger. Someone was going to die that night—or perhaps, two. Was it someone looking for his long-gone fortune? He had a bone to pick with the world and himself, and that night—that moment—the events of his life, the road he had taken, and the ones he hadn’t, were coming to a dreadful juncture. The knocking on the door intensified as Jonathan slid out of bed and cautiously walked to the front door in the other room. He was ready to do some damage, an unlucky justice in his mind for all the bad things that had happened to him. His forefinger and thumb worked on the trigger and hammer in unison while the boards creaked under his steady gait. The banging got louder and more forceful. He reached for the doorknob, knowing that lightning and thunder would awaken every emotion in his being at any moment. It was like a dream that he had never dreamt before. The knocking rang in his ears while he turned the latch. It was deafening; then it was silent.

As he opened the door, a solitary figure stood there, motionless. A flicker of lightning lit up the porch and the shape in front of him, draped in a designer raincoat. The deluge soaked the plastic jacket and made it shiny, adding to the flare’s brilliance. Water ran along the length of the porch’s roof until it formed a heavy drop that fell from the overhang’s façade. Some landed on the silhouette, while others dropped into the darkness below. The following crack of thunder shook the night, thus, highlighting it with streaks of light here and there. Although he couldn’t see a face or even confirm it was human, he knew who it was and why they were there. The two shadowy bodies stood apart in silence. They moved when they breathed, but that was the only proof of life. The moment was frozen in time as two souls were brought together under billions of stars on the other side of the rain clouds. A tiny horseshoe sparkled from the light as Jonathan’s deflated heart swelled a little.

The next strike lit up the sky and the humanoid shape before him. It was Lydia, and she presented to him, exhausted. The everyday revolutions of the earth around the sun had flattened her, and now, she was getting rained on. Her eyes locked onto his, and they didn’t say a word to each other, as they didn’t need to. He was reading her. Like him, she had bubbling pain that reached a boiling point. His agony subsided because he gave up. Her misery was only growing stronger. She was afraid, and he could tell.

The comfortable silence ended when Lydia fell into Jonathan’s unsuspecting arms. He had to be careful not to shoot her, as he still held the gun. He wasn’t mad enough to hurt her then, so he gently wrapped himself around her, warming her with his forgiving essence. She hung onto him like a life raft, as he kept her from going over the falls. She felt safe in his arms—secure from the rain, broken hearts, and the uncertainty of the future.

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**\*4/4/2020 8:02 AM:** Good morning, Beautiful! Do you want to get a cup of coffee?

**4/4/2020 8:12 AM:** Hi hansom! I would LOVE a cup. Where and when?

**\*4/4/2020 8:15 AM:** Starbucks? Memorial Parkwy? 10’ish?

**4/4/2020 8:19 AM:** See u thn

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The air was still and barely rustled across the pavement, typical for an early-spring morning. The tufts of wispy fog lingered around the buildings on the parkway. In one such lot, a black ant, taking advantage of the winter’s break, foraged between parking spaces for much-needed sustenance. It marched across the concrete, over the lines of tar and vein-like cracks, until finally, it stopped. A massive crumb stood before it, blocking its way back to the colony. It hoisted the morsel with its fangs unto its torso and then pushed onward. It was steadfast on its mission, blocking out anything that didn’t pertain to the direction of its brood. It was almost to the giant yellow line when a low rumble broke the morning silence and quickly grew louder. The cacophony was nearly deafening when darkness fell upon the wayward gatherer. Something gigantic crushed its armored body—up to its head, leaving the crumb to lash about by the writhing fangs protruding from the arthropod. It was almost to its nest on the other side of the curb.

Jonathan sat in his truck with the motor running and stared at the front door of the Starbucks—in particular, a sign posted on the glass. He looked around quietly, noting the lack of activity in his surroundings, as there weren’t too many souls out.

He opened the rusty door of his cab and hopped out. His feet smacked on the pavement, landing squarely on the yellow line of the parking space like he was walking a tightrope. He steadily stepped to the front door with his eyes on the note, not noticing the swelling of ants around his front-left tire. One lone worker took the crumb from the dying insect and went on while the others followed. Only one stayed behind.

Jonathan stood before the empty Starbucks and read the sign on the locked door:

“Due to the governor’s orders, this establishment is closed for the time being due to the ongoing pandemic. Please stay safe and healthy!”

His image in the glass reflected a fading man, who hadn’t yet reached his potential. Like many in the world at that time, his eyes were sunken beneath a worn face. Unfolding hysteria and uncertainty left cracks around both sockets. A reflection of Lydia’s car in the window broke the ominous stillness in the air. She looked surprised and confused through the windshield as she approached the building and parked next to Jonathan’s truck.

“Is it closed?” she asked, extending her neck to the open driver’s-side window. He turned and looked at her and nodded.

“I guess we can’t get any coffee,” he conceded while throwing his arms away from his sides.

“C’mon, get in,” she motioned to Jonathan with her head. She closed her window as he approached, opened the door, and slid in. He looked back at the sign.

“Is the drive-thru open?” she calmly asked while the loud thud of the closing door interrupted her inquiry. He looked around, still in amazement at the barren streets. A police cruiser sped down the parkway.

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t think any place is open,” he added. The radio played music before going to a commercial.

“Hmm,” Lydia thought to herself while switching stations; and, ultimately, ending up on the AM news channel, WLW.

“Well, what do you want to do”? She asked him teasingly, with a hint of suggestion in her voice. She knew that he wouldn’t bite. Not yet; it was too soon. He just sat, thinking, looking ahead, while the news played in the background:

*Tensions rose at the Capitol as protestors clashed with state police over the governor’s new Coronavirus restrictions...*

He looked down at the floor and then back up into her eyes. They were covered by wire-framed, mirrored sunglasses.

*The death toll rises from COVID-19-related deaths, just as morgues run out of space. They are having to store the bodies in makeshift morgues in the back of rented trucks...*

“I don’t know.” Time was irrelevant at that moment. “I guess we could go to my place. Or to yours,” he quipped.

*Hospitals are facing* *similar problems, having to ration ventilators. Essentially, having to decide who lives and who dies...*

“Oh, I have a new ice cream at home that you have to try,” she announced enthusiastically, flashing a smile at Jonathan. “Do you want to come over?”

*The forecast for today, April 4, 2020, is a mild one...*

“I love ice cream,” he answered, looking into her eyes without looking away. He was slowly losing all self-doubt. She smiled back at him. They were two friends who could cross the line at any moment—whenever the stars were aligned right.

