

Introduction:

On Writing Relationships

My first ever writing professor told me that all of my writing is about relationships. She said that each story and poem, no matter how hard I tried to focus on something else, always centered around a relationship. Some were romantic, others platonic. Some were familial, while others were about a character's relationship with nature, the world, or their own mental health.

She laughed as she dropped that bomb of truth on my work. I wasn't sure how to handle it. Here I was, thinking that I could write a wide range of different stories, when in reality, I was subconsciously stuck to one. But Professor Marcus didn't mean this new insight to say my writing was stale or unnuanced. She meant this truth of my work as the sincerest compliment imaginable. Professor Marcus made me realize that relationships, with all their ups, downs, and complexities are fully fleshed out stories – and the types of stories that I can't help but explore in my fiction writing.

Years later, in my senior year at UMass, I read *Euphoria* by Lily King – a novel that perfectly displays how strong, effective, and fun a narrative about relationships can be. In this novel, three 1930s anthropologists, Nell Stone, Schuyler Fenwick, and Andrew Bankson, study the many new and undiscovered (by Western civilization) tribes in Papa New Guinea. In the 1930s, anthropology was still a new and continuously evolving field of science, which makes *Euphoria's* three characters even more interesting and curious to discover as they practice an unfamiliar and poorly documented science. But what's most important, especially in regard to my own writing process, is King's ability to write relationships between characters and settings so fabulously well.

King uses many literary techniques to get her characters' unique and ever-evolving relationships across. Such techniques I adopt frequently in my own work, too. In one instance, we learn how Nell and Fen have a very odd power struggle that is almost too subtle to notice. However, through King's clever and concise narration, we understand the subtleties of their issues and want to learn more: "[Nell] watched these Westerners and she watched Fen, speaking his hard talk to the men, aggressively pressing them about their work, defensively responding when they asked about his, coming to seek her out then punishing her with a few cutting words and an abrupt retreat. He did this four or five times, dumping his frustration on her, unaware of his own pattern. He was not through punishing her for wanting to leave the Mumbanyo." (King 8-9). Alongside how efficient and gripping her writing is – never wasting a sentence or phrase that doesn't flesh out her characters and world further – King allows the reader to notice a problem in Nell and Fen's relationship without explaining the problem matter-of-factly. A perfect case of show-don't-tell, but more importantly, a perfect case of playing with the readers curiosity with a uniquely off-putting relationship. We know that Fen is not finished with 'punishing' Nell for leaving their original tribe, but why did Nell want to leave? And why is Fen still bothered by this? There is a bigger problem left unanswered from his interaction, and with each new explanation, a new and more interesting question arises.

However, our interest in fictional relationships isn't always about the things that we don't know. In many cases, writers like King use what we *already* know about a relationship to make us curious for what's to come. As *Euphoria* progresses, Bankson befriends Fen and falls in love with Nell, and the plot thickens due to Nell being already married to Fen. As soapy as this type of romance trope sounds, King uses this newfound development in Bankson's relationship with Nell to reveal more about where the story might be going, as well as more about Bankson's

character. Once Bankson leaves Nell and Fen to their own tribe, he writes, “Nell and Fen had chased away my thoughts of suicide. But what had they left me with? Fierce desires, a great tide of feeling of which I could make little sense, an ache that seemed to have no name but want. I want. Intransitive. No object. It was the opposite of wanting to die. But it was scarcely more bearable.” (King 86). In this passage, we as the reader learn how infatuated Bankson is with Nell and Fen. But such infatuation comes from a sudden (and perhaps, premature) relief from depression and suicidal thoughts; correlating one’s own positive growth in mental health solely from the presence of two new friends could be a recipe for disaster. King uses her characters’ relationships to not only further the plot, but also paint a more complex picture of Bankson’s psyche and possible future actions. Will Bankson’s intense passion to be around these two people be helpful or harmful? Is Bankson capable of being happy and alone with others to keep him grounded in the world? Like I said previously, with each new detail we learn about the characters’ relationships with one another, the thicker the plot and possible conflicts become.

There is one final relationship-centered technique that King uses to complicate and develop her story further. In some stories, particularly *Euphoria*, setting is written as a type of character in itself, with personalities, goals, and histories capable of impacting the present-day plot and conflicts. I’ve always gravitated towards using setting to fully develop and flesh out my stories, and *Euphoria* is a perfect example of fiction that uses setting to fully compliment the physical characters’ relationships and struggles.

King describes Papa New Guinea as a living and complicated character, and in doing so, gives the country inherit relationships to the other parts of the world and the three main characters we follow. Describing setting in such a way makes the world feel active in the story, rather than a passive background in which events simply unfold in. For example, when Bankson

takes Nell and Fen to the Kiona, their new tribe to study, he describes the neighboring tribes while floating down the serpentine Sepik river, saying, “After an hour or so of almost complete darkness on both banks, we came round a bend and saw fires and the flashes of festooned bodies all along a beach on the southern shore. It was the Olimbi village of Kamindimimbut, in the midst of a celebration. The smell of roasted boar reaches us, and the hard drumming thudded in our chests.” (King 37). The readers are given extremely concrete and detailed images to paint the scene of the Olimbi village. Each image is not merely a few facts that have no purpose in the larger story and conflict. We learn how the neighboring tribes celebrate in the dark and feast together – how loud and proud they are, juxtaposed with Bankson’s silent canoe and the anthropologists’ unending curiosity. The setting is directly involved in the main character’s thoughts, travels, and studies, making the interactions between the characters in their world incredibly economical, efficient, and gripping from a writing perspective.

However, King soon turns this description of the neighboring Kamindimimbut tribes in a new and much more devastating direction with Bankson’s present-day reflection. Bankson goes on to recall how the Japanese killed every Olimbi and Kamindimimbut man, woman, and child after learning that “a few Olimbi men had helped us find the three captured American agents being held nearby.” (King 37). This realization is terrifying, and King knows the weight of the history she is meddling with. The history of the tribes before and during imperial expansion intensifies the three anthropologists’ presence among each tribe; now, the setting is an active character that has unique and complicated relationships with our real and physical main characters. Throughout the novel, Bankson and Nell take careful caution to not interrupt the tribes’ way of life, viewing the setting of Papua New Guinea as intricate and fleshed out as it truly is, while Fen on the other hand is more rash, involved, and careless when interacting with the

tribes. King writes her characters and setting as a tense back and forth relationship – the characters can directly harm or help the world, while the world can directly harm or help the characters. In this way, setting is written as active as it possibly can be, and the overall narrative and engagement with the reader is all the better for it.

Most writers say that character is plot, and that’s absolutely true. But to complicate that phrase further, I would again say that setting is a character, too. Imagery is constantly characterized and full of personality in any work of fiction or poetry. Good narrative structures must be built up like characters full of intricate nuances, ups and downs, and complexities. And most of all, characters can’t exist without a firm understanding of how they relate to the world, themselves, and the other characters around them.

My own writing focuses on character the most, but that doesn’t mean I exclude setting or plot from my writing. Character is important because we as humans form connections with characters the same way we form connections with each other. After all, each person on this planet is their own type of character, full of struggles, conflicts, goals, backstories, and, of course, relationships. As a writer, I try to focus my work on giving the reader the most curious and interesting relationships to follow and analyze. Because for me, my curiosity is never focused on the plot or the action. It’s focused on the characters, the stakes for the characters involved, and how their relationships might grow or fall with each turning page.

Relationships are character, and character is plot. Who’s to say relationships can’t be plot, too?

Works Cited

King, Lily. *Euphoria*. New York: Grove Press, 2014. Novel.

It's Always You:

A Short Story

Ivan moves the harmonica between his palms and stares at its copper and bronze plating. The campfire crackles and sparks in the instrument's rough metal. The young boy sits on a fallen log, near the three-person tent and dead trees bending through the woods. Owls coo on top of black branches. Crickets sing a melancholy choir. The Mt. Sunapee Greenway trail is empty and cold during the long summer nights, so Ivan huddles over his knees and cradles himself in his arms, his breath growing thin. He is not calm. He is not collected. His older brother is still looking for more firewood. His older brother is nowhere near to keep him company.

He picks up the matted blanket from the tent and wraps it around his shoulders. The harmonica still sleeps in his palms. His father left a dirt encrusted fingerprint in the upper right corner of the back metal plate before he laminated the metal. He had made it himself, right before he died. In his shed back home. His old carpenter's workshop collects only dust now, and their home holds another family who could afford their low asking price. The grass grows dull. The driveway gravels dust. But none of them are around to see the home blossom anymore.

The fire screams and cracks a cloud of red sparks. The shadows crawl further and further towards Ivan from the tall tree trunks and the low mountain-laurels. He feels so weak, believing that he should be stronger for a nine-year-old boy. I just started fourth grade, he thinks. I should start making friends. I'm no longer a kid. Not really. I have to grow up. I have to.

He moves the harmonica up to his lips and plays a quiet minor chord. Focus on the breath, he tells himself. Stay calm and collected. Just like Dad always said.

The leaves rustle in the shadows inside the forest's dark. Dead branches crack and crumble under something heavy.

Ivan looks up. "Henry?" He whispers loudly. "Henry? Is that you?"

A pair of eyes, or what looks like a pair of eyes, open and close in the bushes.

He puts the harmonica away and holds his stomach and chest tight. Air invades his lungs and starts to drain everything away. He doesn't want to be alone. "Henry? Henry please..." He is so alone. All by himself, swallowed in the black and green dark.

The eyes disappear into the nothing that surrounds.

He reaches for his inhaler and breathes it in loud and fast, looking around the trees for the sounds that grows louder – for the eyes that might still be there.

The thought of asking for his dad creeps into his mind, but darkness can bring back no such thing.

Out of the shadow he sees Henry, his older brother, walk towards the camp, humming a simple song. The forest's seductive sounds slowly start to fade. Henry sees his little brother gripping his inhaler and chest and drops the bundle of firewood. He runs to Ivan and hugs his little brother tight. "Ivan, I'm so so sorry." He grips him tighter. "I know I said I'd be gone for only fifteen minutes. I got caught up in getting enough wood for the rest of the night, but it wasn't worth it. It wasn't. Oh god, I'm so sorry, Ivan."

Ivan closes his eyes and looks away. "I'm fine. I just got carried away again."

Henry holds his brother's face in his hands and smiles out of guilt. Ivan's cheeks are cold, chubby, and red. "It's okay that you get carried away and feel anxious. You know that, right?"

"I said I'm fine."

An asylum of loons call to one another beyond the trees. Their pitches raise higher and stronger until they suddenly cease and silence.

Henry stands up and walks over to his backpack leaning against their three-person tent. His backpack is lined with pins and colorful patches from his eagle scout achievements. The brothers' dad was a scout leader, and they joined their troupe because of him. The music and carpentry patch are the only two that are laminated on the frail, polyester straps.

He takes out a mason jar of brown powder and white dots and tosses it to his little brother. "I brought some hot chocolate with those mini marshmallows, the way dad used to make it. Do you want some?"

Ivan pauses before opening the jar. He says nothing.

The morning is bright. The embers breathe slowly. Henry crouches by the campfire and watches his percolator dance on top of the fire's metal cooking grate. He hums "Lullaby of the leaves," a song him and his father used to play together. His tone is coarse and rigid; he doesn't want to wake his little brother up yet.

He closes his eyes and thinks about home.

Henry had to take a full-time dishwashing job, sell the family house, and get a cheap low-rise apartment when his dad passed away. Their family was already small and poor, with no close relatives at all, so when the father's heart gave out, Henry took on the guardianship of his little nine-year-old brother. He wanted to. He never got around to being the best older brother when they were growing up. Their ten-year age difference didn't help with that. He wanted to make up for lost time. It felt like he had to.

The guardianship was easy to obtain, and selling the house was a piece of cake as well. But saying goodbye was the hard part. And driving away in their dad's old car was beyond difficult. Henry had to keep his eyes on the road, and Ivan, of course, said nothing the whole ride through.

His father taught him how to play guitar; that's how he got the scout's music patch. His father taught him how to fish, hunt, build a fire, and track small game; he obtained patches for those skills, too. His father showed him his famous hot chocolate recipe and built him his own cedar guitar, all in the month before he passed away. It was as if his father knew that time was short, and he had to make sure his sons were well taken care of. But he never taught Henry to take care of pained trigger fingers from grimy plastic dishes and blistering hot pans. His father never did anything for himself, either. Everything was always for family. For his sons.

Henry had smiled whenever he played that cedar guitar. But the joy from playing it didn't last very long. He sold that, too.

He stops singing his song and leans back on the fallen log, thinking about his dad.

Ivan wakes up and crawls out of his tent, his head poking out of the dry, green canvas.

"Did you sleep well?" Henry asks.

"I actually did this time. Thanks for the extra blanket."

Henry smiles. "Good thing I thought ahead."

The two brothers watch two worms twirl and hug on top of purple, wet moss. The worms crawl through the black and white cracks and never miss a beat.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" Henry offers his brother the second tin cup. "I made a cup for you if you wanted to try it. I'm not sure if you're too young for coffee..."

"I'm good, thanks. I just want to finish this trail."

“We’ve only got about fifteen more miles left. We’ll finish in just two days. Why don’t we take our time?”

“It’s not the same finishing this trail without dad.”

They started this trail a year ago with him, and it was Henry’s idea to finish it together. As if to finally make peace from the past with new memories. Even Henry can’t disagree that the journey isn’t the same without dad.

“Come on, tough guy.” He takes out a pack of oats and berries and combines them together in a lightweight bowl. “I’ll make us breakfast and we can pick up where we left off. How’s that sound?”

Worms crawl underneath damp purple moss and hide from the morning sun.

“That sounds good,” Ivan says.

Ivan always remembered the small facts of the wild whenever he, his brother, and his dad went hiking during the weekends. He kept track of their steps and their miles with a birthday-gifted pedometer and brought pocket-sized books on mushrooms, berries, trees, flora, and small and big critters. That’s how he got the Fish and Wildlife Management badge. He was the one crowned with a happy, adventurous smile. His dad had told him so.

Whenever he sees himself smile it reminds him of his dad. He can’t tell if it’s a happy, sad, or complicated memory.

Noon passes fast. The trail gets steeper and steeper. And the brothers walk up a long, forested hill, with no one else in sight. Rocks, roots, and bright red mud litter the winding path forward. Hidden chickadees sing on top of long, thick branches. Route 31 is a few miles South

and Mt. Lovell is a few miles North. Once they reach the mountain, they take another rest for the night. At the Max Israel shelter. Ivan feels exhausted.

Ivan notices his brother's fingers locking and freezing in place. It makes him uncomfortable. It looks so unnatural. To help calm his nerves, he whips out his harmonica and plays "Isn't She Lovely" over and over and over again – dad's favorite Stevie tune. The song makes Henry smile. Ivan is sure that his brother must miss his guitar deeply. I hope he isn't jealous or sad or lonely, the little brother hopes.

After a few hours pass, a creek whispers nearby.

They both take a rest while Henry uses his water-filtration kit to fill their water bottles. Thoroughwort plants and plentiful green ferns swarm the creek's edge. Ivan leans against a giant dry rock to catch a bit more sun before the moon welcomes the forest. They both take deep breaths and focus on the forest's current calm. In, and out.

Ivan hears a man approaching from the trail and waves. The man's backpack is black and heavy, with pots and pans attached to the free hooks along the pack's bottom and sides. Just like Henry's bag, and the one his father used have, too.

"Do you mind if I fill some water here with you both?" the stranger asks, his voice low and calm. He gives Ivan a smile and a wink with each eye and looks at Henry blankly.

Ivan stands up, feeling strange at the man's presence. He didn't get to finish his breathing exercises – there was only a deep breath in, and no long breath out. The man interrupted him. And it felt like he had even interrupted dad himself.

"Sure, but we're just about done, anyway." Henry looks down at the creek and back at the man. "Sorry but we've got to keep going. By all means, help yourself." He tries to sound as

sincere and kind as possible. But for some reason, he can barely manage it. He doesn't ask for the stranger's name.

The stranger looks back at the brothers as they walk on towards the trail. He's lost in thought. Contemplating. Concerning.

Henry tugs his brother's arm. "Are you okay? You seemed really tense with that guy."

Ivan can't explain it even if he tried. Dad always found the good in people – even strangers like him. So why couldn't he? "It's nothing. I just didn't like him."

