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SILENT AT LAST

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Author

Vargas, Jacqueline

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SILENT AT LAST

By

Jacqueline Vargas

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APPROVED

Dr. Raymund Papica

Department of Education, University Writing Program

Dr. Begoña Echeverria, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Silent at Last is a psychological horror novella, blending the supernatural with emotional realism, drawing loosely from concepts of cognitive dissonance in order to investigate trauma, guilt, repression, and distorted perception. The narrative follows fifty-four year old Matthew Wilson who relocated from Los Angeles, California, to Govan, Washington, seeking peace following a divorce. However, Govan proves to be unsettling, filled with eerie occurrences. As Matthew struggles with his paranoia, he is convinced that his ex-wife is connected with all of the disturbances, forcing him to confront deeper truths tied to his past. Rather than relying on psychological horrors' typical external factors, *Silent at Last* centers emotional isolation and psychological distortion to have fear confront internal conflict. With a limited, single perspective that remains unreliable, it blurs reality with what is not. *Silent at Last* explores the fragility of reality and effects of unresolved emotional trauma, combining psychological and supernatural horror. This project reflects my love for storytelling by using horror as spectacle as well as a tool to inspect the complexities of identity, human behavior, and perception.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would love to express my deepest gratitude to my faculty mentor Dr. Raymund Papica, for his continuous guidance and support throughout the making of this novella. Understanding that this journey took place during a very difficult period for me in my academic career. Following my mother's cancer diagnosis, he consistently advocated for my success and created a safe environment for me to grow personally and creatively. Dr. Papica's patience and feedback nurtured my confidence and writing abilities necessary to complete this project. I am forever grateful.

I would also love to thank Dr. Begoña Echeverria for being incredibly supportive and understanding about my mom. Dr. Echeverria consistently delivered communication to help me navigate this project amongst all of the true psychological darkness. Thank you to the University Honors team for encouraging creativity and academic exploration as well as teaching me the true importance of civic engagement.

Most importantly, I would especially love to thank my mom and sister, who have consistently given their unwavering support throughout my life, especially over the time of this project. My sister would take over some of my responsibilities in order for me to have time for my academics and work. My mom encouraged me to only focus on academics and work when she herself is going through unimaginable times. I wrote all of this while she fought cancer, and her strength and resilience inspired me to be a better person and push forward with this project and to continue to explore my passions within my education.

INSPIRATION FOR THIS CREATIVE PROJECT

I had always been drawn to mystery and horror, and was enamored by shows such as *Dateline* and *48 Hours* alongside fictional worlds such as *It* and *Stranger Things*. Although some may find these narratives frightening, through horror I had the ability to explore themes of fear, trauma, memory, and distortion of human perception. I began to draw my interest on paper during the COVID-19 pandemic and have turned these interests into my own original work, eventually leading to the unfolding of my honors capstone novella. My inspirations include the following:

The Duffer Brothers

Nobody ever accomplished anything meaningful in this world.¹

Since the release of *Stranger Things* back in 2016, the series has shaped my interest in the supernatural and psychological horror at ten years old. The Duffer Brothers' storytelling leered me into the interest of fear, mystery, and emotional connection. Instead of feeling isolated and uncomfortable, the friendships displayed in the show and shared vulnerability made me feel included. This show allowed me to understand that themes such as horror can make one feel unsettled, yet equally grounded. The way that the Duffer Brothers were able to blend the supernatural with such a core of the characters is something that inspired me as I developed *Silent at Last*. More specifically, their use of suspense, atmosphere, and emotional isolation. The threats within *Stranger Things* being both external and internal was a huge reinforcement.

¹Duffer, Matt and Ross, Creators, *Stranger Things*, Netflix, 2016.

Stephen King

*Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.*²

Stephen King's ability for storytelling is one of the strongest influences on not just myself, but for literature itself when it comes to horror and suspense. He deeply impacted how the genre is able to explore emotional trauma, isolation, guilt, and psychological instability rather than just using fear for entertainment with his ability to tie together human fears with the supernatural. Amongst his eerie worlds, as a kid, I also found belonging, especially through his work in *IT*. King's storytelling showed me how even children within stories can hold such depth, complexity, and literary significance. His work encouraged me at a young age to begin writing original stories that involved younger characters like myself. His influence can be seen within my work of *Silent at Last* and how I focus on psychological tension, emotional deterioration, and internal conflicts.