*In a little over a week, on Tuesday, April 14th, the Lyrid Meteor display will start in the northern hemisphere. It should be quite the show...*

The two drove off in her car, leaving his abandoned truck in front of a shuttered business in the middle of an empty town. The air of uncertainty hung just above the road and rose to the heavens, and still, the radio played:

*And let’s not forget about the Japanese satellite that is hurling toward Earth. They calculated that the impact site is somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.*

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The spring days were getting longer, allowing more light to creep in through the open doors and windows that populated the wavy hills of Northern Kentucky. Lydia sat in one such window and stroked her hair with a brush in front of a small vanity. The afternoon shadows inched across her bedroom wall and around the corners, but there was still enough light to see her radiant face. The golden folds that pointed upwards in the contours of her mouth revealed the contentment within. Every long, elegant stroke of her hair begat soul-scratching satisfaction, like drinking an orange's juice after squeezing the life out of it.

As she stood up, placing one knee on the bench, she put down the brush, picked up a lip gloss tube, and pushed her face closer to the mirror. She curved her bottom lip outward while applying the shiny paint. Her young body was curved in all the essential places and tender all over, but it did little to hide that she was wise, confident, and experienced beyond her years. The person with the coppered skin and chestnut-colored hair could have anyone she wanted; she understood that, but she also had a kind heart. Cheering for the underdog turned her on.

She wore little make-up, so she didn’t spend much time in front of the mirror. Gracefully, she sat back down, pulled off her t-shirt, and dropped a slinky tank top over her golden, wiry frame. She smiled at herself and brushed the scratchy bangs out of her eyes while admiring the informality of her appearance. The subtle hint of her nipples, through the thin white cotton, left less to the imagination and more to the eyes.

As twilight moved into her room and stretched its darkness further down the walls, she sat behind the vanity and peered deeper into the glass without moving. The nearly perfect symmetry of her face hidden beneath her rich, glowing skin masked the turmoil of uncertainty that simmered under both. The optimism accompanying a new crush kept the world's anxieties at bay. She didn’t worry about COVID-19 or fret about an economic downturn. However, she worried about her feelings betraying her and that Jonathan’s pain wasn’t real. His broken heart was attractive to her. She wanted to fix him.

Eventually, she turned on a small desk lamp that occupied a corner of the dressing table. The brilliance lit up one side of her head, making her face appear larger than it was. She basked in the warm light on her skin as if she was in the presence of God while gently rolling powder over her cheekbone. The brush tickled and only added to her giddiness. She felt like a kid again. After the doorbell rang, she smiled, bit her lip, closed her eyes, and wished for the best. She was tired of assholes. She wanted someone genuine.

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The lighting fixture hung especially low over the wooden dining table where they sat. The ambiance was warm and rustic, with a subtle glow from the bulbs highlighting the rich grains of the oak panels that lined the walls. Lydia sat, looking across the table at Jonathan. Her view included remnants of the feast that she had made for him. She was satisfied and too glutted to start cleaning, so she sat there a moment longer, fixing her eyes on the table and admiring the faint, greasy chicken smell still in the air. It was a comfortable silence in which there was no obligation to speak, as if their brains were too full of tryptophan to form words.

“That was really, really good,” Jonathan said without a hint of sweetness. She looked up at him, her eyes glassy in the low incandescence of the room.

“Thanks,” she responded with a warm, half-cocked smile. They sat and smiled at each other before Lydia rose from her chair and picked up a handful of spent plates and dishes. Jonathan sat back further into the seat, as he wasn’t too nervous.

A faint light was on the horizon when he looked out the window. Lydia washed dishes in the kitchen, which gave Jonathan time for introspection. He no longer thought about love and sex interchangeably, so he didn’t feel pressured to sleep with her so soon—or try to. He just wanted to be, to enjoy her company without any expectations of romance.

“Do you want to go into the other room and watch something?” she hastily asked, suddenly appearing around the kitchen wall. Jonathan nodded, and the two roamed into the other room and collapsed on the couch separately. They were about two feet apart. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

“There’s not a lot on tonight,” she said in a monotone voice, zoned out on the screen. She laid back into the soft cushion.

Jonathan was sitting back, as well, deep in thought. He found himself starting to ruminate again. He always hated the gray area of relationships, the one that straddled the line between romantic and platonic. One errant move, and he could chase her away. Conversely, not enough, and he would look weak and flaccid. It was a tug-of-war in his mind, a delicate cake in the oven that only rose if the ingredients were balanced right.

“Is everything alright,” she asked him aloud after noticing his silence.

“Yes,” he immediately responded while looking over at her. She smiled to herself and fixed her attention back on the TV. Her abode had more of a ski lodge feel than a residence. Like the dining room, the living room was also dimly lit, with the screen glaring brilliantly at the two awkward friends. Tiny shadows waltzed among the jagged edges of the stone fireplace, above which the television was mounted.

“I was about to ask you the same thing. Are you ok? You seem quiet tonight,” Jonathan asked after contemplating for a minute.

She nodded and leaned her body towards him while resting her head on her hand's palm, supported by her bent forearm.

“Yeah, just tired from work,” she added while batting her lashes at him. She appreciated his thoughtfulness and showed it in her eyes. He used the moment as a distraction to move closer to her. They were about a foot and a half apart.

“We just opened a new account, and my dad’s really worried about it,” she conveyed while sighing and rolling her eyes at the mundane statement. She refocused her warm attention back on him and smiled.

“Do you like it there, working for your dad?” Jonathan genuinely asked. He could feel the body heat coming from her.

“I do,” she confirmed with a chuckle. “I mean, it’s my family’s business, so I don’t have much of a choice.” She rubbed her breastbone, just above the slinky tank top she picked out for him. His concern for her was turning her on. They sat, locking their eyes on one another’s. They were close enough to hold hands, which she desperately wanted.

Jonathan just nodded while still looking at her. She invited him in for a kiss, but he couldn’t, so he quickly looked away—down at the cushion. She shook off the daze, let out a disappointed sigh, and looked down at the ground, biting her lip. She thought*, why doesn’t he want to kiss me* while picking up the remote control to nervously start changing the channels.

He quickly turned away, masking the pain on his face with his hand, but opened his eyes in time to see a Kentucky Lottery commercial on the TV. He recoiled even further, sitting up, shifting his weight to the other side, and leaning away from her. *Why did I have to see that right now*? He pleaded to himself. The two sat separately on the couch, awkwardly, engulfed by the television rays. Lydia still bit her lip. Thankfully, a knock at the door broke the tension.

“It must be daddy,” she announced while pulling herself up from the couch. “That wouldn’t surprise me.”

She walked to the front window and pushed the curtain aside to look outside. She nodded to herself, then went to the door to unlock it. Promptly, she slipped out for a moment.

As she opened the door and stepped back inside, Jonathan could see the outline of her dad standing on the front porch. He, too, seemed curious enough to peer inside as the door closed. The suitor heard a cough from the porch before the door clicked shut. Lydia turned to look at him with a solemn face.