"Oh. I'm sorry, buddo. But hey, why don't I race you to the shelter? It's only just up ahead."

Ivan frowns and stirs in his head. "That's okay. Let's just get there when we get there."

The moon hovers above the treetops at Mt. Lovell. Night approaches quickly. Henry's legs grow weak and wobbly, and his stomach weighs bricks.

The wind picks up and a branch whacks him by the cheek, making a small gash below his eye. He wipes the blood with his fingers and dries it on his pants. Ivan looks concerned, to which Henry calmly says, "It's just a dumb scratch."

Dad always wore a bruise or a cut or a stain of grime and dirt. After work he'd spend hours in his carpentry shed, measuring new planks of wood, cutting, sawing, architecting. His office was a small box with one window and sawdust grounded into the floor. That window gave all the light he needed. He could practically see in the dark. Sometimes he brought Henry into his shed to help him hold a piece of wood down while he fed the other side to a loud and hungry

sawblade. But that was when Henry was young. Once he got older, sometimes became all the time. Henry was a good little helper. It made him feel so proud and loved.

Henry likes the scratch below his eye as it slowly stops to bleed.

Once they get off the mountain, smoke rises to the right of the trail, thin and breezy in the newborn dusk sky. Henry notices the smoke first and realizes that they're nearing up on the shelter. He takes his brother's hand and heads towards it until he sees the shelter's structure hidden behind the trees. He stops, noticing a couple already there. They're a few years older than he is, a man and a woman, sitting by the fire on stubby stones, roasting marshmallows and hot-dogs on sticks. The shelter stands behind them, its green metal roof and wooden walls and floors remaining silent with the wind.

The brothers hide behind a tree and watch the couple's behavior.

"Do you think they're safe?" Ivan asks. Henry is surprised that he didn't say it first.

"They seem nice enough. Right?" Henry asks.

"Maybe." Ivan says.

"Do you mind if we stay here?"

"I don't know."

"I can stay up later and keep an eye on them. How's that sound? That's what Dad would do."

Henry can tell he said something wrong, because Ivan stares at the ground as he nods in silent agreement.

Henry approaches the couple first with a simple "hey" and a very chill wave. He wraps his little brother close to his side and Ivan squirms out of his over-imposing arm, annoyed. He

asks the strangers if he and his brother can spend the night in the shelter. They both say sure. Smiling. And watching.

They talk for about an hour about their travels, the couple having started the full trail a few days ago, but night comes quick and everyone starts to yawn. Henry helps his brother unpack his bag and curls up into his pasty sleeping bag. Before bed, the couple offers Ivan a marshmallow to roast, which he politely and silently declines. He just wants to get some sleep, Henry thinks. Ivan uses his inhaler quickly and doesn't say another word before he closes his eyes. His fist clenches in his sleep. He turns away to the wall of the shelter, facing no one but rotting wood.

After a few hours of staying watch, Henry rubs his eyes and stares into the dark. The fire is mesmerizing. No one stocks the wood or the embers hungry for carbon, but the flames dance and twirl in the air like a red and orange hurricane. Without a moment's notice, Henry sees rain drops paint a nearby rock. The fire sizzles and cries. The coals glow and dissipate. The rain floods the earth and blankets the forest floor. Birds take shelter and critters burrow into their homes. Drops of water thump onto the shelter's roof and slide over the opening, making a puddle down below.

On the other side of the shelter, the couples' sleeping bags move slightly up and down, together and apart. He can't make out their faces hidden in blankets and pillows, but he sees the movement of their shift and breathy pull without any further sound. The girl moans and covers her own mouth. He looks away and keeps close to Ivan, praying that he's fast asleep. The couple's heavy breathing is obvious and obnoxious and oblivious to the guests around them. He tries to think about his dad, what he might do in a situation like this, but no thought comes to mind. He isn't sure what to do when the memory of his father stays silent without guidance.

A glowing pair of dots stare at the shelter from the shadows of the forest. Henry blinks and the eyes move far away. But their presence doesn't fade. It tampers with his nerves.

He hears a snore erupt from Ivan's nose and sighs quietly in relief. He sounds like dad when he snores, Henry thinks, and sleeps like him too. Unbothered and out like a light. Completely in his own world.

The couple quiets down after about ten minutes or so and falls fast asleep. Their breath is fat and wide.

Before he falls asleep, Henry watches the fire's embers sizzle under the heavy rain. Their light continues to glow a dim, quiet red. They struggle to remain bright. They cry and scream for relief. But despite their inevitable drowning, they continue to glow and burn. They continue.

"This is a chromatic." Dad held the harmonica gently in his hand. "Not a diatonic. It's much harder to play, but much more rewarding."

Ivan nodded and smiled and sat crisscross-applesauce.

"You pull the sliding bar to play the regular key of C and push the bar in to play the half-notes above. You think you can handle it?"

Ivan nodded and said "absolutely."

"It requires practice and focus and a lot of breath control. It's not as intimidating as it sounds. I promise."

"Will my asthma effect my playing?"

Dad smiled and held his son's hands. "I read that it might help, actually. Playing it is like a calming exercise where you just focus on your breath."

“In and out?” Ivan said.

“Yeah. Like that. In and out.” He paused and continued to smile. “It’s worth a shot though, isn’t it? What’s the harm in giving it a whirl?”

“Are you going to teach me?”

“I think you should ask Henry. He’d be glad to help you out.”

“He’s never around and is always too busy for the both of us.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“That’s what it feels like.”

“Just ask him for me. And if he says no (which he won’t), I’ll teach you. How’s that sound?”

“You made him that guitar and taught him how to play. Why can’t you teach me?”

“Because Henry is more reliable than you know. Just trust me. Give him a chance. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

Ivan is the first one awake and notices the couple already packed up and gone. Snot runs a river from his nose and down his lip. He wipes it off and it never ceases to end. It’s a struggle to keep his eyes open. And his skin burns warm and cold.

He looks at Henry and thinks about running away. But he doesn’t have the courage. And dad would be disappointed.

The rain becomes a storm, and the wind an invisible force. To the couple’s corner of the shelter rests a bag of left-over hot dogs and instant canned coffee. Ivan wakes his older brother up and pockets the couple’s gifts in his backpack.

“I want to get going,” he snuffles, to which Henry nods and smiles, as if trying to calm the weather. Calming the storm. Like Dad always did.

After breakfast they set off on the trail, taking in the rain’s heavy beating.

Ivan trudges and trips and falls on the trail’s flowing mud. They continue their pace through the rain. He grips his harmonica in his pocket and doesn’t make a sound, biting his lip, closing his eyes, breathing in and out. Trying to give everything a chance.

Henry looks around and thinks he sees something moving around the trees. He can’t spot it. But the presence is surely there. He looks behind him to see if they’re being followed but no-one comes to mind. The trail forward winds and falls in-between closely packed trees like cigarettes bundled in a cardboard box. He hears a sneeze from behind him and looks at Ivan tripping over his own legs in the mud. Their boots are caked and wet.

“The rain should pass soon,” he says, hoping his prediction is right.

“I want to go home.”

“Just one more night. Don’t quit on me now, buddo.”

“Stop calling me buddo.” His voice lowers and mumbles.

They reach a clearing of tall grass and boulders as a splash of mud comes up from Henry’s step and paints his pants brown. He laughs. “Remember when we hiked that trail in Maine, and Dad lost his boot to that massive puddle of mud? I had to practically pull him out and—”

“Stop talking about Dad.” Ivan says.

Henry stops and turns around. “Are you feeling okay? It seems like something’s got you upset.”

“I’m fine.”

“I can set up a tarp around the trees and we can take a quick break before we get to the Galpine shelter. Or we can keep going until we get there, maybe sometime around—”

“Could you stop for one second? Just... I don’t need your help. I don’t need you to be around all the time.”

“Oh.” He isn’t sure what to say. The rain beats down harder. “Am I being overbearing or something? We can walk in silence if you’d like that more. Or maybe—”

“Just stop being so *nice* all the time! It’s exhausting. God, you make me so mad.”

“You want me to stop being nice?”

“I want you to stop trying! You’re trying so hard and it’s so annoying and you’re terrible at it. Just leave me be. Stop trying to fix things. You can’t fix everything. Just let things be the way they are. It’s like you’re trying to make up for something. But you never did anything.”

“So, you want me to just not care about you? Because that’s a part of who I am.”

“It doesn’t have to be. I wish you didn’t care sometimes.”

“Well, I’m sorry. But I do. I care.”

“I know.” Tears swim in his eyes. “I know. I know. I know. I—” His breath goes out and he holds his hands to his chest. His hands start to shake and he falls to his knees in the mud.

Henry reaches into his bag and grabs the extra inhaler and hands it to Ivan, who takes it viciously. He breathes in the shot of air and slowly closes his eyes. His hands continue to shake and he holds himself on the forest’s floor.

“What do you need me to do?” Henry asks. He looks around the clearing, still feeling something move around the woods. The hairs on his neck stand. His skin creates goosebumps. He looks down at his brother and stands silent, waiting for a response. Waiting for a sign.

“I need you to hug me.” He chokes on his words as he cries with the rain. “Please.”

Henry sits down and holds his brother tight. Neither apologizes. Neither says a word. Henry feels his brother’s breath smooth in and out of his chest and stomach. The air goes steady. The sounds grow silent.

Ivan closes his eyes and finally hugs his brother back.

“I miss him so much.” Henry whispers. “I miss him more than you know.

Ivan says nothing in return.

They reach the Steve-Galpine shelter within a few hours. Night is now. They set up their tarp, their sleeping bags, their pillows and cooking ware. Henry takes out his portable Coleman gas stove and Ivan lies down in his sleeping bag. Shivering.

Henry leans over and rests his hand on his brother’s forehead. Ivan burns up, his lips trembling. Henry searches through his bag for his extra blanket. Finds it. Swaddles his little brother. And leans over the shelter’s opening, out into the wood.

He hears the loons again, flying above the mountains. They call to one another and merge with the crickets and crows. He looks up at the sky, unable to see their flock – their family.

He remembers the cans of soup he has left and thinks about heating one up to help his little brother. “Hey, Ivan?” he says.

Ivan’s blanket shifts.

“I’m going to get some branches and wood to start a fire. It’s dry enough in the spit. Will you be okay here all by yourself?”

“I’m fine.” Ivan says.

“Okay. I’m trusting you while I’m gone.”

“Okay.”

“Alright.”

“You put your first finger on the fifth string, right there. Yeah. You got it. And then the second finger on the second string. It’s gonna hurt so don’t mind the pain for a bit. And just strum without moving that elbow.” Dad paused. Henry strummed the Aminor-7 chord. His ten-year-old hands were too small to hold the chord for long. Dad smiled and clapped in applause. “You hear how good that sounds?”

“It sounds a little jazzy.”

“Hell yeah it does! You hear that dissonance?”

“A little bit. I think I do.”

“That’s what makes those seven chords really pop. The frequencies of the root note and the seventh note clash. But their clash is beautiful. Isn’t it?”

“What’s the next chord for the song?”

Dad showed Henry the other three chords for the simple chord progression and leaned back in his chair. The shed was clean for the first time all spring. The sun was overflowing and bright. Henry waved his left hand around and bit his lip. “This hurts a lot.”

“Like I said, it’s gonna hurt a lot at first. But it gets better with time.”

“How long will it take?”

“It depends. Maybe a month or so.”

“That’s so long.”

“Just be kind to yourself, okay? It’s going to take a while and you shouldn’t be too hard on yourself if it takes a bit to get used to. It took me months to be able to play my first song. You’re already doing better than I was at your age.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I know so. But it does take time. Things don’t happen instantly. And things that matter most require the most amount of patience.”

“Ew. That sounds so corny.”

“But it’s true. Things take time. Don’t worry about those things you can’t fix immediately. You’re doing the best you can now.”

Henry smiled and continued going back and forth between the four new chords. His dad hummed along with him until the sun moved past the window-frame.

The rain seeps into Henry’s jacket collar and trickles down his chest. He looks up at the moon above him and sighs. The sound of water dropping on dead leaves and beating against sturdy tree trunks floods his ears. The stack of wood branches clings to his arms and chest. He walks around a tree, picks up another branch, and continues on his way.

A rustle in the dark. A bush moves and stills. Henry looks around at the sound and sees nothing. Sees nothing. Until a figure approaches him and waves his hand slowly.

The stranger from yesterday, the one the brothers met at the creek, leans against a tree and smiles at Henry. Water sticks to his hood and drips down his jacket. His eyes look familiar and practically glow in the darkness.

“Do you need any help?” the stranger asks. “I noticed that you’ve taken on more than you can chew.”

Henry stands confused. Why is he off the trail like this? In the complete dark? All alone? “I’m okay, thanks.” he says, and picks up another branch.

“Your brother is sick,” the stranger says. “Did you bring anything to help his fever?”

How does he know about the fever? “No. I forgot our first aid kit.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“No. He doesn’t need to know.” He pauses. “He’ll be fine. I know so.”

“You can’t know that. You’re just wishful thinking.”

Henry frowns and looks to the side. “I’d appreciate it if you’d leave me alone.”

“I can see you’re struggling to keep him on your side,” the stranger takes a step forward, “and I want to help. I know how to help him.”

“I don’t need your help. Leave me alone.”

He smiles. “You aren’t his father, you know. You never will be.”

Henry looks up at the Galpine shelter, ready to walk and leave. “Get out of my way,” he says, before the stranger knocks down the branches in Henry’s arms and shoves him against a tree trunk, gripping his neck, his chest, his waist. Henry whimpers and swallows as best he can.

“I’ve been watching you two for days and its so painful to see how much you torment him. You’re terrible to him. Have you heard him cry in his sleep? Have you heard him hide his

small asthma attacks from you? I've heard it. I have. You barely understand what he's going through. Do you? Do you?!"

Air leaves Henry's lungs. He can't speak or breath or swallow. A vein pops out of his forehead and his eye bulge wide.

"I can take care of him, you know," the stranger smiles, showing teeth. "Just let me do this good thing. I'd be a much better father than you. He needs me. Not you."

Henry kicks the stranger in the shin. He grabs his own chest and throat, coughing air in and out. He looks back at the stranger who lunges towards him, pinning him on the ground. The man lands a fist to Henry's nose and a crack rings through forest. He lands another one on Henry's cheek before Henry kicks his groin, picks up a branch from his side, and whacks the stranger's neck with the prickled, decaying bark. The branch breaks in two. The stranger wobbles and stands on his two feet. So does Henry.

"Just let him be happy," the man says. "He's not happy with you. He's becoming a little brat. Can you fix that? Do you really think you have the patience?"

Henry tells him to shut up before the man lunges at him again. This time Henry braces himself and stands his ground. The man grips Henry's waist, trying to hoist him on the floor. Henry lifts his elbows up and beats the man's back over and over and over until the man loses his grip and Henry lodges his elbow right in the man's ear. The man wobbles again. Tries to stand on two feet. He stares at Henry. Smiles. Laughs silently. And closes his eyes.

Without warning the stranger gains the energy to rush Henry again. He catches his grip and Henry falls on the ground. Henry's arms are pinned. His legs are paralyzed under the man's heavy weight. He receives a punch to his broken nose. His cheek. His eye. His ear. His lip. All

until he sees nothing but his bruised eyebrow and red liquid in the corner of his eye. He mumbles for the man to stop, but the man does no such thing.

Out of absolute panic and pure adrenaline, he moves his hand around and grabs a rock by a tree. With all the strength he has left, he breaks his arm free and thrusts the rock on the stranger's face. He does it again, and again, and again, until the stranger buckles and falls and grips his face, moaning. Henry crawls to his knees and thinks about crushing the man's head. But he can't bring himself to do it. He isn't sure who is in a worse state.

He crawls himself over to a tree and watches the man moan. The man even starts to whimper and cry.

"Leave us alone," Henry says. "Please. Just go."

The man crawls back to his feet and hides his face in his hands. He walks out into the woods, crying, and howling.

The pain goes on for what feels like hours until Henry closes his eyes and starts to cry himself. He can't help but curl up into a ball and breath hard and heavy in the mud.

He opens his eyes as best he can. He inches himself forward towards the shelter and reaches the fireplace and the mud below the wooden floor. His ears ring loud and the rain is muffled and drowned. The memory of being with his dad for the last nineteen years of his life breaks him on the forest's floor. It feels distant. It feels like it never happened.