Mike Flannagan

*In darkness, we find our true selves.*³

During the COVID pandemic, I watched *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, both by Mike Flannagan. His approach towards horror captivated me as he blended the supernatural with grief, memory distortion, and trauma. His writing uses horror to explore psychological realism with emphasized unresolved emotional conflict that can create unstable interpretations of reality. The ambiguity within his work influenced how I blur the lines of what is real and imagined within *Silent at Last*.

² King, Stephen, Author. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, 2000.

³

Flannagan, Mike. *The Midnight Club*. Netflix, 2022.

Psychological horror remains an important genre today because it shifts the focus of fear from external threats to the instability of the human mind. Unlike the traditional themes of horror such as monsters and violence, psychological horror explores how a person's perception, memory, trauma, and emotional repression may distort a person's perception of reality. This creates stories that are more personal, enduring, and emotionally disturbing for the readers.

Through an "unreliable narrator" within a narrative, this allows for stories to investigate real-life experiences such as guilt, repression, and identity conflict through a lens that is unsettling and thought-provoking. Taking from emotional realism, this genre mirrors fears that cannot be easily escaped or defeated because they exist within the person. The theme of psychological horror stands relevant in modern storytelling because it continues to capture how easily the mind can become either a refuge or source of terror. *Silent at Last* explores one's fractured perception, instability of memory, and trauma to convey how one's mind can either be a refuge or threat itself.

WHY FICTIONAL NARRATIVES ARE IMPORTANT:

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND HISTORICAL IMPACTS

Fictional narratives are important because they reflect, challenge, and reinterpret our cultural, social, and historical experiences in ways that feel personal. Stories grant writers the ability to explore issues such as identity, inequality, and neglect while encouraging their audiences to personally connect with such subjects beyond academics. In *Silence at Last*, the pattern of missing minority children directs towards the idea of how certain communities and experiences are overlooked or silenced within our society. It explores themes about how silence is not only within individuals, but society as a whole as well. Through psychological horror, it

motivates the readers to reflect on "silent" issues that remain prominent within our day-to-day lives.

Fiction lets people explore emotional and psychological ideas past the limitations of formally objective writing and reality. As a future psychologist, I learned that psychology is often dependent on clear, evidence-based explanations whereas fiction allows ambiguity and the space to present complex topics such as trauma, guilt, and distorted reality in more flexible and emotional ways. Through narrative uncertainty and tension, fiction allows its audience to experience the unknown more personally rather than analyzing it. This makes difficult subjects easier to engage with, while also allowing for uncertainty and multiple interpretations.

Silent at Last explores how the human mind is able to process trauma, memory, and emotional conflict, and repression. The narrative investigates how guilt and psychological distress can distort one's perception of reality, drawing from concepts in cognitive dissonance and an unreliable perception. Throughout the novella, silence is an internal and external force that affects the characters' relationships and understanding of reality. *Silent at Last* focuses on the fragility of the human mind and how a person's unresolved emotional trauma can easily impair their true sense of self.

THE RELEVANCE OF LITERARY DEVICES:

WHY WE NEED CHARACTER-DRIVEN HORROR

Silent at Last is restricted to a single point of view in order to immerse the reader in Matthew's wavering perception of reality. By limiting the perspective, the narrative blurs the line between reality and distortion, allowing for horror to seep in from psychological instability rather than relying on external threats. Elements of suspense and ambiguity are used throughout the

novella to create an uneasy atmosphere, strengthening the themes of unreliable perception and internal conflict with the use of perspective, framing, and use of horror elements.

Tension is crucial to the story because it is the driving force of the reader's suspense. As Matthew's psychological stability worsens, his inability to attain clear answers creates a sense of unease for the protagonist and audience. The protagonist's gradual mental decline is what pushes the narrative from mystery into horror as it continues to focus on memory alteration, perception, and truth.

The characters in *Silent at Last* are significant because they pose as reflections of memory, guilt, and perception. Matthew, the protagonist, represents a broken psyche that is the result of emotional instability and unresolved trauma. Characters such as Martin continue to contribute to the sense of internal conflict by reinforcing Matthew's deteriorating perception of reality. Even secondary characters strengthen the unstably psychological perspective within the narrative. Each relationship is the interpretation of what was true, shaping how the reader understands validity within the story, pushing the psychological tension by making it unclear of what is and not distorted.