“Hey, I’m pretty tired, plus my dad was busting my chops about work, so I’m just going to go to bed,” she hesitantly told him. Jonathan knew he had blown his chance. He rose from the limp position and eased his way to her, like a scorned dog. He wrapped his arms around her, but she was unresponsive. She gave him a pat on his arm as a signal to let her go, so he did.

“Is your dad sick? I heard him coughing,” Jonathan asked while grabbing the doorknob.

“Yeah, he said that he wasn’t feeling well,” she responded without feeling. “He’s under a lot of stress with this new account.” She was checked out of her conversation with him and began to trail off.

Sensing his defeat, he lowered his head and opened the door. He smiled and said “bye” to her; she did the same, but with a glow of failure, like she had just finished second in a race. She shut the door and lowered her head in disappointment. Selfishly, she cozied up on the couch with the TV still turned on but with the sound muted. She bit her lip and casually scrolled on her phone, looking at a dating website as the moon glowed brightly outside her window.

Pulling out of her gravel driveway and onto the main road, Jonathan felt terrible about himself. He had let her down and was derelict. He was the steward of their future together, and at the moment, he failed at his job.

Driving on the open highway, the firmament was a dark void above him, with bright stars pockmarked and splashed across the nightly canvas. It was the country, so the big-city lights of Cincinnati stopped a few miles from him, leaving clear skies and an open invitation to the universe beyond.

He knew it would be a long night of self-loathing, so he pulled into his usual gas station, attended by the familiar clerk, to get a coffee. He waved and smiled at Jonathan, holding his slender, milky-white hand in the air upon his entry. He watched Jonathan with his beady eyes and thick glasses, noticing his miserable body language as he walked to the back of the store. Jonathan returned a moment later, put the coffee on the counter, and pulled out his wallet. The attendant looked down at the register and rang him up.

“You don’t look so happy about something. Is there something wrong?” the awkward clerk asked.

“No,” Jonathan mumbled back. He twisted and turned his face a bit and then admitted:

“You see, I have this girl...”

The clerk nodded. He smiled at the bachelor’s humility and listened to him.

“I think she likes me, but I’m not sure,” he continued. “I had my chance to hold her hand, and I blew it.” The attendant breathed in and shook his head at Jonathan’s misfortune.

“Well, are you going to see her tomorrow?” the consoling clerk asked. Jonathan just threw up his hands and shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he conceded abruptly, breathing frustration from his sour mouth. He stopped for a second, carefully choosing his words and whether he wanted to materialize them, but he went on before permanently pausing: “You know, my whole life...all I wanted to be...,” he trailed off and then reflected on his words. Knowing he had revealed too much, Jonathan snapped out of it, thanked the man for his time, and grabbed his coffee. The attendant just looked on, offering him quiet support. He was almost to the door when the clerk spoke aloud:

“All we want is to be loved. I get it. We live our whole lives either running from it or chasing it. It was there yesterday, and it’ll be there tomorrow. There’s always tomorrow.”

Jonathan listened to his words without facing him. He didn’t want anyone to see his face contorted with pain. He just lowered his head, hoping that would take away some of the sting.

“Good luck, my friend,” the clerk wished, waving one final goodbye to him. Although Jonathan didn’t look, he heard the man’s words as he exited the establishment and appreciated them. He jumped in his old truck and placed his cup in the holder while peering through the windshield at the newspaper stand outside the entrance door. He read the current headline to himself: *Lights, Camera, Action: The Meteor Shower Starts Tonight*.

He pulled onto the dark highway, quietly biting his lip and thinking. He agreed with the attendant that there would always be the next day. He decided to go home, rest, and try again in the morning. He was going to win her over, one way or another. His truck disappeared into the darkness as a shooting star fell overhead.

# Tokyo, Japan

# (4/17/2020; 8:52 a.m. JST)

A young female intern sat behind a computer and stared at the illuminated screen. Her big brown eyes revealed confusion as her thin, delicate smile relaxed. She studied the information before her, scrolling between spreadsheets, graphs, and charts. Pictures of rockets and satellites dotted the suite's walls, catching the early-morning rays of sunshine and lighting them up like golden trophies. The words “Fujimoto Heavy Industries” adorned the wall in the lobby just outside of her office.

Jumping up from her seat, the young intern was focused and concerned. She marched over to a row of cabinets, bent down, and pulled a large map from the bottom drawer. She hurried back to her desk and rolled it across the surface—placing an object on each corner to keep it flat. She pulled a pair of dividers from a cup on her workspace and set them against the map, an outline of the North American continent. Her gaze was concentrated, and her mouth was agape, although she was not breathing. She hovered above it, taking measurements with a steady hand, while her dark, braided pigtails dangled above the Gulf of Mexico, barely kissing it with their curled ends. Her one hand, which remained flat against the surface, began to shake, then her arm, and ultimately, her whole body. She dropped the dividers on the map after taking one last measurement and held her hand to her mouth in horror. There was terror in her eyes as she ran from the office. What she learned was enough to drive anyone mad.

# Part 6

# (4/19/2020)

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he truck tire moved so fast that it barely made contact with the slick pavement. Every bump in the highway sent the turquoise truck a few inches from the Earth before crashing back down with a squeal from the oscillating tire when it smashed into the fender upon impact. The vehicle was on a mission, and nothing would stop it.

Meanwhile, a brood of ducklings frolicked in a lazy pond on the other side of town. The sun was bright and warm in the afternoon sky. It gently kissed the tender quacking heads of the young waterfowl. They knew nothing of life other than following their mother and learning to walk; thus, they splashed in the blue water without a care.

The majestic Ford Ranger was stopped at a light but continued to rev its engine. Upon a quick turn to green, the screeching tires left burning smoke as they sped down US 25. The front-left tire shook, struggling to keep up with the demand from the foot on the gas pedal. Every swinging turn of the spinning wheel barely cleared the raggedy fender that encased it. The worn vehicle was hellbent on getting to where it wanted to be. Destiny was calling.

Back at the pond, a gentle breeze blew through the young ducklings' delicate feathers while chilling their fragile backs. They swam to the edge of the quaint pond, following their mother to the muddy bank. The smallest one struggled to keep up but was determined to go ahead when it did catch the others. Its siblings watched and quacked as the runt marched up the hill in defiance and curiosity. It just kept going!

Concurrently, the truck was nearly out of control. The left tire dug into the road as the rogue vehicle tilted into the oncoming traffic and careened past the stoic lion statues. Like an old donkey, the combustible machine grunted as it ascended the hill while shifting gears. It chugged along, incessantly.

The wayward duckling was new to the world and hadn’t ventured from its family before. The grass was sharp and hurt the flexible webbing of the little bird’s feet; but it liked the freedom, so it waddled further up the hill to the top. Its senses weren’t developed enough to hear the rumbling echo in the distance. It reached the top of the ascent: a flat, solid surface void of grass and vegetation. It pecked at a pebble, oblivious to the fury coming toward it.