Lying down on the wood and his pillow calms his pounding head. He finally hears Ivan snore in the shelter. The sound makes him smile. He closes his eyes. And falls asleep with the rain.

A blue jay feeds her young with a worm caught in her beak. The babies reach up and try to grab the worm. The mother leans down and lets her children eat, their songs merging into one, happy symphony. And then the babies coo their heads together and lean on the mother. She sings loud and happily.

Ivan takes the lead on the trail and looks ahead. “We’re almost at Lucia’s lookout,” he says. “Do you see the opening?”

The ground shifts and falls under Henry’s weight. His leg gives in and he falls to the ground, groaning. His head pounds. His lips crack and bleed. His nose is stuffed with his extra flayed shirt and his arm is working around a splint made just last night.

“How much longer do we have?” Henry asks.

“About another mile or so.” Ivan hides his worry. He can’t believe he slept through whatever happened last night. Henry hasn’t said a word. He can barely speak and move. Ivan isn’t sure what to do other than to press on and finish the trail. Their friend Lucas is waiting at the end of it to pick them up. They’re so close already. All they have to do is reach the finish line.

“Okay,” Henry sighs. “Okay. Okay.”

Ivan remembers that Lucia’s lookout is about 2,500 feet in elevation, surrounded by trees in a bumpy, rocky clearing. His memory is spot on. When they reach the spot, the rocks and boulders they walk on are littered with strange seeds and pinecones that aren’t exactly pinecones. He looks out of the clearing, on the top of the lookout, and stares at the valley below. Fog swims through the air. Its milky white water floats in the sky.

Henry collapses on a rock and leans his back against the cold, grey surface. He looks up at the sky and breathes in and out. "I need a break. I'm sorry."

Ivan takes off his bag and helps Henry take off his. He takes out the Coleman gas stove and sets it on a flat rock and sparks out the burner.

The flame erupts for the kettle on top of its grate. Henry stares at it, confused. "What are you doing?" he says.

"I'm making us hot-coco," Ivan says.

"Why?"

"It's the only thing I can think to do. So I'm doing it."

"I'm okay. You can have some without me. Alright?"

"No. I want you to have some. You need some."

Henry tries to smile and wipes the blood caked on his lips. "Okay." he says.

Ivan leans over to Henry's bag and grabs the homemade hot chocolate powder. The mason jar is big in Ivan's hands. He pours the powder into their two tin mugs and sits them on the ground and waits for the water to boil.

The family of loons fly in the valley. It's the first time the brothers finally see their formation.

"Ivan?" Henry closes his eyes.

"Yeah?" Ivan stares.

"Remember how I told you I sold my guitar for money? The one dad made?"

"Yeah. I remember."

"I lied. I sold it because I couldn't play it without thinking of him. His fingerprints were still somehow in the neck, too."

“Oh.”

“It was a mistake. I just couldn’t look at it anymore.” He pauses. “I’m sorry. I thought this trip was a good idea. I did want to fix everything. I tried to. I don’t know why. This whole trip is all my fault. I’m sorry, Ivan. I’m sorry.”

Ivan pours the boiling water into the two tin mugs, swirls the powder with a spoon from his bag, and hands the mug to his tired big brother.

“Stop talking and drink your hot-coco.”

Grey December

The first four chapters of a novel

“If I abandon this project, I would be a man without dreams,
and I don’t want to live like that. I live my life, or I end my life with this project.”

Werner Herzog

1: November 21. Stay, just for this moment

In an old wooden building shaped like a barrel for rum, constructed and raised from Richmond's second Antarctic expedition, Jessica lets her eyes wander. She analyzes the crowd of people huddled over wool and leather couches. Parkas strewn about on tables and chairs. Wine glasses half and completely empty, sleeping in the palms of frail, calloused hands. One of the men huddled over the TV, sporting a rough, white and yellow beard, stares at a new flatscreen that was recently replaced (more accurately, upgraded). He snuffles and wipes the snot on his sleeve. He better not have the crud. Jessica doesn't want to have it again. It's inevitable, but still. Best to be avoided if possible.

The air is hot, thick, and sticky. She looks around at everyone having a good time and leaves the audio recorder rolling. Her camera is set up on a tripod in the corner. Normally, she would be helming the camera herself, getting the exact close-up shots she likes. Tonight, however, she wants to celebrate with her favorite crowd. To give herself a break. She can do her job and have a little fun while doing it. One day to relax can't hurt.

The bearded man huddled over the TV finally leans back into his seat on the couch. He holds a controller in his hands, and he and his buddies stare at the TV as men bounce up and down and fight one another over and over again with swords and sticks and fists. The cartoon characters fall off a platform and come back up to fight another day. It bores Jessica.

"Hey, Jess," The bearded man says. He adjusts the Rolex on his wrist. "Can you do me a favor and get me another glass of Cabernet Sauvignon?" He produces a French accent only when asking for the wine, as if to say 'hey, I'm cultured. I can say it properly.' The thought makes Jessica snort.

“You want me to get one for your wife too, Ryan?”

“Hey, Sheryll!!” He shouts, cupping his hands to his mouth.

“Not now, you baboon!” A voice yells back instantly from across the room. Sheryll is too busy playing cards with some of the other scientists. And she’s winning.

“She’s all set.” Ryan says. He stares back at the T.V. with a blank, focused expression.

“I’ll go ask her myself.”

Jessica walks in-between a collection of poorly constructed wooden chairs, tables, and other antique furniture that nobody has bothered to replace in years. As she reaches Sheryll, who pays no attention to her approach, more people pile into the café from the front door, letting in the cold. Snow litters their heads and shoulders. They brush themselves off with their gloves. Collectively, they all sigh and take deep breaths, inhaling the crowd’s sweaty warmth.

“Hey, Sheryll?” Jessica taps her shoulder softly. “You want a glass of red?”

“Oh, bless you, Jess. Absolutely.” Sheryll’s voice is rough around the edges and cuts through the air with hard consonance. She croaks when she speaks. “Another glass of Cabernet, please. I’ll owe you one.” Jessica is convinced she used to be a smoker.

“No need. I was just getting up and heading out anyway.”

“Sheryll!” A voice from the table starts. Noah, a young, handsome man (though not handsome enough, according to Jessica), with a rough stubble and a thin nose, points at Sheryll with a fat finger. Skin peels off under his nails. “Let’s finish this game now, yeah?”

“Someone’s eager to get their ass whooped.” Sheryll nudges Jessica’s shoulder and gives her a wink.

The bartender hands her two glasses of Cabernet with a smile while throwing the bottle into a plastic container for recyclables at the end of the bar. A few women hang their coats up

next to her, shouting a celebratory congratulations to Noah who brushes off their sincere remarks. The only reason this party is happening is because of Noah's black hole discovery at Amundsen-Scott, the South Pole station. His group discovered a large mass of neutrinos somewhere far away in the galaxy, from a supermassive black hole. The neutrinos, emitted by the black hole, were detected with his group's vacuum adjacent helium balloon. Funny enough, the project was expected to fail. As smug as Noah can be, he's keeping his ego well in check tonight.

He licks his lips and bluffs for his two pair. Never mind, he's still feeling himself too much.

Jessica walks the glasses over to Ryan and Sheryll, picks up her bag from one of the couches, and heads to her camera trapped in the corner. A hoop of applause and shouts erupts from in front of the TV. The game just ended, and it looks like Ryan won. He shakes the hands of his comrades and hugs the one to his left with a strong, firm shoulder.

In-front of the door to the café, the wind tries to seep in and enter. Jessica rests her hand on the doorhandle before letting everyone know she is leaving. A warm cry of laughter and goodnights come from the drunken scientists. Sweat clings to their warm sweaters. They stomp their boots hard on the wooden floor for her departure.

She opens the door and leaves. The two am sunlight looms overhead, from the never-ending sun stuck on the empty, cloudless horizon. Jess has only had a few glasses to drink. She isn't drunk. She can't say the same for her friends, though, but it's only one night. They deserve the celebration.

When she arrived at the station the scientists welcomed her with open arms. She interviewed fifteen of them in her first week, taking their names, their histories, their

mannerisms, and their individual human warmth. She found friends within two days, during her survival training for the harsh Antarctic weather. She found her place within the scientific community – a home, temporary as it may be, with coffee and wine and personalities ready for documentation. She found her work right in front of her, practically begging, as if it was all too easy. She didn't have many expectations for what her experience may be, but it all seemed too easy. It was a feeling of cooperation she had never experienced before.

Antarctica houses the most isolated 'civilized' communities on Earth, right at the southernmost tip of the world. The people there procure accents after years of working alone, together, and keep stories of their pasts locked up inside their hearts. Old expeditions from the previous European empires survived, thrived, and perished all the same on the white and black rocks. The world's history is locked underneath tons of ice, from dinosaurs to single-celled organisms, dark to light, life to death. Hidden oceans. Buried rivers. People above and what lies below, underneath.

The continent breathes, stops, and breathes.

The snow on the ground has solidified to a rough, ragged, and firm dirt. Each step Jessica takes to her dorm, the more her boots slowly deteriorate with ice and mud. The weather is in the low-twenties, Fahrenheit. All the station's buildings and services are to her left, along with her dorm building, where she should catch some shut eye.

But she doesn't want to head to her dorm. Not yet. The air is dry and stinging her lungs, causing her to take out her water bottle from her bag and frequently take a sip. But even still, the cool, piercing air is refreshing from the stuffy café. People are exhausting. And people in places – close quarter spaces – can be exhaustingly dull and gradually overwhelming.

She walks towards Mount Dormi, just for a few minutes outside of the base. The mountain is a few miles away, but the sight is there. I won't get far, she thinks. But the view, the walk, is worth it.

She walks on volcanic rock and repurposed dirt roads. Buildings are stained white and black behind her, their windows smudged in smooth, washed strokes. People please one another with small talk and waves as she passes by. Scientists focused on their paths to the labs, and contract workers, stuck in their vehicles and tractors, laughing with one another while hiding cigarettes and beers in their cup holders.

Skuas fly a few hundred feet forward, invading one another's flight patterns. They fly away once they spot Jessica, though they stick around the area for longer than normal. They scavenge and hunt for prey but nothing of the sort is ever left around the base.

Up ahead, a warm yellow light crackles in the old Richmond hut, constructed in 1908. The light flickers shadows, as if from a flame or a warm, stove fire. She sees the old wood furniture reflected black on the walls inside. The light is not electric. It burns brighter and brighter with every step she takes.

And something sticks upright in the snow. The thing is half buried. A pile of clothes covers most of it with a blanket, too. A VHF radio lays on top of a volcanic piece of rock, right next to the figure. Its battery is dead, and its screen is dark.

Jessica slowly reaches the figure and stops. She covers her mouth and falls to the ground. Her knees grow cold. She screams, backs up. Fingers shaking in her gloves as they stick to the icy ground. She stares at the figure. Her eyes bulge. Her breath stops. She is alone, staring at the figure, and she doesn't know what to do.

She looks back at Locks station, now a mile away, and screams for help. Shouts and shouts and screams her dry, dehydrated lungs out. Her lips crack and bleed and she wipes away the blood on her sleeve. A lone tractor a few hundred feet away, carrying a pile of salt and dirt for the station's makeshift roads, stops in its tracks. At full speed, the tractor turns around and drives to Jessica, flashing its headlights. Signaling that they're here. She isn't alone.

A man, frozen in the snow, sleeps for the last time. His eyes are half open, completely frozen over. His mouth is agape. Ice has engulfed his hair, eyebrows, and nose. All he wears is his long sleeve, snow pants, and boots. His jacket is gone. A blanket haphazardly covers barely any part of him. Nothing else is around but the man, the crashing snowbanks, and the half empty bottle of liquor. Snow swallows him whole. It pours out of his mouth like smoke.

Jessica stops herself from throwing up her dinner as the tractor slows down its crawl. When she picks herself up, she looks back at Richmond's hut. The windows are black, and the light has been snuffed out. Soot crawls on the window's surface.

She rushes to the front door and barges in to find nobody home. The old crates of hundred-year-old canned food still sleep along the walls and on the cabin's broken shelves.

An old wood stove is nailed to the wooden floor in the corner. Not a single ember is lit.

She leaves and waits for the tractor's approach. Breathing. Heavily.

2: December 1. The arrival

An old man with a red parka and a grey wool threaded beanie leans his head on Olivia's shoulders. He has fallen asleep, already three hours into the flight. He sports a multi-layer of puffy, stiff jackets, pants, boots, and gloves. Bundled up like a rough-edged cocoon. Everyone else on the plane is tired just as well. Some are still awake, looking straight ahead at the tied down cardboard boxes and metal cargo strapped with winches, and some are on laptops working away. Next to the cargo are people's backpacks and personal carry-ons. A few men lie down on the floor, resting their heads on top of their luggage like carry-on pillows. One woman uses her red parka as a blanket. Another man tries to keep his stripe-socked feet out of her face. Both of them have fallen asleep.

Olivia can't sleep. The pencil between her fingers slips and almost falls to the metal floor. It's pointless to continue her sketches of the tired men. The sleeping, snoring man at her feet will not cooperate, and her hands continue to shake to the drum and low-frequency hum of the plane's airborne engines. It's simple pre-show jitters, she thinks. That's all.

Lucas Grate, the other artist tagging along with Olivia on this ice-flight, is strapped in his airplane seatbelt with his own white parka strewn across his lap. He is a tall, pale man in his late twenties, with long hair escaping his grey beanie and a large, plump nose resting in the center of his face. In his hands is a folder of old, yellow-stained sheet music that is at least a hundred years old. He studies it with precision and great, penetrating focus. After a few minutes, he looks around at everyone on the plane before glancing at Olivia.

"How's your sketching going, Liv?" He asks her, his voice soft and low. He gestures to the sketchbook shaking in her fingers.

“I’m managing,” She tells him as she tries to focus back on the sleeping man, outlining his face, his posture, and the repurposed blankets covering his body. “How’s your reading going?”

He shrugs with a small, friendly smile. “I’m managing.”

The wind outside beats against the plane as they fly higher and higher towards the frozen desert. The Southern Ocean rips its way through the Earth with a calm, never-ending tide. It’s only a few hours away until the Ross Ice Shelf comes into view. Just a few more hours.

A man sitting across from Lucas holds and hugs himself tight. His hands curl across his hips and under his arms. He leans over himself, bobbing up and down in the constant drone of the plane’s flight. The stubby lips on his face move slightly, mumbling something like a prayer or plea for help. Olivia keeps her sketchbook flat in her lap and begins to sketch the outlines of the shaking, helpless man. First, the structure of his face, which is attached to his huddled shoulders and crawling arms. Then the chest which breathes dark and closed, while the waist is hidden from view with all the jackets piled on his body. Next, the legs tremble up and down on the metal floor. A perfect subject. She loses herself in his image, in his honest representation. She looks back at his face, contorted and wincing, and finishes the outline of his sad, perfect face. Then, she—

Lucas slowly unbuckles himself from his seat and crouches over to the shaking man. Olivia stops drawing, slightly annoyed. He raises his hand slowly. “Hey, just breathe with me. Look at me, man. I’m right here. Come on.”

The man, looking up out of his daze, tries to smile but struggles to make a different expression. He looks back at the metal ground and bobs up and down. Mumbling.

Lucas kneels at the man's feet and holds his calm hands in the shaking man's hands. "It's going to be okay. I don't like planes either." He smiles and tries to laugh. "We're already more than halfway there. Is this your first time to Antarctica?"

Olivia sees the man slowly nod and look away from the floor, directly into Lucas's eyes.

"Mine too," Lucas says. "Does the plane frighten you more, or the continent?"

"The continent." He manages to control his lips before going back to mumbling.

"I'm afraid, too, but I'm also excited. Don't let the anxiety and nerves get in the way of your enjoyment of this place."

The man looks at Lucas and tilts his head to the side, mouthing the words 'thank you.'

Lucas crawls back to his seat to grab his bags and sheet music and heads over to the man, to keep him company. He takes the empty seat close by and wraps his right arm around the man's shoulders. The man's shaking lessens as each minute passes by.