THE RISKS TAKEN WITH A DARK NARRATIVE

A primary risk within *Silent at Last* is the use of an unreliable narrator where reality is not always clearly understood. This challenges the reader's understanding of what is truly occurring and what is being interpreted. However, this uncertainty that is evoked strengthens the psychological horror by placing the audience inside a fractured mindset. Another risk within the narrative was my reluctance to give the audience a straightforward answer for certain events and motivations. Rather than giving a solid explanation, I had to have faith in my readers and pushed

them to interpret multiple possibilities of what is real or imagined. This risks leaving the readers to feel uncertain or uncomfortable with unresolved questions. However, it fosters deeper engagement and reflection upon the themes of perception, memory, and truth.

Rather than relying on the traditional factors of external horror such as violence or monsters, the *Silent at Last* relies on internal psychological distress and emotional deterioration as its main form of fear. This tactic is riskier due to it depending on built up tension rather than physical threats. However this approach permits the horror integrated to be more realistic and personally unsettling.

One of the most challenging parts of formatting *Silence at Last* was narrowing down my ideas into one cohesive story. I initially had many concepts and possible directions with themes and structures. Deciding on one single ending felt overwhelming at first. The breakthrough came when I decided to combine psychological horror with supernatural elements rather than separating them, which allowed me to decide on a clearer direction. From the beginning, I knew Matthew's conclusion involved a major turning point, but it took time and revision for everything else to align around the central idea.

A personal challenge for me, as the writer, was to look inward to reflect upon my own personal struggles to convey into my work so that my work was more authentic to my audience. The risk of putting my raw emotions out there and displaying my own issues with abandonment was daunting even when agreeing upon this idea. In *Silent at Last*, Matthew moves from California to Washington in order to start a new life away from Adeline. He continuously states how he desperately seeks a refuge away. However, throughout the story, he still continues to look for her within his new home. To write, I had to emotionally look inward to truly understand

myself. I thought of times where I believe myself to be more independent, or wanted to. It still remains a challenge for me to accept when I am truly alone.

NARRATIVE PROCESS: INSPIRATION AND EARLY INFLUENCES

My interest in psychological horror started early in my childhood when I would watch shows such as *Dateline* and *48 Hours* with my uncle, which introduced me to the concept of mysteries and unsettling ways of human behaviors. Simultaneously, I began to enjoy horror within pop culture such as Stephen King's *IT* and *Stranger Things*, where I found the eerie atmosphere strangely comforting rather than frightening. This birthed my interest in storytelling with notes of tension and eerie environments. During COVID-19, I had more time for opportunities of self-reflection and creativity, allowing me to nourish my long-standing interests and grow them into original writing pieces.

A motivation of mine when creating *Silent at Last* was that I wanted to personally explore the feelings of isolation and emotional uncertainty. Even while I grew up being surrounded by strong connections with family and friends, there lingered moments where I didn't fully understand why I felt small remnants of disconnect. I wanted to build upon that feeling that I never truly was able to explore myself.

Through Matthew's journey throughout the narrative, I drew upon the fascination of the human's desire to escape the past, yet still being unable to truly let go. The fear of the unknown is an emotional state that I wanted to include because it is the most personal to me. This novella allows me to dive into themes that have always interested me and turn them into the central ideas within the narrative.

WHAT I LEARNED AND CREATIVE PROCESS REFLECTION

Over the time of creating *Silent at Last*, despite its darkness, it built up my emotional awareness and caution as I learned more about storytelling and human behavior. I got to know more about my own interests as I realized how they are connected to and influenced by the media throughout childhood. Balancing this project with academics, work, and personal obstacles made this process more demanding, however, these challenges only nourished my patience and discipline. Completing *Silent at Last* permitted me to grow not only creatively, but personally as well. As a psychology major, my novella has enabled me to cultivate such a more profound appreciation for psychological horror and its abilities to explore multiple complex themes such as identity, reality, trauma, and emotional conflict.

Now reflecting on the entirety of this project, I see how a part of me truly is, how what I write is connected to my current life. Matthew moved in order to start fresh and gain a new sense of self. After I graduate, I will study abroad in Japan to learn more about who I am when it is just me alone, like Matthew. I crave the feeling of wholeness as well. I want that independence. *Silent at Last* is a reflection about multiple mental issues such as an individual's sense of identity, trauma, and emotional conflict. These are topics that have influenced me to seek a higher education to help others with such struggles.