Like a run-away steam engine, Jonathan's truck reached the hill’s apex, but not after nearly running over the stubborn birdling. The whirling tread clipped the animal, causing it to tumble back down the slope into the pond. Its siblings met it and resumed its place in the back of the team, as if nothing had happened.

The truck, on the other hand, wasn’t so lucky. As Jonathan swerved to dodge the duck, he over-corrected and swung left as another car was speeding around the corner.

“Fuck!” he yelled for an eternity while pulling the steering wheel to the right in slow motion. The other car left the road and sped downhill towards the pond—finally stopping when it ran headlong into a concrete bench on the waterfront. The impact sent the top stone slab into the water with a thunderous crash. The ducks scattered everywhere from the fracas as Jonathan immediately pulled to the side of the road. His heart dropped when he realized who was in the car.

“Oh my God, Lydia!” he screamed, thinking the worst while running to her car.

Jonathan could only see the deployed airbag through the driver’s side window as he approached her car. He pulled on the handle, panicking at the thought of her being dead. He looked for blood but didn’t see any.

“Lydia!” he pleaded. “Lydia!” He couldn’t see anything past the airbags, which took up the whole interior of the car. Steam rolled from under the hood while he paused, bracing himself for what he was about to find. Then, he leaned in closer. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his shin, followed by a glimpse of a spiked heel recoiling from under the deflated cushion closest to him. Just as he pulled back the bag to expose a leg, he heard Lydia’s voice:

“What is it with you and my car?”

“Oh my God, Lydia! Are you alright?” Jonathan cried out. “Where are you?” He frantically searched the driver’s-side floor.

“I’m over here,” she called out. Her slender body was under both bags, stretched along the floorboards, but her head was below the passenger seat.

“Are you in pain?” Jonathan quickly asked as he ran to the passenger’s side. The ducks floated nearby and watched him.

“Am I in pain? Yes, fuck-wad, I’m in pain. You ran me off the road,” she exclaimed, revealing her anger, a little school-girl crush, and attitude.

He flung open the door with super strength and pulled her modest frame from the wreckage. His breathing was intense. She seemed to be in a state of shock, so Jonathan leaned her against the polished exterior of her car while she spoke to him:

“I was going to the store to get medicine for Daddy. He’s so sick.”

With that, Jonathan planted the biggest kiss on her bruised lips and kept it there. Her body was limp and non-responsive. He wouldn’t stop until he sucked all doubt from her open mouth. Their tongues clashed—his more wildly than hers—on the side of the road while the little ducklings observed. They blushed.

He pulled away from her and said it without much forethought:

“I love you.”

She just looked at him, still reeling from the accident. Mindlessly, she panted, not knowing what to think about anything. She glanced away and then again at him—into his eyes. She wanted more, so she grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled his face into hers. She was hungry for his kiss. She rubbed his face, neck, and chest sensually before dragging his body onto hers. They lay there for a while, enjoying each other while smoke billowed overhead. It would be a while before the tow truck would arrive, but they didn’t mind.

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Later that night, Jonathan lay in Lydia’s bed and held her against his chest. They were both clothed under the sheets. Although the TV was on, the sound was turned down—not muted—but low enough to provide comfortable background noise. The two lovers clung to each other like they were on a raft in the ocean. He inhaled her intoxicating beauty, noting the flowery essence while molding his body around her soft, delicate one. He could snap her in two if he wanted.

The radiance from the TV warmed their smiles and outlined the shapes of their glassy eyes, which faced each other closely. He felt drunk and uninhibited, a feeling he had never felt before from another person. He caressed her fragile shoulder, prompting her to move in for a kiss before closing her eyes in a hot, mindless bliss. Softly, he moved from her shoulder to her waist. She instinctively shot her tongue into his mouth. He dragged his fingertips across her midsection and down the small of her back. Willfully, she arched herself into him while the skin on her arm goose-pimpled. She was lost in him as she opened her eyes and pulled away from his lips. She was ready for him to take her. He moved his hand into her panties, careful not to snag the delicate silk with his dry fingers. She was ready to submit.

“I love you,” quipped a subtle voice on the TV, which forced Jonathan to open his eyes and lose focus. His hand stopped. Those words stung as he remembered Lydia not saying them back to him earlier that day. *Why did she not reciprocate*, he asked himself, while the two lay in bed, still inter-locked. She waited for him to resume because she was so turned on, but Jonathan wasn’t. He didn’t want to be duped into sex again. She would have to say those three words to him for him to go all the way. That’s all he wanted his whole life, and he wouldn’t go any further without it. He returned his hand to her shoulder and rested his head on the pillow.

“What?” she softly asked with a hint of disappointment, but he shook her off. Slowly, he opened his eyes and grabbed the remote before switching the station. A news channel with graphics and a banner across the bottom of the screen flashed before their blank faces. Every box on display had information about the ongoing pandemic. Everything on the TV was frenzied, so Jonathan switched the channel again. Lydia collapsed onto his hollow torso as he clutched her tight. He was hurt.

“I’m afraid Daddy has that COVID,” she revealed while visibly trying to suppress her panic. “His cough is getting worse, and his fever won’t break.”

“Can’t they test him?” he asked. She looked down at the floor in despair.

“I asked the doctor that yesterday, and he just said they didn't have any tests,” she answered. “He suggested that Daddy go give blood, and it’d be tested there.” She rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. “He’s much too weak for that,” she added.

He gripped her tight, trying to squeeze all the pain and fear from her. He did what any good boyfriend would’ve done.

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The massively beautiful, blue-and-green orb that is Earth loomed behind the nearly-defunct satellite that slowly, quietly circled it. The structure was as big as several cars, all connected by pipes and panels, covered in shiny metal and glass. Japanese writing dotted the hull next to an exterior control board. Doors opened on either side of the hull, and thrusters calmly extended from them. Once they were fully expanded, they ignited—causing the old piece of space junk to shift its trajectory. As the craft passed before the sun, a screen suddenly illuminated and started a countdown: “6 Days – 15 Hours – 59 Minutes.” The minutes continued to decrease as the satellite moved closer to Earth; thus, starting its descent.

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# (Monday, 4/20/2020)

The last springtime meteor shower of the night ended as a lone shooting star soared over Lydia’s estate and disappeared into the golden band of orange and crimson swaths on the eastern side of her house. Birds chirped at the new day, and somewhere in the distance, a rooster’s crow echoed from the foggy hills and hollers that rolled through the area. Lydia’s bedroom window was open, revealing a still, country chamber blanketed with the early-morning ease that sets in right before sunrise. There was barely enough light to showcase the details of the room. The bubbling of a coffee maker and the pungent scent of the roast brewing matched the creepy outside sounds while the sunlight fought off the last of the moon’s rays that beamed through the open window.