The engines whirl without end. Olivia's eyes flutter. Outside the window, the Ross Ice Shelf looms under the horizon. Some of it has already started to melt as the warm weather approaches. A murky fog hangs right above the frozen sea, dethawing the ice below. In the small puddles of water that have just started to unfreeze, orcas rise for air and stay close to their families below.

Olivia's pencil falls to the metal floor, rolling away to the back of the plane for good. She puts her sketchbook away into her backpack and looks at the roof of the plane.

She doesn't like it when she's unable to draw.

Olivia first learned to draw by documenting the ghosts underneath her bed. They first appeared in second grade and took on all different figures and shapes. One had horns that curled and twisted, suspending itself with gravity, its body floating in the air. Another was entirely made of fur, blacker than space with eyes brighter than stars. All the monsters watched her as she slept with eyes unblinking and smiles invisible. The first few nights they appeared, Olivia screamed. Their darkness had veins and hair and smokey pushed-in pores. One had no mouth while another had no right hand. They left her alone for long periods of time but always came back eventually, as if they only meant to stop by. As if they had other plans.

When she asked her parents about the monsters, her mother bought noise cancelling headphones as a silent, jaded response, while her father decided to talk with her privately about her nightmares lurking in her corners. They lived in a little Washington hill-town in a decaying two-story farmhouse, with creaky wooden floors, rusted white paint that blanketed the tall walls, and sealed paned windows shut tight with lead paint. Olivia first thought the house was haunted, from the house's decrepit appearance, but her father assured her otherwise. He'd had a stutter since he first learned to speak and was always ashamed of the time it took to form simple sentences. So he didn't talk much, but he said he saw the same monsters too, when he was a little boy. They sometimes popped up whenever stress came around but they always did go away. No one else could see them but he. His parents didn't understand, just like Olivia's mother thought her daughter's crazies were just obtrusive nonsense. Whenever the nightmares came around, he was too afraid to speak, as if he forgot how to move his lips and tongue. The doctors thought sleep paralysis, but he could still move and cower.

He hugged his daughter tight and whispered that there was nothing to worry about. It was just a family thing. A curse or a blessing all the same. Don't worry, sweet-pea. You're never, ever alone.

One time her father stared directly at one of the monsters as he tucked-in Olivia goodnight. He didn't say anything, of course, what could he have said anyway? He stared at them only a few seconds after kissing his daughter's forehead to sleep. The monster went away when he left the room, but Olivia still had trouble sleeping. Her father tucked her in to bed every night after that, now fully aware what haunted her in the shadows. He didn't have to say that he could see the monsters, fully understanding their position. Olivia could read between his eyes. All he could do was be around to keep her company.

In middle school she met a boy named Tyler, her first love. Blond, shaggy hair, and a back as crooked as a question mark. Loose fitting jeans and baggy logo t's for a top. At her thirteenth birthday, a party Olivia hosted all by herself, her mother uninterested in making a big fuss, Tyler bought her a sketchbook. He noticed the dark doodles she created in the margins of her textbooks in class. He wanted her to have her own space to draw. She only drew in lined notebooks. Nothing empty for doodles and shadow. Her mother would never buy something like that for her, and her father came home too late to know who her daughter was outside of her horrors. A sketchbook was too expensive. Too unnecessary. And Tyler had the time and money. It was the most thoughtful gift she had ever gotten. It still is.

At that birthday party, she pushed Tyler on a rope swing hung to the tall oak tree in her backyard. He laughed and snorted, and Olivia found it adorable. She touched his back and kept pushing. Soon she saw shadowed hands overlap onto hers and curl into her fingers. On the

ground, beneath the sunlight, the tall monster reached twice her size, its horns bleeding into its head.

It looked up at the branch, the tire clinging to its bouncing twigs, and the rope started to crack, spindles breaking. Before Olivia could warn her friend the rope snapped. Tyler fell out of the tire. His back hit a root gorged out of the ground. Bones as frail as china, cracking in blood. He tried to scream but was unable to. He tried to move but was unable to. He looked at Olivia and wanted to ask for help but was incapable of making a single sound.

The monster disappeared when the ambulance came. But before its swift departure it had stuck around, just watching as it always did. Observing.

Her father held her while she cried herself to sleep. It's okay, he said. I understand. I understand it wasn't you.

Tyler still loved her, thinking what had happened was just bad luck. She always came to his physical therapy lessons after that. It took him two years to walk again when it should've taken one. They were lovers in high school. They did everything together.

Every night, after class and after her part-time jobs, she sketched and drew and practiced her technique. Whenever she worked or had some project on her mind, the monsters left her alone. She eventually went through sixty-seven sketchbooks by the time she reached senior year. She felt like she had to. An obligation she couldn't ignore. She applied for arts school and got in. Only five percent were accepted. She drew the monsters and the scream of Tyler's pain and how they blended together in her mind and in her permanent memory. She was awarded a full ride for her talent and practice. Her father was so proud, knowing she made the best out of a bad, inevitable situation. She never showed her portfolio to Tyler. She didn't want him to know.

At prom the monsters watched her dance. She closed her eyes and ignored them as best she could. Their presence hugged her and tucked themselves between the cracks of her bones. It became hard to breath. She went to the ER and was told she had a panic attack. She didn't believe them, but they wouldn't have understood what she felt – what she had always seen.

She graduated and went to college. Long distance with Tyler. A grade-A student, dean's list, published and galleried immediately into her senior year. Tyler was so proud but she felt nothing of it at all. Time floated by. A shadowed hand always kept at her shoulder almost all of the time.

The monsters appeared more frequently in random locations and varying distances. Sometimes they walked by, as if running an errand. Other days they stood right next to her, deafening a room's noise with nothing but cold and silence. She never told her father it was only getting worse. She didn't want him to worry more than was necessary.

While walking downtown near Tyler's place, on their junior spring break, Olivia noticed that they were being followed by one of the monsters. Its eyes stuck out in the black night like candles in the dark, and its fingers stayed still by its sides, shadowed along the pavement, tapping and waiting for them to stop and come closer. Another followed closely behind, the one with the horns bleeding through its head. She told him to quicken up the pace but he didn't much understand. When they got to his apartment, she told him to hide, only explaining that someone was tracking them and that he needed to stay put. He rolled his eyes but played along. He hid in his apartment and called the police. Olivia waited in her car outside his front door. She hoped her suspicions weren't true. She hoped she was wrong. But she wasn't. She saw the horns and shadow and black fur standing in front of his door, waiting. They tried to open the door but couldn't. No one else could see them but her. She knew they couldn't do anything.

They looked at her waiting in the car, tilting their heads and staring with unblinking eyes. One of them held the doorhandle and it started to move. It got stuck on the lock and couldn't get it to open, but they moved the doorknob. They could move the door. It turned and stopped. Turned and turned and stopped.

As soon as the cops showed they disappeared. Olivia stayed in her car, thumbing through her keys and picking at her nails. They started to bleed.

She had to break up with Tyler a few days later. He begged and cried and didn't understand but she had to. The monsters defied the rules she had made for them and had no idea what they were truly capable of. She had to lose him. She had to.

As soon as she did, the monsters started to go away one by one. Whether it was a simple correlation, she had no way of knowing. But she didn't question it. She was thankful for the peace. Her dad said they would go away eventually, but the price she had to pay was never what she had expected. It hurt.

Tyler tried to reconnect with her when she turned twenty-eight. She was afraid and told him to never call her again. He didn't understand, but neither did she.

She continued her art galleries, published her work in New York, traveled the world sharing what she saw in charcoal and white. Her mother passed away and her father now lives alone, content with his silence. Despite his incessant doubt of their return, the figures are still in her head, etched in stone. Silence might bring them back, indecision could bring them back, idling will bring them back.

She doesn't like it when she's unable to draw.

Olivia wraps her scarf around her face exactly four times. The bus glides across the ice shelf, the plane fading in the distance, workers unloading the large cargo onto heavy trucks and tractors for the thirteen-mile ride.

The sun blocks out all shadow.

All eighty-six of the plane's passengers look out of the windows of the bus; scientists, air force operators, and contract workers talking to one another, yawning from the long flight. Lucas sits in the window seat, falling asleep. Olivia rests her legs in the aisle. The bus driver sips on her water bottle and Olivia sketches her figure, getting Mount Dormi and the little lights from Locks station in the background on the page.

Ice and snow crunch underneath the tires. Heat blasts from the open vents on the roof. Loud voices and soft snores.

Olivia taps Lucas's shoulder to wake him, pointing outside the window. A small group of Adélie penguins waddle on the ice, heading North to their colony. They occasionally dip their white bellies down on the ice to slide, but they always come back up to waddle, waddle, waddle.

The penguins ignore the bus a thousand feet away, as if they hear nothing.

An hour passes before the base comes into view. The lights of Locks station do nothing in the endless Antarctic sun. Tall, steel lamplights show the path up the station resting on a black, dirt hill. Salt and mud mark the roads between the buildings and the other tracks beyond.

The bus slows its roll on the dirt path to the shipping depot. Fifty-foot-tall cranes pick up red and yellow shipping containers, moving them from one busy spot to another. It's loud, mechanical and screeching. The ice tries to reach up to the rocky shore but doesn't quite manage to go any further. The frozen ocean stalls.

Olivia steps off the bus and covers her eyes, blinded in brilliant white light. She squints. The ice crunches beneath her boots. Except for Lucas by her side, she's alone. People brush by her on their way out of the bus and around the shipping harbor. Most of the scientists walk towards their friends, smiling and laughing as they look around in awe. She remembers it's easier to get home from the International Space Station than it is from Antarctica. What scares her more is making new friends, not the ability to return home if all her hard work should fail. There is no chance for return until five or six months. No opportunity for failure. Nothing else to occupy her mind.

A knot twists in her stomach. She welcomes it with a sigh of relief. A signal of Peace. No shadow seeping into her bones.

Lucas nudges Olivia and smiles. "I'm shitting my pants right now." He says, stammering. "This is awesome."

"Same."

A tall, white man with an extra-large flannel fashioned underneath a dark orange parka walks between the dock workers, towards the new arrivals from the plane. He removes his darkened goggles and waves at everyone staring back at him. "Who here is new to the station?" he asks, his voice grounded and low.

Half of the bus passengers raise their hands. The half sitting silently, with their hands to their sides, start to walk up the base, talking amongst themselves. They ignore the rest.

"My name is Dr. Zelensky," the man in the extra-large flannel says, "And I'm the station supervisor for Locks station. It's my job to manage the day-to-day run down of our lovely little town. Any questions you have about schedules, when things are open, where things are – I can

gladly help y'all with that." He looks around and smiles. "Don't worry about your carry-ons from under the plane. The harbor workers will bring those to your dorms all safe and sound."

Steam escapes from a tall, cylindrical vent at the top of a large building on the hill. It rises to hundreds of feet before it disperses, dies, and decomposes in the air.

Dr. Zelensky tells everyone to follow him up the hill and no one says a word. Either from fear, excitement, or a healthy hint of both.

A few warehouse looking structures are sparsely out along the journey up the hill. Some look more run-down than others, while only a few look perfectly new, with fresh coats of paint and barely any stains from dried snow. Tractors, trucks, and forklifts drive by on the frozen, rocky roads, slowly leaving a trail of dirt behind the big tires. Old wooden structures intersect between some of the roads and buildings, left untouched and decayed.

The hill flattens its curve, and the back of a massive, intricately constructed building comes into view. It's made of perfectly cut stone with tall glass windows on almost every inch of the building's walls. People are behind the windows, talking to themselves with drinks and papers in hand. Some of them look directly out of the building and at the new arrivals. Others continue to walk amongst themselves, lost in thought and work.

Dr. Zelensky gestures around to all of the station once they reach the main courtyard, finishing his tour. None of his speech registers with Olivia. Central Services, the large building interconnecting the entire base's structures and warehouses, stands before the crowd, snow stains bleaching the walls and skua shit blanketing some of the glass. The building reminds Olivia of her own college campus, with every wall plastered from top to bottom with crystal clear windows and flags from every nation of the Antarctic Treaty flying high and low.

“Almost all of these building have either been renovated or replaced within the last few years,” Dr. Zelensky continues. “So, there might be some quirks with a few of the systems and structures in place.” He beckons behind him. “The waste, water, and power buildings were below where we started, and Diving Services is behind Central Services, next to the Pion Science lab. Don’t mind the old wooden buildings you might see that are a bit broken down. They’re from Richmond’s second expedition. They didn’t survive the weather, as we all know... A brave first attempt.”

“Now, dinner will be ready shortly at Central so don’t miss out on that, but you can come basically anytime to get something to eat. There will always be something.” He looks around at everyone, as if he can scan out certain folk from the crowd. “For anyone who is in maintenance or vehicle repair, you’ll want to check in to the Trades shop to your left or Vehicle Maintenance/Storage behind us, further up the hill. Supply people, your place of work is generally going to be the Cargo floor below Central. And Service staff—” he pauses. “Meet with your contract supervisor because generally speaking anyone who isn’t involved with the NSF doesn’t report to me. So, um, get on that asap. But of course, after dinner and after getting settled in.” He looks at everyone with open wide eyes. “Let’s go inside, shall we?”

The crowd walks up the ramped stairs to Central Services as the automatic doors to the building slowly swing open. The building is expansive, with open staircases heading to the second floor and almost every wall between rooms and offices completely transparent with clear, windowed surfaces. The hallways to the dining hall and cargo building are just around the corner, while upstairs radio chatter and pilots talk to one another in the comms offices and Locks weather station debriefing room. To the right is an open room full of sleek, wooden furniture and

couches. Everyone is on laptops in the room. One of the women inside looks up at the crowd, gestures to the man sitting next to her, and rushes to close her laptop.

The woman opens the door with her friend and finds Olivia talking to Lucas. Olivia sees her before anything is said.

“Are you both Olivia and Lucas?” The woman says.

“Yeah. That’s us.” Olivia stutters, thinking. “Are you Jessica?”

“Yup. Jessica Mun. The one and only.” She holds out her hand for Olivia. It’s tense. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” She smiles, something caught behind her eyes. The man standing next to her smiles too and holds out his veiny, dark hands.

“My name’s Barry,” he says. “I’m the supervisor for the Antarctic Artist and Writers program. I hope your flight was okay.” He sports a fashionable jean jacket and glasses.

“It was. Thanks.” She looks at Lucas. “We’re both excited to be working with you finally.”

Olivia takes a moment to look at Jessica. She’s a little shorter than Olivia, with long black hair curled at the bottom and thin, bubbly eyes. Her nose is small and pointed and her skin is lightly olive and smooth. Her cheeks unusually rosy and warm. And Olivia sees that she’s wearing a layer of chapstick on her lips, too.

She’s wearing a pair of tight black jeans, black boots, and a loose blue t-shirt. Olivia shakes her hand, trying to look her in the eyes.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” Jessica says. “I like your freckles.”

“Thanks. It’s a pleasure to meet you, too.”

Jessica moves on to shake Lucas’s hand as well before the crowd continues their tour. “Mind if I tag along with you both? I need a break from editing some footage.”

“Please do!” Lucas joins in. “You’ve been here for about two weeks already, right?”

“Yeah. That’s right. It’s been quite a lot already.” She pauses to put her hands in her pockets. “You’ll get used to it, though.”

Faces of occupied people glance at the new arrivals with both happy, confused, and nervous stares. A few are in lab coats while others are in civilian clothes. Two military personnel walk by, chatting with each other and ignoring the new crowd entirely.

Jessica looks at her two new partners and lets out a deep, relieved sigh.

At the far end of the hallway, a tiny window keeps the building from freezing. The frosted earth, with the thousand-year-old snow reflects its white light back into the hall. How lovely, Olivia thinks. More things to keep me up from sleeping.

Checked bags are right next to Olivia’s dorm room door. All four of them, bulging and heavy.

“Now I’ll show you to your room, Lucas.” Barry gives Olivia a pat on the shoulder and waves goodbye.

Jessica leans against the wall, looking at her new partners, excited. She signals a goodbye with a fast, energetic wave. Lucas waves slowly and steady, and they both follow Barry down the hall. Olivia waves back.

Her dorm is empty except for the bunk turned into a single, a poor-quality wardrobe, and an old wooden trunk. Nothing else remains in the room. A blue grey spiral rug litters the floor, and the wall is painted dark blue. The previous tenant painted seals and penguin in the little corners of the wall. They must’ve had some free time, or maybe went a little insane.