Her king-size bed sat against a wall, halfway between the window and bedroom door, wrapped in cotton and silk with folds spilling over each side, like a sinking ship. Therein, Jonathan’s shaking, sweaty body tossed from side to side, signaling that he was unconsciously distressed. His eyes rolled under their lids as his limbs extended and retracted. His breathing was rapid while his heart beat faster until the pressure finally forced his eyes open.

The tufts of hair on his disheveled head shot into the murky room while he gasped for air and struggled with time and space. He felt around, remembering who he was and where he was at. He laid back down into the plush softness of the pillow to rid his mind of the torment that occupied it moments before. The birds outside eased his thoughts, and the smell of coffee warmed his senses. He touched the impression on the mattress where Lydia slept next to him. He heard her talking on the phone in her makeshift home office in the other room. She was sent home to work remotely the week before.

Jonathan pulled himself up in bed and looked around the room, shaking off the residual fogginess. He leaned back to the stained oak headboard that rested against the wall. He tilted his head back and draped it over the wooden board so his neck firmly gripped the decorative piece. As reality sunk in, he suddenly had something on his mind. He reached for the remote, hidden in the luxurious folds, to turn on the TV—hoping that would ease his worrisome thoughts.

The sound was muted, so he just mindlessly flipped around, not paying much attention. He was too deep in his thoughts. He didn’t understand why Lydia didn’t say “I love you” back to him when they kissed after he ran her off the road the day before. She kissed him back passionately. She seemed to love him, but she just didn’t say it. That was a problem because he didn’t want to consummate their relationship until she finally said those three words. He wasn’t going to be fooled again.

His trembling hand stopped on something that caught his eye. He turned up the volume and listened in glorious beauty and horror as a correspondent narrated the scene:

“As you probably know, Italy has been one of the hardest hit countries in the world by this new virus spreading around the world, now called ‘COVID-19.’ As a result, the government imposed strict lockdown measures, essentially keeping everyone indoors and away from the deadly virus. But, as you see and hear here, the lengths of this pandemic have tested the human spirit and its survival.”

Another correspondent chimed in:

“What we have here is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen and heard. I have goosebumps. Just take a moment to watch and listen to the resiliency of the human spirit.”

The TV cut to a scene of an empty cobbled street in Milan, Italy, lined with tall, stone brick houses on either side. Balconies dotted the dense urban landscape, while wires and clotheslines draped overhead from one side of the street to the other. Somber figures with sunken-in faces stood on the balconies, huddled together, and belted their sorrows into the miasma. At the same time, government officials in hazmat suites sprayed solution onto the road below from bulky canisters strapped to their backs. Some played guitars, some just their voices, as each tormented person on the street merged their harmony into a haunting rendition of “Ave Maria.” The pain in their voices cracked and revealed a tiny sliver of hope for all humankind. No one knew the future, but the present was bleak enough to be rightfully scared. Hundreds of voices sang as one, as the eternally blue sky overhead highlighted the jagged outline of bell towers and church steeples while blackbirds carelessly added motion to the dismal scene. The correspondent quietly resumed the broadcast, reiterating the devastation that Italy was enduring:

“Bodies are piling up outside of morgues, and doctors now have the task of deciding who lives and who dies, as the country is now out of ventilators.”

A lone tear rolled down Jonathan’s clammy cheek as he struggled to put the sound back on mute. He was worried that he may never be loved by anyone. He always thought someone would eventually love him, but he wasn’t so sure anymore due to life's uncertainties. He told Lydia he loved her the night before, but she didn’t say it back, so she must not love him. He turned the TV off, rolled over, and wiped the tear from his face. He could hear her confident voice handling business and making deals in the other room. He loved that.

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Later that night, after a romantic dinner of Shrimp Scampi, Jonathan sat on the porch with Lydia, holding her in the crux of his shoulder, watching a storm creep in. The dark, flat clouds in the distance added to the eerie twilight that accompanied the evening hours. Lightning flashed over the splashing waves of bluegrass, making the two lovers feel adrift in a sea of rolling hills. The wicker seat creaked as Lydia pushed herself deeper into his embrace. He absorbed most of her silky body but did have to shift to brace himself. The loveseat jiggled when he did so.

The mood was electric in both the air and in their hearts. She enjoyed her time with him, as he made her feel safe, tucked between his broad shoulders. He held her firmly, which drove her wild. She leaned back for a kiss, stretching her smoky neck to meet his mouth while caressing the crouch of his jeans with her tiny, soft hand. Her blood warmed, and her breathing slowed as his penis grew more erect with every touch of her warm fingers. Thunder roared over their lip-smacking while the wind chilled their hot bodies. Everything was ready for sex as the rain started to lightly fall.

Their tongues were interlocked in a wrestling match of passion when Jonathan ran his rough hand over hers as she rubbed him. He pulled his head back to disengage the kiss, but she had a firm grip on his mouth and pulled on his bottom lip with her kiss before letting it snap back to his face. He was trying to be subtle, but he also wanted to put his mind at ease, so he asked her:

“Do you love me, baby?”

The two stared at each other in a vacuum. He waited for an answer while she blankly stared back, biting her lip. A burst of lightning emphasized the deep lines under her eyes and the distrust of the future in her gaze. He pushed her hand from his crouch just as her phone rang. The two frustrated lovers sat apart on the creaky, wooden loveseat as the rain came down around them, invigorating their souls and making them feel alive.

Lydia answered the phone and turned away from Jonathan while remaining in her seat. Her tone was grave as she nodded and listened to the voice on the other end, occasionally interjecting her voice.

“Well, how’s he doing now?” she inquired, followed by a couple of guttural acknowledgments. Jonathan gently rubbed the small of her back to show his support. He knew what the call was about.

“How’s his breathing?” she asked with urgency. She bit her lip and pushed farther away from Jonathan. “Ok, ok,” she added. “Just let me know if he gets any worse.”

She ended the call and continued to face away from Jonathan, as she didn’t want to reveal her eyes welling up. The rain let up and faded into a country silence. Jonathan sat up and gently draped himself around her. She sniffled, putting the palm of her hand against his face, as she turned farther away to face her father’s house. The light was on in his bedroom window. The nurse’s car was parked parallel to his house on the gravel driveway. The rain started to fall again. Lydia pulled herself together, sat erect, and leaned back into Jonathan. She then sighed.

“So, how’s he doing?” asked the supportive boyfriend.

“Uh, not good,” she expelled with force while drying her tears. “If his breathing gets any worse, he’ll have to go to the hospital.” She closed her eyes to shield herself from the pain. “I’m pretty sure it’s COVID-19 or whatever it’s called,” she added, focusing her sorrow on the concrete floor.