Olivia drags her checked bags into the room and plops her backpack on the ground. It takes a few hours before she finishes setting up everyone in her dorm. A picture of her friends from college, her dog she used to own from college, too, and some other pictures from her high school days, participating in art competitions and winning a good majority of them – all of them, actually. The pictures make her laugh a bit.

But then she comes across her graduation picture with Tyler and she isn't sure what to do with it. He's smiling with her as they both hug in this one. It was after she got accepted into college. He looks so happy. *She* looks so happy.

She opens up the picture frame and turns the photograph around, with Tyler's chicken scratch handwriting written all over the back. 'Happy anniversary, Liv. I love you more than you'll ever know. – Tyler.'

The picture wants to slip from her fingers, so Olivia puts the photo on her nightstand. Closing her eyes, it swims down her throat. She takes a deep breath and continues to unpack.

After an hour, a knock comes from her door. Four swift taps.

"Come in."

Jessica smiles, opening the doors slowly. She's changed her shirt to a baggy tie-dyed, with the sleeves down to her elbows and the bottom tucked into her jeans. Olivia looks her up and down. Jessica yawns. "How do you like your new dorm?"

Olivia can't help but laugh. "It's not too bad. Do you see the little animals drawn on the walls?"

"Yeah. A good amount of these dorms have little quirks like that." She points to the penguin sledding with sunglasses and a Peruvian snow-hat in the corner. "I like that one."

"Me too."

Jessica leans against the open door and folds her arms, looking at the ground. “I just wanted to come back and say that I’m really glad you and Lucas are the ones who we’re... well, ‘stuck with’ for the next few months.” She pauses. “I’ve already been here for two weeks and feel a bit fatigued with my work. I think we’ll all be able to help one another out – keep us all on track to finish our projects. And you both seem like great people.”

Olivia stutters and doesn’t know what to say. She looks away and plays with her parka’s metal zipper, but she still sees Jessica’s smile. She wants to smile, too.

“It’s nice to not be alone here. I think you and I are going to get along really great,” Jessica says. “Don’t you think?”

All she can do is smile back. “We’ll have to see about that, won’t we?”

They laugh. “Have a good night, Olivia.”

“You can call me Liv, if you want.”

Jessica smiles wider. “Okay. And you can call me Jess, if you want.”

“Of course.”

“Goodnight, Liv.”

“Goodnight, Jess.”

The door closes with Olivia’s luggage still on the floor.

Outside, a tall, completely wooden church, painted white to blend in with the snow, has its lights on inside. It’s quite close by. Olivia notices the small congregation of parkas and sweatshirts sitting down in the pews. They all look at the Father, who, as much as Olivia can make out, help direct a few of the men who are carrying a large casket to the front of the altar. It’s dark, black wood. Probably made by the contract workers in the Fields shop.

Olivia takes out her sketchbook from her bag and starts to draw what she thinks the inside of the congregation looks like. It's only rough, jagged lines. Nothing concrete. Nothing identifiable. It matches the mood of what she can see through the window, at all the lonely, derelict faces.

Behind the church, about a quarter mile away, on top of a snowed in hill with rock and dirt sprinkled around, a large wooden hut has a few lights on. Richmond's second hut. The never-ending Antarctic sun hides some of the light from view, but Olivia can still see it. The hut stands firm in the ground, even as the log walls and paneled roof crumble and break from years of age. Red warning flags surround the entrance of the building. The light turns off after only a minute. No trucks or snowmobiles are parked outside.

She places the pencil and sketchbook on her desk and closes the blinds, trying to get some shut eye. Trying to get some peace.

3: December 1. Cold among company.

Lucas sits with his elbows on the bar and holds his temple with his hands. He asks for a Woodford Reserve on the rocks and a can of coke on the side. The bartender, an older woman with long locs, acne-covered brown skin, and cold, dark eyes turns around to get the glasses and the bourbon. Lucas rests his hands on the bar, palms sticking to the surface. He taps his fingers on the wooden counter. One, two. One, two. His thumb and fore finger count at eighty-seven beats per minute, thumping along to ‘I Don’t Want to Set the World On Fire,’ which plays from behind the bar on an old, 90’s stereo.

Over the years Lucas discovered that counting a tempo helps calm the nerves, whenever his hands start to shake. So, he tap, tap, taps away whenever he needs a pick-me-up, or a moment to lose himself in his head. Tappy tap, tap.

A pool table sleeps to his left, with a couple of forklift drivers and dining hall chefs hollering about accidentally landing the eight-ball in. Darts are left alone to his right, next to a poster of the bar: Southern Hazard, warning and welcoming visitors alike. Skulls and crossbones canvased in black and white. A pirate flag for the weary and wicked. There are no windows in sight. Only two big tables count as furniture for the establishment, except for the large, fluffy couch in the corner. Most everyone is huddled over the bar.

The bartender hands Lucas his drinks and tilts her head to the side. “You’re new.”

“Yup. Just got here today.” He takes a sip.

“Who sent you down?”

“Do you mean the NSF?”

She scoffs and throws a dirty dishrag into a bucket in the corner. “So, you’re a beaker then?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what that is.”

“Do the math. What do you think a beaker is?”

“Um... a thing you hold liquid in?”

“Okay. Sure. And who uses beakers?”

“I don’t know. Cooks, maybe?”

The man to Lucas’s left brushes his shoulder and grumbles, “They’re scientists, you damn dumbass.” He goes back to his huddled posture on the counter, grey shadows engulfing his eyes.

Lucas takes a big sip of his bourbon and chases it lightly with the coke. “I’m not a ‘beaker’ or anything. You guys don’t like them or something?”

“It’s not that we don’t like them,” the bartender starts. “We just tend to... be on different wavelengths. Sometimes on different planes of existence. It all depends on the day and what kind of mood they’re in.” The bartender gives Lucas her hand to shake. It’s sopping with soap and dirty dishwater. “My name is Barb. I work at the waste and water stations.” She shakes Lucas’s hand and points to the man huddled over the bar. “And that sorry sack is Paul. He works as an electrician on base.”

Lucas thinks about asking barb why Paul is a ‘sorry sack,’ but realizes that’s a dumb idea. He tries to address them both. “I’m with the Antarctic Artists program and my name’s Lucas Grate. I’m working on an album, actually. Using field recordings from the continent and wildlife. Sampling them and such.”

“The what, now?” Paul blubbers. “I dunno if that makes you better or worse than what we’ve already got on base.”

“I’m a musician. I think it makes me worse.”

For the first time all night, Lucas gets a smile out of Paul. It’s small and fleeting, but Lucas got it regardless. A few people at the pool table overhear their conversation and give simple nods in Lucas’s direction.

Assimilation isn’t as hard as I thought, he thinks.

The rest of the bourbon goes down his throat and he asks for another.

The bartender slides the bourbon down on the counter, this time without ice. “You don’t need it.”

“Thanks.” He takes the glass and slowly sips it down. Looking around the bar, he realizes a lot of the clientele keep their heads and eyes down, shoulders slumped. He can’t find a smile in sight.

An older white woman walks into the bar and finds Paul, greets him with a big, wide hug, and sits down at the bar beside him. Something heavy rests on her face, too. Paul and the woman order another round of drinks and talk.

“How are you feeling, Paul?” the woman asks.

“I’m feeling fine. Don’t worry about me. I’m handling better than I ever was.”

“We can’t just ignore that he’s gone. It’s okay to – y’know, mourn or whatever. To take our time.”

He turns around in his stool and walks to the dart board. “I just got off a fourteen hour shift. Do you think I have time to think about anything?” He picks up a few darts and shakes his head. “Just cause you lost your husband doesn’t mean you’re the divine sympathy. Okay?”

Lucas looks at Barb who simply shrugs and cleans dirty cups from the counter. She leans in close to Lucas and whispers, "His best friend was Al."

"Who's Al?"

Barb can't hide her expression of surprise and disgust. "Did no-one tell you what happened last week?"

"No. I have no idea what's going on with whoever Al is. Sorry."

She shakes her head and laughs out of pity. "Figures they wouldn't say anything. Al was one of the electricians who worked on our power lines. He also knew a thing or two on communication equipment, which has come in handy with all the faulty starts and mishaps with the station's renovations these past few years."

"What happened to Al?"

Barb lowers her voice. "He drank himself cold. They found his body near Richmond's Hut. Most of the people here are from the wake tonight."

"Did you know him?"

"No. Not really. He came in with his friends, Paul over here and a few others, too, who've all worked together with their company in Greenland and Alaska. But he was a really funny guy. A bit too rowdy and aggressive if you ask me, but he was fun regardless." She pauses and puts down a clean glass behind her. "It's just weird that he died like that. No one knows what he was doing that whole day. No one saw him for work."

"If he was drunk that night, wouldn't he have come here?"

"That's the thing. Me and the other bartender, Julia, never saw him come in the whole day. He must've drunk alone." She pauses. "He was about to finish his full year here."

Paul looks over his shoulder from the dart board and frowns. “Would you two shut up about him, already? He died. He’s dead. Deader than dirt. That’s the story; beginning, middle, and fucking end.”

The wind hits the building from the side, and the door hisses and whistles cold air in the room. Lucas looks at Barb and then back at Paul. “Why don’t I buy you a drink, Paul?”

“If you’re buying, I want the most expensive thing here.”

“I can manage that.” He takes out some cash and puts it down on the bar. “I’ll take another, too.”

The bar gets louder and louder. Paul grabs another can of beer while Lucas orders a shot of jack. He grabs hold of the glass, his hands starting to shake, and takes a hit. He waits for the drop in his stomach to warm his blood. He orders another. Grabs the next glass. Takes a hit. Asks for another. Grab the glass. Take a hit. What’s he do next? Another and another and a another.

He stumbles to the pool table and wins stripes. Plays darts and almost hits someone’s shoulder as they walk into the bar. The door lets in the cold, and everyone shouts for the new welcomed stranger to close the *fuuuuucking* door.

Lucas stays for a few hours longer than he expected and checks the clock to find out it’s past midnight. He needs to be awake for training in a few more hours.

Oh god and damn and *ohhhh* good god.

He grabs his coat from a stool and tells Barb she’s his bestest friend, to which she simply waves to him a goodnight. A warm hug invites Paul and he ruffles Lucas’s hair and lingers for a few moments, stroking his back, relaxing in his neck. Eventually he pushes Lucas away and tells

him to get away with that sissy shit. He opens the door and braces the continent. He expected darkness but is instead welcomed by light. The 24/7 sunlight.

The base is empty, and Lucas is completely alone. The salted dirt makes him stumble and fall. Stumble and hum another jazz standard as the cold bites his tongue. His nostrils begin to freeze. He can see Central just ahead. His lungs dry up. He needs a sip of water. He needs a warm bed. My name is Lucas, I am drunk-drunk-drunk, and there is no one here who can stop me.

He looks over the hill at the old hut Barb told him about, from Richmond's second expedition. The wooden logs constructed for its walls keep firm in the one AM sun. But the lights are on inside, shining through the tiny windows a quarter mile away.

“Do you suppose that Richard will be upset about the new base's location?” A young voice, undeniably English and boyish, shouts behind Lucas. He turns around to find two men walking towards him, carrying a sled with what looks like a pile of metal pots and lids toppled one top of one another, held together by the tied down base at the bottom. The sled contains other crates, cans of food, and old science equipment Lucas has no knowledge of. He says nothing and watches the men interact, too drunk to speak. “I know you mentioned he plans to come down once we finish setting up.”

“If he is,” the other man says with a thick Welsh accent, his hair fully greying and white, “Richard is even denser than I thought. He's a good man, but not everyone is without fault, Mason.” His wrinkles thin his face with the sunlight passing through him.

“You could say the same for the Owner.”

“Ah, Richmond? Some call him a warrior-poet, but I call him an egotistical pain in my ass.” The man holds his friend’s shoulder in his arms and kisses his forehead. “We’ve only just begun, boy.”

The two men reach close enough to Lucas, without ever paying a single glance to the musician struggling to stand in the snow. He walks to the side to let the strangers continue their journey, carrying their sled.

Behind the men another soul approaches from behind, leading a massive horse in the reins and kicking Mason’s boots. “Hey Harry, you all set there, yeah?” Scottish, for sure.

“Aleck, you great big bastard. You’re damn bloody late. By this rate we’ll never start finding the magnetic South Pole.”

“That may be true, but in preparation I was too busy finding where I stowed this on the boat.” Aleck procures a bottle of black liquid in a bottle and shows it all around. “Can’t go home without her.”

The old man Harry laughs and shakes his head. “You’re a real piece o’ work. We’ve got to set up this base in the nick of time and you’re worried about a bottle of rum? Sometimes I wonder how the hell you’re our medical officer. Do you even have a degree?”

“You know Richmond, ‘The Owner,’ is a good judge of character.”

All three men wear the tightest pieces of wool clothing, their fur mittens tied to their woolled hats and scarves wrapped around their neck, ears, and face. Two small motor cars, completely metal with the engine fully exposed, drive by the three men. They all head towards the hut a quarter a mile away, with the lights still burning bright.

Lucas can hardly believe his eyes. He backs up and trips and falls flat on his ass, his head barely hitting a boulder. He slowly gets up to find the men no longer in sight, probably back at the hut. Their tracks in the snow are nowhere to be found. The lights are suddenly off.

His memory rewrites itself in his drunken haze as he heads to the back entrance of Central. Walking through the halls, he tries his best to not appear absolutely sloshed. He bumps against the wall a few times, heads up the stairs, trips on a shoe-lace, and receives a glare from an Air Force operator walking down to the first floor.

To his left he finds the wide and spacious lecture hall, the seats built into the floor like stairs with the walls fully windowed, peeking out into the Antarctic landscape. Mount Dormi and Richmond's hut sleep well together in the window's view.

Sitting in the corner of the lecture hall is Olivia with a sketchbook in her lap. Lucas reminds himself that it's getting close to two AM and it looks like she's drinking a fresh cup of coffee. Can she sleep? He thinks. I don't know. Why can't she sleep? I don't know, I'm too drunk to find out.

He continues down the hall, to the offices for Locks Weather station and Fire dispatch and finds his own office already prepared for him. He fumbles with the keys, they fall to the floor, and he reaches down to pick them up, his stomach churning a second spin cycle.

When he steps inside, he plops himself down at his desk. His keyboard is right behind him. He wheels himself over, flips the on switch, and gathers himself, away from his drunk.

His hands start to shake. It's been a while since they've done that when he's had a few drinks in him. He tries to count a tempo in his head, but his hands continue to shake. Thoughts race in his head like fireworks, alive and dying. He thinks about the bar and whether he annoyed everyone with his presence. He thinks about meeting Jessica and if she really liked what he's

doing for his Antarctic project. He thinks about Barry and if he realizes Lucas is a useless sob story with no real talent, regretting his actions for choosing to bring Lucas here in the first place. He thinks about his dorm, knowing he'll go crazy in there for the next months to come. He thinks about the plane and what it'd be like to die in flight. He could've died so easily. So, easily. He thinks about Olivia and if he annoyed her with his niceties. He thinks about the continent. He thinks about home. He thinks about his hands unable to stop shaking and holds back tears splashing on the keys.

He passes out while trying to play 'I've Got That Old Feeling.' Nobody checks in on him when his alarm rises a few hours later.

4: December 6th. The passing years will show

“Could you sit down for me, Jess? I want to ask some advice from you.” Sheryll adjusts the scarf tucked into her flannel and takes off her grey and white earmuffs. Her gold earrings dangle and shine free. Her voice is a pack of cigarettes a day. “It’s about my husband.”

The time is noon, and the Kraken Café is emptier than usual. Normally a bartender (or barista during the day) serves coffee and biscuits, tea and cupcakes, and the occasional bag of UTZ potato chips for the scientists just getting off their twelve-hour shifts. Today, only Jessica and Sheryll occupy the barrel shaped building. They light a candle for their table to imitate an intimate setting, a bottle of wine placed neatly next to the crackling flame. Their gloves and beanies silently rest on the wooden décor.

Jessica chaps her lips before they start to crack from the dry air outside. She takes off her coat and sits down in the creaky chair. “You can pick my brain,” she says to her friend, excited to finally catch up after a week of busy filming. “I have the time.”

“I’m worried Ryan is starting to lose himself or something.” She leans over the table and brushes her eyes. “I hardly ever see him when he gets off work now, and all he talks about is his research and what he plans on doing next.”