The lovers leaned against one another while a mist dampened their numb bodies. They were hopeful for the future but scared of it at the same time. They watched the dying sunset while holding each other tightly. Jonathan knew that he loved her. He was OK with her not reciprocating it, as her father’s worsening health was her priority—not him. After all, he reasoned to himself: *I have all the time in the world for her to fall in love with me*.

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# (Tuesday, 4/21/2020)

As the obsolete satellite rotated around Earth, pushing closer to landfall, the body of the mechanical mass freely twisted in orbit. It glistened its metallic sheen in the bright sun. The structure’s paneled arms swung around the massive deep-blue sphere, inching closer to it, while the satellite’s thrusters powered through the planet’s thermosphere. A display panel on the hull flashed and blinked as the digital clock continued its countdown:

4 Days – 17 Hours – 31 Minutes.

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**\*4/21/2020 1:01 PM:** Hey…I’m getting lunch. Do you want something, Beautiful?

**4/21/2020 1:05 PM:** hmm…whr u going?

**\*4/21/2020 1:06 PM:** Probably B-King.

**4/21/20201:08PM:** YES! Im starvn. get me a med #1

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Jonathan loaded his business supplies in the back of his truck before closing the tailgate. Although there was an initial work slowdown due to the pandemic, Lydia helped him secure jobs in supermarkets and hospitals, bringing him steady employment. She also helped him with his bookkeeping by creating digital spreadsheets and ledgers. Likewise, she designed marketing materials and booked jobs, so he was fortunate to have her in his life. It was like he won the lottery.

He drove down US 25 in a state of pure contentment, basking in the warm sun and admiring his surroundings at each stop. Looking at the bed of his truck in the rearview mirror, he pondered the idea of buying a new truck—one that wasn’t so old and junky—since the future of his business seemed bright. He stopped at a traffic light, engaged his left signal, and turned up the radio. The weather forecast was just wrapping up:

“Tomorrow night is the peak night of the Lyrid meteor shower. The skies will be clear, so it should be quite a show. Get your wishes ready. There will also be a New Moon on Thursday.”

Just then, a loud rumbling sound took over Jonathan’s pleasant joyride. A red convertible Mercedes Benz pulled behind him, drowning out anything within earshot of its loud thumping bass and accompanying music. The lucky bachelor fumbled with the volume button as the arrow turned green, but he was too busy to notice the change. The car behind him laid on its horn, startling the distracted driver and prompting him to step on the gas and turn left into the restaurant’s parking lot. He looked in the mirror at the driver behind him, feeling like he’d been disrespected, but he wasn’t going to let it spoil his good mood. There was no one in the drive-thru, so he pulled right up. He was promptly greeted by a welcoming voice in the speaker box. It was turning out to be a pleasurable experience.

But, as Jonathan began to order, the red Mercedes pulled behind him, even louder than before. A middle-aged man in sunglasses talked loudly on the phone, speaking over his music. The voice on the other side of the amplifier couldn’t understand Jonathan’s words because of all the racket, so he had to yell at the menu board. He hung his head out the window, sighed, and looked back at the rude figure behind him, wondering if his order would be correct. He pulled his car forward, up to the window, and smiled at the blond teenage girl behind the glass. She said “hi,” and flashed him a smile, exposing her braces before asking for payment. Jonathan asked her about his order's accuracy, but she could not understand him as the offensive car pulled closer to him. She passed a large drink to him through the opening, which he placed in a cup holder wedged within his dashboard. He handed her several bills of cash in exchange. She closed the partition for a moment, at which time the music and the thumping were deafening, rattling the glass of everything around it.

The man in the red car shouted ‘fuck this’ and ‘fuck that,’ regardless of anyone around him. The window opened again, and the big-eyed, freckled teenager handed Jonathan a bag of burgers and fries. He smiled and thanked her, and she did the same, clumsily, as profanities loudly emanated from the Mercedes, causing the young girl to blush and Jonathan to brandish a look of annoyance backward. He noticed a tip jar on the counter just beyond the glass, so he extended a bill through the window and dropped it into the cup. The girl turned red again and thanked him. But, as he withdrew his arm from the restaurant, the man behind him engaged his horn again, which made the girl jump back and shut the sliding door. Jonathan instinctively popped his shifter into neutral to let his car roll a few feet before slamming on the brakes, causing his drink to nearly tumble from the holder. He caught it with his right hand while pushing down on the emergency brake on the floor with his foot. Without hesitation, he opened the door with his left hand and hopped out with the drink. The universe slowed down for a moment—planets ceased spinning, time stopped moving—while Jonathan took off his sunglasses and approached the car. A lifetime of rage beamed from his eyes as he threw the fountain drink at the man’s windshield. A crowd had formed on the other side of the restaurant’s glass. They watched as fate finally dealt Jonathan a winning hand. The man turned down his music and ended the call on his phone. He wouldn’t interfere with the cosmic plans of the star-crossed lover. Jonathan jumped back into his truck and drove off, hopefully teaching a lesson to everyone involved. Perhaps, he learned the most.

**\*4/21/2020 1:27 PM:** Hey Lydz…Do you have any Diet Coke at home? Long story

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Dusk crept into the clear April afternoon when rush hour came and went at the familiar gas station. Local factories discharged their first-shift employees for the day, with many stopping at the convenience store before going home. The usual attendant sat on a stool behind the counter, exhausted from the dwindling flurry of customers. He hadn’t seen Jonathan in a while, so he stayed hypervigilant, always awaiting his arrival. Many people lumbered through the door every day, but none impacted him as Jonathan did. He admired the swinging bachelor.

Just then, as if by luck, the turquoise pick-up truck sailed down the road, like a shooting star, past the gas station, towards Lydia’s house. He watched in awe. It was like seeing Bigfoot. The meek attendant understood that Jonathan had more important things in his life than chatting with a gas station clerk. *He was probably off, making love to many women. Or, tending to his family’s fortune*, he thought to himself. The attendant didn’t have Jonathan's lavish lifestyle, or so he thought, but he envied the bachelor, nonetheless.

The pastel sky turned cobalt as the hours wore through the evening. Like an Edward Hopper painting, fluorescent lights illuminated the lonely clerk as the world and all its opportunities passed him by. Cars careened down the avenue past the gas station as ripples do a current. They broke off into different streets, going their separate ways, living their own lives. Humanity was a moving electric light show—some joined the rousing symphony of life while others sat it out. There’s no pain in an unbroken heart.

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# (Wednesday, 4/22/2020; 11:31 p.m.)

The short Spring day ended, as the star-splashed sky hung over the bleak horizon like a snow globe frozen in time. Two silhouettes joined at the hands, hiked up the tallest hill that rolled across the dotted skyline. An occasional shooting star brought their index fingers into the speckled dome. They injected humanity into the universe while they pointed at the heavens. Their incessant giggling, like excited school kids, reverberated through the hallows of the landscape. The light from above led them to the hill’s apex.