“You should meet Liv. She’s the exact same way.”

“Yeah, I know. You’ve mentioned her more times than I can count. If you weren’t so fond of her, I’d consider it annoying.”

“Sorry. Don’t let me interrupt you.” Olivia’s face creeps into her mind and she tries not to smile.

“Well, as I was saying. Ryan and I have an agreement where we try our best to leave our studies out the door when it’s just time for us. I don’t talk about Mount Dormi, and he doesn’t talk about his seal population.”

“That makes sense.”

“But he won’t shut up about it. He *literally* can’t talk about anything else. You’d think it’d be endearing or cute – hell, it once was when we first got married. But he can’t stop himself. I tell him to shut up, playfully, but he just goes back to it.”

“Was he like this before Allen died?”

“Who?”

“You know. The electrician who died a little over two weeks ago. The one I *found*?”

“Oh, him? What about him?”

A gust of wind attacks the café’s walls and stops. The paintings and souvenirs on the walls bustle and move but stay firm in their places.

“Nothing. I thought maybe—”

“Ryan has been like this for months. And Allen, or whatever you said his name is, isn’t going to bother him any. A death like that wouldn’t.”

“Yeah. Sure. I understand.”

Sheryll itches her neck and ignores the eczema on her wrists. The air is dry. “What do you think I should do? Probe him about it? Be a little relentless? Make an ultimatum?”

Jessica notices the gold necklace that dangles in-between her collarbones and the glistening diamond rings clutching to her fingers. Her veins pop in her skin. Her wrinkles are flabby mountains. If Jessica had her camera, she’d be unable to cast her in any particular good light. She tries to hush away the thought.

“It sounds to me that you already know what you should do.” Jessica stands up and grabs her coat, ready to leave. “Sorry but I can’t stay too long. I need to go back to editing the footage from last week.”

“That’s okay, Jess. I’m glad you were able to at least take a break for today.”

The two women wrap themselves in their coats to head back to their duties. Outside, Sheryll waves at her friend goodbye and heads to the Pion Science lab, grounded tall like a stocky tower in the snowbanks crashing into its walls. Jessica looks to her left, at the old wooden church with its lights on and the Father cleaning the stained-glass windows. He opens the front door to go back inside for just a moment, and Jessica sees the large wooden casket, sleeping in front of the altar.

She walks towards the church and keeps her head down in her scarf.

Olivia hops off the helicopter and beckons for Lucas to jump too. When he does, he falls on the ground and laughs like a little boy, clutching his knees, trying to stand up.

The coast of Adélie land is empty, with black and grey rocks and small patches of ice and snow lingering in the corners of the Southern Ocean. It is one of five districts that the French Southern and Antarctic lands lay claim to. The French base, Dumont d’Urville, is about fifty miles East from where the helicopter lands. From what Olivia was told, Ryan, or Dr. Ryan Du Bois, communicates with the French researchers quite frequently. She’s curious whether she’ll get to meet any of them soon, while she’s out and about on the desolate black and white coasts.

Before the helicopter turns up again, two men with snowmobiles drive up to the helicopter’s landing zone. They turn down the hill, gliding across the snow as if walking on

water. One of them stops in front of Lucas on the ground and Olivia standing above him. The snowmobile purrs underneath his weight. Taking off his helmet, the man scratches his bald head and white and yellow beard, waving a slow and unenergetic wave at the two artists. Tired. He says nothing.

“Are you Dr. Du Bois?” Lucas asks, standing up from the ground.

“My name’s Ryan. And this is my friend Noah.” the man says. “Lucas and Olivia, I presume?”

“Yes,” Oliva takes off her glove and reaches out her hand. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Mhm.” He scans the coastline, the Southern Ocean cracking with rock and ice, and looks back at his two guests. “Have you ridden on a snowmobile yet?”

“Yeah. We just finished the survival training a few days ago,” Lucas says. “Camped out in the tents next to our snow-walls and everything. Did they do the bucket head scenario with you when you first arrived?” Olivia remembers the scenario well, as she slid and fell on the ice with a bucket on her head to simulate what a condition one blizzard *truly* feels like. It sucked.

“Mhm.” Ryan Du Bois mumbles. A skua lands close to them on the beach and picks at a fish in its beak. Blood is stained near its eyes. “We’ll take you to our camp and get you settled in for the day. I hope you didn’t forget your equipment.” Olivia jingles the messenger bag to her side, containing her pencils and sketchbook, while Lucas does the same with his backpack full of field recorders and laptop.

He’s not much for conversation, Olivia thinks. Dr. Du Bois’s eyes never leave the ocean’s stilled current. A piece of ice cracks and breaks apart. The skua flies away, leaving the fish’s carcass flayed on the rocks.

He turns on the snowmobile and motions for Lucas to sit behind. Olivia is assigned to sit with Noah. Neither of them talk as they ride towards the field camp, the helicopter starting its motors and flying back to Locks station.

When they get to the camp, after an hour-long journey, they park the vehicles next to the heated Jamesway hut; a firm, blue, temporary construction with a short vent for heated steam and a few windows in the front and back. It's the only human building, a small interconnection of cozy cylinders, for about fifty miles. Dr. Du Bois and Noah (Olivia doesn't know Noah's last name yet) enter the hut and leave the artists to follow them on their own command.

Lucas adjusts his backpack straps and leans towards Olivia, whispering, "I don't think they like us."

She rolls her eyes. "Aren't you so observant?"

The camp is established next to a large hill of snow, the lower bank darkened by more volcanic rock and dirt swallowed in permafrost. Low, guttural sounds come from seals beyond the hill. Olivia takes out her water bottle and takes a sip, her throat starting to dry.

Inside the field camp is a little electric stove and mini-fridge with cabinets for freeze-dried rations, a few stand-up desks covered in papers and portable hard-drives, and in the back are the cozy cot beds for the two scientists. On the floor, Dr. Du Bois pumps out two air mattresses for his guests.

Olivia takes out her sketchbook and gets to work, outlining the components of the hut and looking out of the window, to the snowy hill and permafrost on the rocks. Dr. Du Bois ignores her.

Lucas opens his bag and turns on his field recorder, resting it near the stove's counter. Dr. Du Bois looks over and frowns. "Are you recording me?"

“No, not you in particular. Just the sounds of this camp. You can hear the cracks of the wind and the seals in the distance in here.”

The doctor goes back to the air mattress and shakes his head, mumbling something in disgust.

Jessica adjusts her bag around her shoulder and stands in front of the church, peering inside. A few tractors carrying salt for the roads pass behind her. None of the drivers look at her. One of them sneaks a drag from a cigarette and quickly stows it away.

Inside, she sees the Father stand up and create the holy trinity on his chest before sitting down at one of the pews. His face is hidden in the windowpane.

The casket sleeps still. Unmoving.

Trying not to disturb the Father, she opens the door. A loud creaking sound comes from her entrance, and the priest turns around at the noise and smiles once he sees the filmmaker. He rests his arm on the pew and raises a hand for a wave.

“I don’t mean to interrupt if you’re busy,” Jessica starts, her hands behind her back and her bag tightly pressed against her scarf.

“Not at all. You’re not a bother.” He stands up and greets her with a small nod and a handshake. “I was just saying a prayer for a few people on base. A field camp was just constructed for a few divers and a truck just headed toward White Island station. They’re all regulars here.”

“Oh.” She plans on going to White Island at some point during her stay. She wonders what the blizzard-stricken island has in store for her. “Right. That makes sense. That’s very kind

of you.” She looks at the priest who studies her every expression. He doesn’t try to hide his face. He presses his lips together and walks down the aisle and sits down at the pew he was originally at.

“I’ve never seen you in here before. What’s your name?” He rests his hands on his lap, looking at the cross at the end of the hall.

“Jessica. And I’m just filming a documentary here for a few months.”

“‘*Just*’ a filmmaker?”

“Yeah. Nothing special.”

He smiles and looks away, finding what she said funny. “I can tell you haven’t been inside a church in a while. You look uncomfortable.”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“Are you here to see Allen?” He gestures to the casket in front of the wooden altar. “Did you know him?”

Wooden varnish on the casket shines from the light of the sun and the candles on the wall. Jessica walks to a pew next to the Father and sits down.

“I was the one that found him.”

Skuas fly near the church’s windows, as if trying to crash through the windows.

“And you’re here...” he says, “trying to pay your respects.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

He pauses and looks at her with his hands in his lap. “Y’know, you’re the first person to come in here who wasn’t one of his buddies. Everyone who’s come to see him works on a contract. Not one scientist or grad student has come by.” He sighs and rubs his temples. “You’re the first.”

“I’m not a scientist, though. I’m just here for a documentary. I’m not one of them.”

“You’re still the first person to see him that doesn’t clean, cook, or keep up the base in working order.” Jessica can’t read his expression. It’s as if his mind goes completely blank.

“Some of my congregations have scientists, but not many. They don’t come in often. And here you are, saying you’re not one of them.” He laughs. “My days keep getting interesting, don’t they?”

“You’re a bit pessimistic for a preacher.”

“You could say I’ve been here for too long.”

The seals on the ice waddle and wade with their mothers. The young pups lean into the stomachs of their mothers, receiving milk and warmth and safety. Noah mentions with much malice that only eighty percent of the seals will survive, as if wanting to disturb his new guests; Olivia has no idea why.

After months of raising their young, the mothers will leave. Go underneath the ice and find somewhere new. Start again. Raise a new family – the survival rate always stays the same.

Olivia wonders if the mothers hope for their young after they abandon them.

Dr. Du Bois carries a black tarped bag in his hands and slowly walks over to a happy, fun, fat seal lounging on the ice. The snow is yellow and brown and red. A mother nearby gnaws on the remains of penguin and fish. The beach is loud with the seal’s vocal calls. They sound like human babies with high pitch and deep growls. Lucas listens intently with his field recorder propped to his side, pushing buttons on his remote mixer and looking ahead at whatever Du Bois does next.

Olivia keeps her sketchbook and pencil tight to her lap and chest.

“It’s okay, girl.” Dr. Du Bois whispers a lullaby to the seal. He bags the head and leans over the seal’s nipples, taking out a plastic syringe to draw out the milk. The seals guttural growls are low and disturbed. She wiggles her head in the bag with not much effort but still tries to break free. It pains Olivia to watch, though she was reassured by Noah, although quite sarcastically, that this is procedure is of no harm to the seals. “Noah, get the vial ready.”

“On it.”

The two artists watch as the syringe fills with milk and is slowly dropped into the vial held in Noah’s hands. After the last of the white liquid is in the vial, Noah caps it off. Dr. Du Bois removes the bag and lets the seal regain her surroundings. She blinks, her eyes completely black. She sways her head back and forth between the scientists and then rolls back calmly on the ice, letting her pup waddle back to her again to receive more of her milk.

“I think that’s enough.” Noah says, placing the vial in his knapsack attached to his waist.

“Should be.”

Olivia looks up from her sketchbook. “What are you going to study the milk for again?”

Dr. Du Bois sighs. “A research team a few years ago found some useful properties in the milk that could help with human weight loss. We’re tasked with reproducing their study. And also,” He wipes his breath induced ice accumulating in his beard, “we want to see if the milk loses its protein and fat content with the mother’s age. How many pups a mother has had could affect it, too.”

“What happens to the fathers?”

“They protect the seal’s breathing holes in the ice, and if successful, they get to mate.”

Lucas laughs. “How romantic.”

Out on the beach, the waves grow disturbed. The ice is broken apart and much of the ocean is white and blue. Small chunks of white float off the ocean, with a few seals flopping on its surfaces.

The waves go towards one of the floating pieces of ice. Two seals stick close to each other, sleeping. One of them looks up at the waves and makes a vocal call. They both wake up alert.

“Oh no.” Dr. Du Bois whispers. “Not again.”

A black and white fin and body emerge from the water, followed by two more close behind. The orcas circle the floating ice. Their rubbery skin reflects the white sun with rolling dripping water.

One of them dips under the water and pushes against the ice, trying to capsize it. Water rolls over the seals. Their bodies engorged in water and trickling snow. They slide and fall off. Only a second passes before they both flop back onto the floating cracking land. Groaning.

One by one, the orcas dive. Push up the ice. And do it all again. The seals get back up without any hesitation.

Water spouts up from an orca’s blowhole. She’s getting angry.

“They’ve been bolder and coming in closer to the beaches now.” Dr. Du Bois kneels on the ground and gets out his binoculars, watching the hunt. “The warming waters will do that. And the orcas are relentless.” He pauses. “My population has been dying because of them. The damn devils.”

“Does global warming have anything to do with it?” Olivia asks.

He grins at her ignorance. “What do you think?”

Noah watches in silence, folding his arms and tilting his head. Lucas packs up his field recorder and stands next to them. “Why are the killer whales going after them one by one? Why not all at once?”

“They’re training.”

The sea ice fully goes under with the seals following its wake. A minute passes. No one says a word. Only one seal comes up, gasping for air. Shouting low and in pain. Half of its body is missing. The ice is red; light and dark.

Olivia wants to look away but can’t. She grips her sketchbook stronger and gets to work. Sweat slides off her skin and sticks to her inner clothing. Her feet feel drenched. Her hair is wet. She didn’t think she’d want to go home. Her porch in Washington with the fireflies and crickets at night make her wish for a little bit of green. For something other than black, white, and red. She feels sick to her stomach.

The orcas swim on her page with her bloody black textures.

She looks up and notices a man hauling a sled in the distance on a hill. He is dressed in all brown, fur, and thick wool. He does not notice the orcas or the seal carcasses. When Olivia sees him, he looks up from the ground and stares at her, probably a thousand feet away.

“Do you see that man?” she asks to everyone. He grips his hat tighter and waves at her. She points in his general direction. “That man right there, waving?”

As soon as everyone turns their heads he’s gone. His tracks disappear, buried in the snow.

Lucas looks at her and raises his hand only halfway to comfort her but stops. He asks if she’s okay, noticing how she stares at nothing and draws without control.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about me. I’m almost done anyway.”

A candle in the church goes out. Jessica's watch reads 5:38.

The priest finishes relighting the candle and walks over to the votive candles, lighting a few more in silence. Flames flicker and crack. They bloom bright and red once they breathe the air's dry life.

"Who are those candles for?" Jessica asks, knowing that the votives are for prayers of the self, or someone else.

"I don't really know yet." He pauses and sits down again, all of a sudden very tired. "Sometimes I've been getting these urges to light the candles and pray for those I don't know. It's common to pray for people we don't know, of course, but..." He's out of breath for some reason. "this feels different."

The door to the church opens. A woman with locs and dark brown skin leads a very pale man into the church. His eyes carry dark black circles. He focuses on his feet trudging on top of the wooden floor. They walk through the aisle, staring between the priest and Jessica. She keeps her hands in the pockets of her blue coveralls, smelling of mud and sewage, while the man is dressed in a baggy raggedy sweatshirt. Jessica tries not to flinch at the smell.

"Hi, Barb. Hey Paul." the priest says. "It's great to see you both. It's been a while."

"A week, hasn't it?" Barb tries to smile.

"I'm just glad you two are doing okay, is all."

She introduces herself to Jessica, conserving many details and intimacies in their conversation. She notices the timidity and cleanliness Jessica brought into the building. The man named Paul sits down at a pew, saying nothing. "You're a scientist, aren't you?" she asks.

“Why does everyone keep assuming—” she takes a deep breath. “No, I’m not. I’m just a documentary filmmaker.”

“Are you with the Antarctic Artists program?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

Paul looks up and grimaces. “We’ve met your buddy, Lucas. He’s come into the Southern Exposure a few times the past week.” He wants to say more but stops himself.

Barb sits down next to him, unsure what to do. “He’s a nice guy,” she says finally, talking about Lucas.

The silence is deafening. Only candles burst through the calm. No wind roars outside.

“Do you want to say something to him?” The father asks Paul, motioning to the casket.

“I don’t know.”

“I can say something to him for you, if you like?”

He winces. “How much longer does he have to stay here?”

“He’s going tomorrow night, on the next plane. We’re going to do a little memorial for him tomorrow morning.”

Paul pauses and breathes slowly. “Good. Then I’ll say something tomorrow.” He looks at Barb and glances at Jessica but fixes himself on the head of the casket. Its lid is shut tight. “I think I want to see him.”

“Are you sure—”

“I *want* to see him, Father.”

“Okay then.”

Barb shuffles her feet and Jessica puts her hands in her pockets. Without a word, the priest stands up and walks over to the casket. The image of Allen buried in the snow sticks to

Jessica's mind. His mouth agape. Eyes frozen open. Lips paled to blue, hair clumped to ice. She tries to push the thought out but her mind has taken control.

He lifts the lid and lets Paul stare.

Allen rolls his head to the side, mouth closed, eyes open, and looks at Jessica. His eyes were brown, she remembers when they were buried in his sockets and in the snow, but now they've turned blue. The candles reflect in his irises. He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. His skin crystalizes to a pale blue, his eyelashes melt into icy sticks, and his hair mats with snow and dirt. Jessica sees his tongue form words. Jessica sees him move. He moves.

His cold seeps into her bones and she shivers and looks away and covers her mouth, swallowing her vomit. Everyone looks at her.

"Are you okay?" Barb asks, resting her hand on Jessica's shoulder.

"I'm...I'm..." If she speaks she will desecrate the floor.

The windows turn black and her forehead burns.

"Let's get you to the medical center, yeah?"

She looks back at Allen and finds him staring at the roof, as he originally was. Eyes close and skin sleeps. The snow is gone, the ice melts into air. She wants to stand up and slap him awake, her heart beating fast and her sweat dripping slow, but she can barely move. Her legs and arms shake.

"Ugh. I feel sick—" she says, stuttering her words.

"Does she have the crud?" Paul asks.

"No. No no. I'm fine. I just need some rest."

"You *need* to get checked out."

It takes a minute for Barb and Paul to grab a hold of Jessica, but once they do, they hoist her up by her arms and help her stand. Her throat scratches and burns, forcing her to cough. She stumbles over her legs as the two contract workers guide her out of the church.

The below freezing temperatures force her eyes open and shut. Open and shut.

The priest stays behind, as if partially feeling responsible. “I’ll call the medical bay and let them know you’re on your way,” he says, reaching for his walkie-talkie near an empty pew.

“Thanks Father,” Paul says, looking back.

“We’re sorry to have interrupted you,” Barb starts, talking like Jessica is already one of their own. “I guess some people can’t handle dead bodies, right?”

The father faints a smile but it quickly fades. The never falling sun keeps its position still on the horizon. Jessica leaves a trail of snow and dirt as she trudges through central with her two new friends. The church doors close with Allen back asleep.

“So, you played at Porter’s concert that spring?” Noah looks at Lucas and smiles wide. “You were *that* pianist?”

Olivia watches Lucas shuffle in his chair, ignoring the praise, completely unable to take a compliment. “Yeah, but it was nothing. I was just filling in. The pianist was out sick that weekend and my band – well, I shouldn’t say my band anymore – opened for them.”

“I didn’t know that. I usually don’t pay much attention to the openers.”

Lucas rests his eyes on the ground. That must’ve hurt, Olivia thinks. She doesn’t understand why he stewes in his silence.

The Jamesway hut is cute and cozy. Dr. Du Bois puts a percolator on the stove and turns the burner on. Noah sits at a desk full of papers and dinosaur age laptops. Lucas and Olivia both sit on the floor next to their blow-up air mattresses. One time, when Olivia was out on an assignment for a grad school project in Iceland, she camped out near the Bárðarbunga mountain to sketch its surroundings. She found herself in a situation similar to this. Awkward park guides, crappy mattresses, and uncomfy silences. Most of the discomfort came from herself, though, in what remained lurking and ever-present in her shadows.

The scientists filled the two artists in on their projects in full detail for about an hour. Dr. Du Bois and his seal population, recreating previous scientist's studies and tracking pup-survivability conditions, while Dr. Noah (as he likes to be called) simply took a weekend break from his own studies at the south pole, studying neutrinos and black holes. Olivia knew this wasn't much help to Lucas's work, since he needed samples and audio and concrete findings. But for Olivia, the scientist's work could influence her drawings. Their work, full of sleep deprivation, sweat, and frozen tears, could direct how she draws the continent, or how she draws the scientists themselves. For her, every little bit helps.

After another hour the clock strikes close to midnight and the scientists prep for sleep. They say goodnight to their guests, their eyes drooping and their stances weakening.

Olivia and Lucas tuck into their mattresses and say goodnight, too.

Her dreams end up becoming madness and she tosses and turns and sweats in the night. Her ghosts sometimes get into her unconscious. They make her frown in her sleep, sometimes mumble and mutter words and phrases she'll never remember. But they're always there.

Whenever they start to come close her heart hits like a drum. Whenever they reach her, merely

inches apart, her head pounds and her migraines burst her brain. Whenever they lay a hand on her she wakes up, knowing that they are somewhere around the room.

The windows are black in the hut, though she knows they should be light.

She looks over at the desk full of Dr. Du Bois's notes and sees him huddled over his work, unable to fall asleep. He scratches beard and then his forehead in disgust. He groans, either from being tired or annoyed at his slow, unmoving progress.

Below him is a plastic bottle full of fizzy orange liquid. Olivia can smell it from here. The beer, clearly homemade, reaches the doctor's lips. He lets out a small 'ah' and sets it back under his desk, trying to hide his homebrew concoction. Nobody is allowed to drink while on shift, Olivia knows this. She wonders how common this behavior is. Does Noah do it, too? Does Lucas? Does Jessica?

She looks to her right, at Lucas falling asleep, and sees the shadow. It stands firm with its masked cloak and stares at her, hovering over Lucas. It leaves no trail. Raising one of its hands to its face, it rests a finger to where its mouth would be, hinting at Olivia to remain quiet.

She remains quiet.

It looks at Lucas and leans in closer. It inches and crawls and floats in front of his face as its eyes get wider and wider and wider.

She doesn't have much choice. She gets up from her bed and rushes towards Lucas, shaking him awake. His shoulders tense and he clenches his jaw and opens his eyes wide, pushing Olivia off him. Everyone wakes up and stares at her in utter shock.

"What was that?!" Lucas shouts, gripping his shoulders and hugging himself tight.

"I thought I saw... I thought..."

"You thought you saw what?! Who else could it possibly be? It's just us here!"

“I’m so sorry. I must’ve just…”

Lucas recovers himself and looks at the scientists who just stare at the artists like animals.

“You know what, it’s fine. I’m sure you were just having a nightmare or whatever.”

“Yeah, I just get them sometimes. It’s really nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry – it’s really okay. I was just worked up, is all.” He looks at Olivia and tries to smile. “Are *you* okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. Please.” She looks out at the window and sees the sun again. They’re gone, she thinks. The ghosts are gone. I can finally breathe.

“How cold is it outside?” she asks Dr. Du Bois.

He looks at the thermometer near the door. “It’s around ten degrees Fahrenheit.”

“That’s not too bad.” She gets up and walks towards her thermal clothing, jackets, and bright red parka. “I just need to go out for a walk and get some fresh air.”

“Are you sure?” Lucas asks, still lying down in his bed half in shock. “Keep your radio on you, please.”

“I’m okay, I promise. I just need to stretch my legs.”

The medical bay is full of stale LED lighting. The walls are white and tiled. Jessica’s room is curtained off and she’s left alone to sip a cup of apple juice through a straw.

Paul had to go back to his shift but Barb still has an hour off. Jessica isn’t sure why she’s staying. They barely know each other.

“You don’t have to stick around,” she finally says, coughing into her sleeve. “They’ve already ruled out the crud and think it might’ve just been some food poisoning.”

Barb looks around the bed curtain and closes her eyes. “I know you were the one that found Allen near Richmond’s hut.”

A fluorescent light above flickers and remains steady.

“I feel terrible—”

“It’s not about you,” Barb looks at her and doesn’t look away. “I know you feel guilty but this isn’t about you. This isn’t even about me or anyone else that comes to this place for a month or two for some dumb research project nobody’s ever going to care about.”

“I’m sorry I—”

“Just shut up and listen for a second.”

Jessica focuses on her steady fast heart and breaths slowly. Listening.

“I don’t think Al drunk himself to death that night.”

Jessica wants to say how she found his bottle of liquor but decides to push the thought out of her mind.

“He always cut himself off at the bar when he drank with Paul and all of those guys. He was like the one that kept everyone – everything in check. How could he kill himself like that? What could’ve possibly happened that led to him stealing a bottle of liquor, drinking it all by himself in that broken down hut, forgetting his coat and jacket and all of his warm clothes, and just... and just...” she wipes her eyes and clenches her fists open and close.

Nobody ever told Jessica that the bottle of liquor was stolen. For some reason, that new fact haunts her more than she expected.

Jessica leans as close as she can without leaving the bed. “What do you want me to do?”

Barb looks up at her. “I don’t *want* you to do anything. I just wanted you to listen. Because *nobody* seems to give a fuck and I finally wanted someone that wasn’t on a damn contract to listen. Do you understand? Do you?”

“Yes. I do.”

Barb stands up from her chair and heads for the door and stops. She turns around and locks her face tight. “Then prove it.”

Olivia thought the cold might wake her up more but it doesn’t. She walks up a hill just behind the researcher’s hut and look across the landscape. The transantarctic mountains wall off the Ross Sea and the beach just beyond carries an abundance of Weddell seal pups and mothers. The fathers, just like Dr. Du Bois said, guard some of the water holes cracked open in the ice. No orcas are in sight.

She sits down and watches everything come into motion. The air dries her pores but she’s wrapped to the brim in cloth, wool, and tightly compressed polyester. Only her eyes are exposed to the continent.

Crying would be pointless. Her tears would freeze on her cheeks which would make her all the more cold. She holds herself and hugs herself and leans back on the snow. She’s never invited her ghosts to invade her space, but now, she’s starting to debate whether that’s such a bad idea.

I thought isolation would take them away, she thinks. I thought that if all I had was my work and my pen, I’d be alright. Do I really have to make myself suffer like this? Do I really

have to push everyone away? Does my presence really bring about so much fear and anger and death? What is *wrong* with me?

She hears snow crunching to her right. Leaning her head to stare at the sound, the man she saw on the hill approaches her with his sled strapped tight. He carries a massive piece of ice on the sled, with what looks like a creature trapped inside. He pauses when he reaches her and stares. "How are you now?" he asks. His coat is made of fur and strung together to his hat and mittens.

"I'm sorry," she says, almost out of breath. "I don't know you."

"Really, George? You don't remember me?" He laughs at her, holding his gut. "We were on the *Exposure* together. How could you not remember me?"

"We were on the what?" Did he just call me George? she thinks.

"Oh. I see. You must've tapped into Aleck's reserves already. Everyone's talking about the rum he brought with him from Scotland, but I think it tastes like bloody piss regardless." He holds out his hand frozen to his mitten. "My name's Mason, if I have to reintroduce myself all over again."

She shakes his hand firm, not wanting to question anything just yet. "It's a pleasure to... uh... re-meet you, Mason." She looks at the block of ice on his sled and motions to it. "What do you have there?"

He gets all excited. "Me and some men are digging around the beaches into the ice for some fossils. This one here looks like something you might find on the ocean floor. A piece of sponge or coral or something of the same species. I know you're just a crewmate for the ship but this is marvelous, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sure is."

“What are you doing all the way out here? Shouldn’t you be back with us at the beach, too?”

“I’m just taking a break.”

“Why don’t you come on back with me there? I’m headed there anyway and... I’m not exactly sure what you’re doing here all by yourself.”

She thinks of an excuse. “I’ll catch you again once I’m finished up here.”

“Alright then. Suit yourself.”

He trudges the sled behind him and disappears down the mountain. Believing it all herself, and knowing that ghosts can appear there and not there, she only questions the man’s presence twice. On the third time, she understands perfectly.

She lays in the snow and closes her eyes for a few minutes more before heading back to the hut.

Safety Away from Home:

A Short Story

*BBC News: September 1, 1939: "These are today's main events;
Germany has invaded Poland and has bombed many towns.
General mobilization has been ordered in Britain and France."*

I asked Gregory to check if he had his tiny gasmask, change of clothes, night-shirt, toothbrush, stockings, and other toiletries tucked inside his hand-me-down suitcase. He opened it up and forgot to bring his stockings, but I carried an extra pair. I fastened his over-sized peacoat and ruffled his hair, faking a smile. I had just turned fifteen. And Gregory was only nine. We were lucky to be going to the same foster home – not everyone was gifted such luxury. I wore my child-sized gas mask around my head, like all my friends at school, and helped Gregory with his. We waved to our friends as we boarded our trains. I wouldn't be seeing them all for a while.

Mrs. Payne, our schoolteacher, walked close to us and grabbed Gregory's hand. "Come on up, boys. Gregory, Robert. Don't be shy." She guided us to our train in the underground London station and let out a big sigh of relief once we were at our train's entrance. Her eyes never stopped in one place for more than a second, and I could see the goosebumps on alert at the back of her neck. I didn't know what was causing her to be so anxious when everyone else controlling the situation was so calm. But she gave us concerned looks with a struggling fake smile. She handed us our name tags and continued to filter us from the crowd. Guiding. Protecting. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and cursed under her breath. We hung our tags around our necks and boarded the train after her.

Gregory had a dumb smile and wanderlust eyes, skidding back and forth, excited for this new chapter in life's adventure. I followed behind and stared at the adults smiling back at us, wishing us farewell and guidance. Their smiles and stares made me uneasy and uncomfortable. It was as if they all were trying to figure out what's going on inside my mind. Whether or not I would be okay.

They were so tall. Blank, yet occupied with thoughts I couldn't figure out. I couldn't read them, but they all knew what might come in the next few days – maybe even the next few months. And sometimes they would talk to one another in hushed voices, or simply with slight nods and glances at one another's expressions. I didn't like it one bit. They wouldn't tell me what was going on. And I thought I saw a gun holstered on one of the men's sides. My mind could've played tricks on me, that much was true. That man smiled at me and my little brother, regardless. Pondering.

I missed my new radio. I wanted to bring it with me, but Mum told me not too. "Your foster home might have one," she told me that morning, kissing me on the cheek and promising to write to us every day. She was a nurse. I figured that in the coming months, she would be busy. They said so on the radio.

When we reached our train compartment Mrs. Payne told us to behave and good luck. She helped the other kids find their seats, too. Our compartment was already full, and we didn't have much room. I didn't look at the other kids. I stared at my shoes. Gregory sat up on his side of the train compartment and started eating the soggy peanut butter sandwich Mum packed us for our trip.

"Don't eat it all at once, Greg," I told him. "We don't know how long this ride is going to take."

He frowned at me, ate half of it in two quick bites, and put it back in his suitcase.

The other kids eyed Greg's sandwich and I told them to piss off. We were all poor. We were all leaving London together. But that did not make us friends.

The teachers and other officials outside waved to us goodbye with smiles and long, blank faces. The train started slow, and black coal smoke littered the air outside. All the kids leaned outside the windows and waved back at the parents, teachers, and random adults. Gregory was among them, but I stayed sitting down in my seat, thinking about the lost stare in Mrs. Payne's eyes and what could have given her so much anxiety.

I watched London drown away in the windowpane as the countryside came into view.

BBC News: September 3, 1939: "All cinemas, theaters, and other places of entertainment are to be closed immediately until further notice. In the light of experience, it may be possible to allow the reopening of such places in some areas. They are being closed because if they were hit by a bomb, large numbers would be killed or injured."

On our first day in the countryside, our foster family, the Bakers, wanted to take us to the cinema or a live theater show. But instead of doing that, they had to think of other ways to keep us occupied with 'fun.' They were an old, ancient couple, who lived a mile or so out of Southampton in Ashurst. Lots of wrinkles and creepy prolonged stares. They set up their old croquet set in their large backyard and gave us tea and fresh biscuits; the kind Mum used to make once she'd receive her prolonged payday. They were very rich and lived in the biggest house I'd ever seen. A tall oak loomed over their mansion. The driveway paved in pristine cobblestone. Not a single dead leaf out of place. Not a single puff of smoke under the clouds.

I felt spoiled, but Greg was having the time of his life.