“Is this a good spot, Beautiful?” Jonathan asked Lydia, looking into her golden eyes. They were glazed over with lust. She just nodded and grabbed his shoulder to steady herself. She was so hot. She wanted him to take her right there, under the stars.

Jonathan removed a blanket from under his arm and spread it over the open grass. He grabbed her around the waist and confidently pulled her onto him. He held her firmly with his rough hands, turning her on even more.

“I want you to make a wish on the next shooting star that you see,” he whispered before pecking her neck with gentle kisses.

“It’s already come true,” she breathed under her breath while her heart rate slowed. She didn’t want him to necessarily hear her.

“I love you,” he hissed in her ear after taking a quick break from the nape of her neck. His thoughts were mindless as he tugged her earlobe with his teeth before returning his attention to her tiny shoulder. She writhed against his body in extreme elation. She closed her eyes and forced quick breaths from her open jaws while he caressed her with his lips. He rubbed her breast with his left hand and her groin with his right. The denim was rough, so he applied more pressure—prompting her to nudge her mouth to his. His hand slipped under her panties to her wet labia, stroking her vulva in a circle. He had her pulsating, massaging her breast and crotch in rhythm while sucking the life out of her. They felt each other’s tortured soul through the love their tongues made. He didn’t care if she loved him or not; she was where he wanted. He would tease her until she said the three magic words.

Meteors rained down on the two gyrating lovers. Jonathan had complete control over Lydia, holding her with one arm while rubbing her clit with his free hand. He could feel her tension mount as she groaned from the intensifying pleasure. He gently nuzzled her skin, bringing her closer to the climax. This was it!

Lydia opened her eyes. She didn’t know if she was alive or dead. A hundred shooting stars fell above her quivering body as she inhaled deeply and then exhaled. She heard nothing except for her own breaths. The last of her contractions expelled what little moistness she had left in her. The orgasm swept over her like a tidal wave before receding back into the ocean. A second crest of extreme exhaustion crashed into her, making her fall limp in his arms. She loved his sturdy embrace.

He lay on his back and looked at the sky, holding Lydia against his chest. He thought she felt a little warm. She drifted in and out of consciousness, taking turns shifting her glances between the light show and her father’s house. She knew in her heart that he had COVID-19.

As dusk turned into dawn and the darkest hours of the morning blanketed the countryside, the two figures lumbered back down the hill; but, this time, one was carrying the other. The masculine outline and the relaxed silhouette contrasted greatly against the last brilliant streaks of falling stars. In one last spurt, they shot down like fiery rain over the exhausted lovers.

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The screen on the hull shook violently and was blazing hot. The satellite was nearing impact. It continued its countdown:

2 Days-5 Hours-27 minutes

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To: Lydia Barrister

Thursday, 4/23/20 10:37 am

From: Jonathan Simmons <bigjonstud@hutmail.com>

Subject: New Moon

You are my new moon

My new moon.

Nothing else

is such a boon.

Today we’ll

Start over anew.

Just me and you,

My new moon.

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# (Friday, 4/24/2020)

A series of forceful coughs woke Lydia from her unconscious state, forcing her to sit up in bed and gasp for air. She had difficulty catching her breath as the morning light peaked through the blinds across her distressed face. Birds chirped at the new day outside her window. She leaned back into the pillow, feeling unusually exhausted. Her tendons, bones, and muscles all cracked and throbbed when she did so. But she didn’t want to think about it. She shook the sleep off and realized Jonathan was not in bed with her. She remembered he had gone to bed the night before, and it looked like he had slept beside her, but she didn’t see nor hear him anywhere. He was off for the day, so he had nowhere to be. She reached for the phone and shot him a text.

Reluctantly, she slunk out of bed and into the shower, stopping in the kitchen to turn on the coffeemaker. As she eased past the side-facing window, she saw the nurse’s car in her father’s driveway through the sheers, prompting her to look away since it was too early to deal with the heaviness of his situation. She lumbered into the tiled bathroom, where she did most of her deep thinking and problem-solving. The warm stream of water in the morning eased the tension enough to let thoughts flow more freely. She shut the door and quickly let out a few coughs before dropping her clothes to the floor. The handles creaked when she turned on the water. Clouds of steam rose to the ceiling, kissing the tender leaves of a fern that hung between the window and the shower. Before stepping into the tub, she checked to see if Jonathan had texted back. He hadn’t.

While she dragged the loofah across her aching body, leaving a trail of creamy suds that were quickly washed away, her thoughts immediately shifted to Jonathan. She had deep feelings for him but wasn’t ready to commit emotionally. She needed a little more—perhaps one more sign. The steam loosened up her congested head and rigid muscles. The water trickled softly, so she could listen for his message. *Where is he?* She thought to herself. A cough boomed through the paved corners of the shower as she turned off the water. She stood for a moment, shivering, watching the drops fall from her torso and disappear into the air, only to be washed down the drain. The stillness in the house was comforting, but only under the expectation that it would be filled with life later in the day.

Lydia worked through the morning, sitting behind the computer in her home office, feeling the balmy sun on her face as its brilliance shined through the front window onto her aching body. She lacked stamina and found herself exceptionally unfocused on her work. Anxiously, she peered over her monitor, out the window to her father’s house, then down at her phone. She hadn’t heard from him or the nurse, so she breathed a little easier for the time being. Strangely, she hadn’t heard from Jonathan, either. The worried woman continued to lose focus, scrolling through the day's news: “Satellite Almost Here” and “Sunny Today, Showers Tonight, Fair Tomorrow” were the headlines she mindlessly rolled past while trying to redirect her thoughts back to business.

Not wanting to waste any more of the company’s time, she moved to the couch in the other room and turned on the TV. The cushions were soft and welcoming to the fatigue that slowly crept in. She emptied her mind of all the terrible things in the world and lay there. She wished that Jonathan was by her side, caressing her hair. The thought of his calloused fingers against her tender skin comforted her. She was falling in love with him and ready to tell him that. But, it had to be the right time—so she could then make love to him. She had all the time in the world, she figured; thus, she was in no rush.

Different angles of the living room displayed Lydia’s undisturbed body, folded up on the couch, dressed in flannel pajamas. She was lifeless as the afternoon wore on, and the shapes crept across the wooden floorboards. Vapor pooled in the dim sky while daylight started its westward journey, leaving dark trails that streaked through the rustic décor of Lydia’s home. Still, she remained on the couch.

A truck door slamming shut woke Lydia from her deep sleep. The TV was on mute, but the radiance from the screen blanketed the drab surroundings. The dying embers of the day occasionally poked through the thickening clouds, creating an eerie glow over her estate. She heard footsteps approaching the front door, causing her to slowly unwind, lower her legs to the floor, and hoist herself up. She heard the wind rustling through the branches as she gently approached the entrance. Without hesitance, she reached for the knob just in time to hear a smash on the other side of the partition. She pulled the door open in one slow motion to reveal her fate.

On one knee, Jonathan knelt before her, holding a ring box. Her heart stopped momentarily as their eyes locked. Hers was full of surprise and shock, while his were sad. The remaining bits of sun protruded from the murky clouds and shined down on him in sharp, divided rays of light. He rose to meet her face in a distorted sense of time that seemed to last forever. His head eclipsed the glimmering sky to form a halo around his wispy dome. He smiled down at her with all the warmth in the world. A breeze cooled her cheek, but she was too engulfed in the moment to feel the approaching weather. She held her hand to her mouth to keep her sanity from falling out. She watched his lips as he began to speak. They formed “Lydia,” but she couldn’t hear the words. He laughed, but it was like she was underwater. Her senses weren’t coming through. “Lydia,” he mouthed again. The rays and halo receded, leaving her in the company of a mortal man once again. She started to regain her senses.

“This is not what it looks like,” he explained to her, letting out a sharp burst of laughter. “I dropped my keys,” he revealed, pointing down at the keys on the ground before the door. She looked at them, trying to hold her relief while focusing on the box he was holding.

“Here, I got you this,” he said, shoving the present toward her. He groaned when he pulled himself up, trying hard not to grab onto her for leverage.

What’s this?” she asked, trying to act normal. Day was turning into night. Lights on the outside, plus the ones on the inside, lit up their silhouettes so they could see each other. She opened the box to reveal a necklace: a golden chain attached to a heart with a diamond in the middle. Basking in genuine contentment, Lydia pulled the shiny choker from its case and wrapped it around her neck. Jonathan watched in delight as she clasped it together behind her dizzy head.

“They didn’t have any long necklace boxes left, so they gave me that one,” he told her with a chuckle. She kept her hands behind her back and brought forth the necklace she typically wore: a diamond-studded horseshoe at the end of a golden chain. She draped it around his collarbone and fastened it together. They stared into one other’s eyes, grasping their new symbols of each other, which hung against their hearts. She was ready, so she pulled him in.

Lydia took control of Jonathan by swinging him around, so she faced the obstructed living room with his back to the door. She pushed him in and nudged the partition shut, but a big gust of wind blew it open before it could latch; so she kicked it shut with her foot. She guided him to the couch with both hands flat against his chest before forcing him into the cushions. He was docile, subservient, happily awaiting her next move. She straddled his tree-like body like a climber does a mountain—firmly and with confidence. She reached for her phone on the end table to dim the lights and turn on soft music. She held his hand while she kissed him, driving his disheveled hair into the fabric. She pulled on his lips with her kiss before letting go. She breathed, “I love you,” hovering over his glazed-over face. The necklace was just enough to push her over the edge. She said the magic words, so she was ready for him.

She grabbed his arms and rolled him on top of her, wanting to be penetrated from the top. Branches tapped at the window from the wind and filled their beating hearts. Rain spat at the glass and primed their bodies for the rhythm that was about to come. She closed her eyes, waiting for it. Jonathan was hard against her. It was a perfect time when all was right with the world. The thought of being his wife someday made her want him more.

Suddenly, she opened her eyes to red lights flashing across the room. Her phone started to ring. She jumped up, threw Jonathan off, and grabbed her phone but didn’t answer. She ran over to her office—to the window closest to her father’s house—and pulled back the sheers. An ambulance lit up the night sky before her father’s house. She raced into the bedroom to quickly get dressed. Then, she met Jonathan in the living room.

“Hey, I gotta go,” she frantically announced, trying to hide her disappointment. She moved closer for a kiss, which comforted her. “I’m sorry, but I’ll be back tomorrow,” she whispered while her eyes longed to stay with him. Their lips engaged and then prematurely unlatched, leaving them both wanting more, but she had to go.

“I’m going home tonight to sleep in bed,” he yelled to the room as she darted away.

“No, just sleep here,” she hollered back in haste from the outside, turning slightly to face him. He jumped up and ran after her, but she was too fast. He stood on the front porch, watching her fade away.

“No, I’m going home tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow,” he screamed into the night. She turned around to face him while running, but the wind began to howl, so she could not hear his words.

“I love you,” he shouted at the fleeting figure as she disappeared into the void. The blasting wind smacked the ambulance with rain in bursts while paramedics loaded Lydia’s father into the back. She reappeared in the lights, thus reaching them in time. They took her temperature before giving her a face mask. She hopped into the back while the first responders shut the doors.

Jonathan watched as the ambulance drove away. The moistness on his face reflected the worn lines around his eyes and mouth. The menacing precipitation ended, and the night was then tranquil. Moonlight shined through the pine and oak trees onto the cascading bluegrass hills. Although he could’ve stayed, he was tired and felt deep inside that it was time to go home. His work was done there.

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Violent flames engulfed the display panel as the satellite shook, nearing total, full-body meltdown. The impact was imminent. Blue water and green land circled below.

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# (4/24/2020; 11:52 p.m. EST)

Jonathan fell asleep in his bed with the light beside him still lit. His lanyard draped around the lamp, nearly touching the floor. He slept peacefully on his back, clutching the horseshoe necklace with his right hand. Nothing mattered to him anymore: his childhood, the money, Lydia. Nothing. He was lucky enough to get the one thing he wanted in life—something most unfortunate souls don’t experience. He didn’t know what the next day would bring; but as he drifted off to sleep, he knew that he just had the best day of his life.

# Part 7

# (4/25/2020; Tokyo, 9:30 p.m. JST)

#

A

n oscillating fan sat in the corner of a living room, whirring gently, adding movement to the lazy evening. A Manaki-neko, or lucky cat figurine, sat on an old console TV, waving its ceramic paw at an elderly couple facing it. They laughed at the current program: a game show in which the contestants wore outrageous outfits. They rejoiced at the antics on the screen while the foreboding cat beckoned to them. Its blank stare was impersonal, indiscriminate. It was focused on something far greater than the living room.

Suddenly, the screen went blank and then cut to static. The noise was deafening, which caused the old couple to cover their ears. The cat still waved at them without any regard for anything. It was relentless. The woman finally jumped up and quickly scooted over to the console. She banged on it a few times but to no avail. The cosmic cat continued to swing its claw and stare through her. She waited momentarily, balling up her fist, when the show came back on. The screen blipped several times, as if experiencing technical difficulties, but then corrected itself. They cheered before she returned to her husband and sat beside him. They resumed enjoying the show, occasionally pointing at the screen with laughter. The cat figurine called to them with a dead stare. Its mechanical paw clicked and clacked as the fan blew softly behind it. To listen closely enough to it, between the ticks and over the childish laughter of people living their lives, meant hearing one tragic tale ending on the cusp of being told. A lone star streaked across the sky as the sun disappeared for the day. It was brightest right before burning out.