The couple was very kind at first, but I could see straight through Mrs. Baker. She kept bickering and cursing about the nation-wide closings, calling the whole ordeal unfortunate and overdone. When she first saw us, she couldn't help but cover her nose and open her eyes wide at our clothes. Only our pants had holes. Our shirts were perfectly fine – all patched up and dusted from soot. I didn't think it was that bad. And despite her first impression, she kept trying to get us to eat her cookies and drink her tea, as if the act of being a good host would let her forgive herself for being so rich. Gregory didn't seem to notice or care for her disdain. He didn't notice much of anything at all. It was just me, alone. Alone.

Mr. Baker thought the situation funny and alluring. When we arrived, I overheard him convincing Mrs. Baker that the money they were receiving from the state was something to appreciate, but his wife wouldn't have it. He thought it was the right call, sending all the children into the countryside, and he smiled about it a lot. He was the only one smiling about it.

He looked at his wife with a smile. It was a sweet and sad grimace, something like love, maybe. But the sadness outweighed the sweet. He didn't like how I noticed and stared. I didn't know why.

I was not as happy as my little brother. The air in their home felt stiff and too silent, and nothing was nearby. The smell of baked bread and cookies was always around, but the scent was too perfect. I wished Mum could come with us, but she was needed elsewhere. She was a lifeline. A strong one. London needed her. Our world needed her.

The only things around the Bakers' home were trees, well-manicured bushes, short pesticide grass, and their two fancy automobiles. They owned *two*.

I had my brother to take care of, but I had never felt more alone.

We settled into our rooms on that first night and unpacked our belongings. We set our gas-masks next to our beds, and I tucked Greg to sleep. He had been playing croquet all day and was exhausted. He fell asleep immediately.

But I was more awake than ever. I heard voices – tinny, crackled voices – talk in great patterns and speeches downstairs. I didn't like or respect the Bakers much, so I decided to open our bedroom door and sneak about the house, chasing the voices to their source.

I stood in the doorway to the living room and saw an expensive radio sleeping on an old, carved table, with Mr. Baker hunched over it. The room was dark. An oil lamp procured the only light around. Mr. Baker kept turning the frequency knobs, trying to find the right signal. His eyes never faltered on the radio set. He kept mumbling something under his breath, and I thought I saw his hands begin to shake.

He stopped on a frequency and the radio began to speak, "*Germany Calling, Germany Calling. This is Lord Haw Haw—*"

In the moment, I thought it would be funny to mess with him, so I asked from the shadow of the doorway, "Excuse me, sir, but what are you doing?"

He didn't jump. He didn't scurry or look immediately to question the sound. He simply glanced my way with a slow turn and pursed his lips. "I'm trying to find the new BBC Home Service station." He sighed and kept turning the frequency knob. "Do you know the frequency, Robert?" My name on his lips sounded like a curse.

I knew the BBC recently merged their programs into one national station, and I absolutely knew the frequency by heart, but I wanted to see him figure it out on his own. I shook my head no and asked him if that was a new radio.

"Yes. It is. Very new. I got it a few days before you two came here."

“Are you trying to hear news on the start of the war?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Mind if I join you?”

The old man hunched over the radio some more and looked out the window, to something hiding in the darkness. “Sure, my boy. Take a seat next to me.”

I took the seat and looked at the radio. It had beautiful paneling and the glow-light from the front looked like magic. It reminded me of my own back home.

“I love the radio.” I found myself saying. I didn’t mean to speak.

“I do too. It helps me keep in touch with the outside world here. It helps me feel more connected and safe.” The old man kept staring out of the window, looking up at the stars in the sky. “I like listening to the programs about other parts in the Empire. Maybe I’ll get to see them someday.”

“You don’t think the Empire is too large?”

He said nothing. He didn’t move a muscle.

“I used to listen to the radio with my Mum,” I said. “After she came home from work.”

“I listen to it alone, usually. But this is a special occasion. Isn’t it?”

I was getting too sentimental. “No. It’s not that much of a special moment.”

“To you, maybe. But to me it is.” He looked at me with his dark eyes and started an awkward smile. I thought he looked embarrassed. “Have you ever heard of Oswald Mosely?”

The name rang a bell. I knew mum hated him deeply because she got me into the radio. He was an antisemite from what I heard. A real powerful one, too, trying to make England think the way he did and all. The name didn’t sit right with me. I feigned ignorance when I asked Mr. Baker, “I’m sorry. Who?”

“Oh, nobody really. Just an old politician who...” He stopped, licked his lips, and put his hands in his lap. “Got himself too much to handle, I suppose. Too many big ideas for his own good.”

Uneasy. “I don’t like keeping up with politics.”

“Yet you don’t like the largeness of the Empire.” He pauses. “In this country, I don’t like the politics either.” He put his hand on the table and looked back outside. “You can use my radio whenever you’d like. The more use it gets around here, the better.”

I didn’t want to say thank you, but if my Mum were watching me, I knew she would be disappointed. “I appreciate it, sir.”

“You should head on back to bed, Robert. I need to find that new Home station.”

I walked out of the living room. Even in the doorway I could still hear the old frequency he turned to originally again, before I interrupted him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him lean back in his chair, and rub his face with his hands. The hands that kept shaking.

BBC News: Blitz Bombings, 1940. Date Unknown: “At the moment, everything is quiet. For reasons of national as well as personal security, I am unable to tell you the exact location from which I’m speaking. You may be able to hear the sound of guns off in the distance very faintly like someone kicking a tub. The search lights are stretching out now in this general direction, I can hear just the faint whisper of an aircraft high overhead.”

A whole year passed. The month was September. London was attacked by bombers and air raids, and more destruction was expected in the coming months. It was mostly near cities and the more urban areas, but sometimes the Nazis decided to bomb closer to the Bakers – closer to me and my brother. Other kids were offered to move again, into more rural areas other than the

Southern countryside, but the Bakers refused. They didn't want to move. I would've written to Mum and told her all about it, but I didn't want her to worry. And our letters dwindled in frequency, too.

Before the bombs started, Gregory was still in his adventuring phase. I told him not to go play outside unless I was there, because I knew he wouldn't think twice about the loud cracks and bangs of bombs close by. But when the bombs first dropped, and when they dropped closer than expected, he stopped being a child; he started being silent. Greg even wet his bed many times during the raids, upsetting Mrs. Baker to the highest degree. She called him names I had never heard of, from another language even, but Gregory was too absorbed in his feeling of embarrassment. I understood why he was embarrassed, but he shouldn't have been. It wasn't his fault. It was never our faults.

With the bombs always in the sky, everything I heard and saw seemed like something ready to kill me. I'd do grocery shopping for the Bakers occasionally each week, and every time I'd go into town, I'd see another new building collapsed and a new place of impact from where the bombs laid their rest. While walking alone in the deserted street of town, people always stared and looked at me with lost, hungry eyes. Eyes that I had never seen before and hushed voices just within earshot. Paranoia was inevitable. Trust was a distant luxury.

I always walked with the Baker's money on me. Everyone in the streets looked as if they knew of the money in my pocket and stared while I walked by. I wish I could throw it away. I didn't want to do errands for them. I didn't want to do anything at all.

But some people in town were 'normal' and woke up with the sun and headed off to work. Those people scared me the most. The people that thought that everything was normal and to be plainly expected.

One time, I saw a man in a long black coat follow me around a few blocks in town. His hands hid in his pockets and his stare locked on the back of my neck. He switched crosswalks after a few minutes of following me, but I kept seeing him in the shadows or dark windows at night. I knew he wasn't there. I knew. I hoped. Convincing myself with logic never helped. Logic isn't better than luck.

I listened to the radio whenever I had the time. Although, it was always after Mr. Baker. He had an odd obsession with it. Every night at midnight, the old man turned on the radio and listened to all sorts of broadcasts. Even the Germany Calling one. The one rumored to be from Hamburg.

As I slept one night, when the birds were like distant rain and the clouds were murky and grey, I saw flashing lights appear in my window. I grabbed Gregory from his bed and threw our bodies onto the floor. I told him to shut up: "Hold your breath. Stick close to me. It'll all be fine. It'll be. It'll be." But there were no gunshots. There were no bombs. The flashing lights moved away from our window, and I peeked curiously outside.

Mr. Baker was in his garden, which was strange because my watch read well past midnight. He was talking to a stranger with a flashlight. A stranger I recognized. He wore the same long black coat that followed me in town. I was sure that was him.

I told Gregory to go to bed and not to follow me. He was more scared than I had ever seen him before, clutching his blanket and keeping his mouth locked. He followed my orders blindly.

I snuck down the stairs and scurried out the front door, heading to the garden. I hid in a bush and waited. They didn't see me, but I could see them. I could barely hear anything they

said, and from the looks of it, the man in the long black coat carried a shovel and was looking for a spot in the garden.

Mr. Baker looked old that night. Older than he truly was. His back was breaking more and more each day, as if the sound of the bombs broke his bones exponentially. But for some reason he looked so lost and confused when talking to the strange man in the coat. So sad and uncomfortable. He stared at the ground and into the shadows of the trees surrounding his property. I thought he was hoping for something to appear in the shadows – to distract him from his situation. His predicament. His stranger.

Together, they searched around the garden. The stranger smoked a cigarette and laughed about something I didn't understand. It only took me a few seconds to realize they were speaking something other than English. Something I thought could be German.

I held my breath as they started digging into a plot of dirt.

The stranger threw his shovel on the ground and leaned into the hole. It was a crate. He opened it. I thought he was reading something because he took a long time to inspect the contents of the box. He nodded to Mr. Baker with a smile and patted him on the back. The gesture meant 'good job.' The gesture meant something worse.

He walked off and headed towards me.

I burrowed myself further in the bush. Held my breath and prayed. Closed my eyes. Pictured mum and my brother and tried not to cry. He walked right by me as he clicked the flashlight on and headed down the driveway. Just walking, no car in sight.

I sat in the bush for a half hour, wiping the tears from my cheeks, waiting for Mr. Baker to go back inside. He was taking forever to dig up the hole the stranger had left. I was afraid that his back might break, bending over his own weight so much and so often, lifting all that dirt with

such a raggedy shovel. I thought about helping him. Asking him what was happening to him with that stranger. But that would've been a bad idea.

Another half hour passed until Mr. Baker filled up the hole. He rubbed the dirt off on his pants and went back into his home.

I fell asleep in the bushes and woke up to the sounds of bombs dropping in the night.

Gregory had wet his bed again.

The town got smaller by the day. I recognized most of the faces when I went into town, and the ones I always remembered were the ones that disappeared. They were replaced by stoic, silent men and 'normal' people who had jobs. My paranoia told me they must not have real jobs. Their jobs must be fake. Secret. Something that caused others to disappear and my mind to go crazy. If I told the Bakers this they might suspect something. There was a chance I was too smart for my own good. I couldn't tell Gregory because that would only make things worse.

It had been a week since I found Mr. Baker digging through his garden with the strange man from town, but I couldn't shake the memory from my head. I never went to the radio again after that night. I tried to interact with the Bakers as little as possible. My suspicions grew worse and worse, and Gregory spoke less and less. My fear was rubbing off on him. My anxiety was tangible. I felt terrible and helpless and I missed mum so much.

The sky stayed dark for many nights. I often looked at the ceiling and listened to the complete silence of nature and gunfire I never got accustomed to.

I remember one night, after a gun-show of lights and stars in the sky, I tucked Gregory into bed and told him to stay in our room.

“Why? What’s going on?” he said. His eyes didn’t blink.

“I need to check something with Mr. Baker.”

“Is everything alright?”

I knew he suspected something. He was a brilliant baby brother.

“It’s nothing. I just want to talk to him real quick.”

“Promise me it’s nothing?”

I didn’t want to lie. “I promise, Greg. I promise.”

He paused and curled deeper into his pillow. “Are you sure you can talk to him alone?”

“Yes. I can do it. But I need you to stay calm, even if you hear something – anything downstairs. If you get scared, hide and wait here for me. You hear, brother?”

He nodded and didn’t fall asleep.

I turned off his lamp and shut the door quietly.

Downstairs the radio was playing again: “Germany Calling, Germany Calling: This is your host Lord Haw Haw, speaking to you live from Hamburg. The Italian invasion of Egypt that started merely a few days ago has officially been confirmed by our intelligence. More news on the front is to come. Next, we also have reports of—”

I snuck down the stairs and stood in the doorway, looking at Mr. Baker drinking a cup of tea and listening to the radio. He frowned and scratched his eyes. His fingers shook. He held a fragile cup and he stared out the window and into his garden. At the spot where the stranger dug and searched.

I knocked on the wall. The old man looked at me and fastened himself a quick, fake smile. “Hello Robert. What are you still doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“The bombs won’t get you here. I promise. You can sleep now.”

“You can’t be so sure.” I walked towards him. For some reason, he let the Nazi frequency play loud and proud. He couldn’t have thought I was dumb enough not to realize what he was listening to. “Do you mind if I stay with you a little while and listen to the radio?”

“Sure. Take a seat.”

I sat down and looked at the old man. He still had that sad, sorry look on his face from that night in the garden. Oddly enough, I felt sorry for him. But I didn’t know why.

I thought about the men that began to appear in town and knew what I had to ask.

“Why do you listen to this station?”

He looked away from the window and back at me. “You know, I was rather surprised by the Government’s decision to round up so many children before the war had broken out. Some critique it now as unsuccessful, but even I must admit that I’m quite impressed. Don’t you agree?”

“I never thought about it. I just did what was safest.”

“It’s a real authoritarian move to get so many people to follow orders like that. Sure, you all volunteered, and no one was forced. But *so many* volunteered. So many of you were convinced – convinced and willing. And even my wife and I, we get paid such a good amount to foster you. We were forced to do so. We were... forced. But the incentives to simply follow orders were... dumfounding. I hear there are no more children in London at all now.”

“I don’t understand. Where are you going with this?”

“I wish I could see it all as black and white, Robert. I don’t have that luxury like you do.”

“I don’t either.”

I leaned back in my chair and continued to stare at Mr. Baker. “Who was that man that you handed that contraband to last week? In the garden, in the middle of the night? Why do you listen to that nazi broadcast? And why are you talking to me like England forced us to do anything we didn’t want to?”

“You were there?”

“I hid in the bush. You both didn’t see me.”

“I’m impressed. Very smart of you.” He frowned. “I don’t know what was in the box. They never told me.”

“Why did you have it? You didn’t look so happy he was there. What were you giving him? Just tell me, sir. Please.”

The old man leaned against the counter, fumbling his lips and darting his eyes all around, as if controlled by something more powerful than his own will. He tried looking at me but could barely make contact for a few seconds.

He held my hand. “You are a very courageous boy, and I have so much respect for the man you will grow up to be. But sometimes it takes courage to follow orders. Don’t you think? Just like how you and your brother followed your orders to head straight to us, away from the bombs.”

“I was making sure we were *safe*. Following orders isn’t courageous. You always have a choice to follow the right orders. And in your heart, you know what’s right.”

“Well, sometimes that choice is—” He scratched his forehead and looked out the window into the garden and up at the sky, towards the ever-growing searchlights growing brighter and

brighter in the night. “Sometimes that choice is taken away from you. And you have to protect the ones you love.”

He squeezed my hand hard, and his eyes started to water with a smile struggling to form. “And if you tell anyone, my wife and I can fake you and your brother’s death with a bomb recently dropped nearby.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“I have to protect the ones I love, Robert. I have to.”

The old man wiped a tear from his eye and finished his cup of tea.

“Don’t ruin this for me.” He said. “Don’t.”

There were no bombs that night. I saw ghosts lingering in the shadows and underneath our beds.

Thankfully, Gregory was asleep by the time I got upstairs. His bed was dry. He didn’t make a sound.

We stayed for another year until it was time to go home. Mum welcomed us back with hugs and kisses and plenty of happy tears. But she was different, too. She couldn’t be left alone and started sleeping near our beds to keep some company. She always had an eye on the window and her hands tucked into her arms and pockets. There was still love on her face for us, but she had that haunted look in her eyes that seemed impossible to erase. I never asked her about it, and I told Gregory to say nothing of it as well.

She was like us now. She didn’t need to speak a truth we already knew.

Nobody ever caught the Bakers. They died shortly after the war. I don't know where they are buried and I have no intention of visiting or caring about them now. Did they get what they deserve? I don't know if that's up to me to decide. I see Mr. Baker's face sometimes when I dream – whenever I nightmare. And sometimes I feel his hand on my shoulder whenever I hear the tinny voice of a show or recording from a new-age speaker.

I never want to listen to the radio again.