When I return from Japan, I am pursuing a Master's degree in California State, San Bernardino for Clinical Psychology. This project has been such a blessing and a reflection on my life. I have learned more about myself through this novella that I am so incredibly grateful for.

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SILENT AT LAST

Although in his mid fifties, a new start was what he felt like he needed. Driving past the old homes was rejuvenating. They had a sense of new life to them. Yes, the paint was worn out, but the sun hit the land perfectly. The weather was perfect and not too hot, despite the fact that it was summer. Matthew nodded his head to the music playing on the radio: The Cure, *Just Like Heaven*. His grey, wavy hair flew as he jetted through the 2 freeway in his brown 1972 Chevelle. Almost arriving at his new house, a few memories trickled back to him. Bickering that turned into screaming matches. Every time that he had to punch the wall or throw a plate across the kitchen just to be heard in a simple conversation. The yelling from her was a lot. The time wasted in that marriage was a lot. The idea of divorce had lingered dormant for a couple years now. But when he finally proposed it, it silenced everything. Finally, it was silent at last.

The drive from Los Angeles, California to Govan, Washington lasted much longer than expected. He had to pull aside a couple times to rethink his decision of such a change. Was leaving his *entire* life worth it? He still had his grandson, Weston, back at home. Nonetheless, he was better off staying with his grandma in California. It's a good place for a nine year old. His grandson's father, *his* son, was too much of a deadbeat to watch his own child. He had mental issues. Something the family tried to hide for years, pretending that it was all in his head.

Parked in his new driveway, Matthew pulled out his luggages from the back seat. He looked up at his new home surrounded by grass that was withering away, proud. The white wood of the home faded to a chipped gray. This didn't sway him in the least. Neither did the

old community where the old house resided. The sky was gray, but that was normal for Govan, Washington. He had heard that it was said to be a ghost town, but that just added relief of tranquility. Something that he hasn't known for years.

Headed up the steps to his porch, he was greeted by a little boy who looked around ten years old sitting down on them. His chin resting on the arm of his hands, his elbows propped on his knees. The boy seemed to have been half asleep, as if he had been waiting for Matthew. He couldn't have been older than fourteen, maybe even ten. It was hard to tell given his small stature. When he had looked up to make eye contact with Matthew, the child smiled, "Hi, mister, nice to meet you. You must be our new vecino. I'm Marty," he spoke warmly with a slight accent as he got to his feet, brushing off what seemed like ash from his pants. He was a little boy with darker skin that hid under the dust on his facet.

"Likewise, Marty. I'm Matthew. Where do you live?" The old man reached out his arm to shake hands.

"I live right there," the boy pointed toward the house next to them. It was a one story, just like his, "With my mama. Kind of. I like to walk around the streets for fun," he smiled.

"Well then, Marty, you should be getting back home. You wouldn't want your mother getting worried about you,"

"Worried?" the boy seemed to get anxious, "It's okay, she knows I'm here. Why are you here? Govan is small. No one new comes here,"

"I came here for a new start, Mat, I like the quiet," He noticed that the boy was wearing a plaid button-up shirt. Black and dark red, "I like your shirt. I had one just like it when I was around your age. You should go take a shower and clean that soot off," he compliments as the

boy smiled.

Matthew patted the boy's shoulder as he walked past him, reaching his "new" front door. Once he pulled out the key to unlock it, he turned around, thinking he could ask how old the boy really was. Though once he pivoted around, the child was gone. *Marty?* Nothing. He must have rushed home. It made sense, the sun was setting and you could already feel the cool breeze.

A few nights had passed, and enjoying his peace was an understatement for Matthew. No yelling, snarky remarks, or even heavy footsteps were heard. Nothing but crickets from outside. Matthew even found himself sitting at his dining table, drinking a cup of coffee— something he hadn't been fond of before. Nor was reading, but he decided to take that up, too. Mid-chapter, the doorbell rang. He had set down his book upside down on the table and stood up. *RING RING RING*. He picked up his pace and raced to the door. Well, as quick as his older body could carry him. When he opened the door, he was greeted by a thin woman with tears in her eyes who appeared to be in her early forties. It seemed as if she hadn't eaten nor slept for days. Almost as if her body was withering away. Her complexion was pale, as if it lacked any kind of nutrition. However, her eyes looked familiar. He's seen them before. "Is everything okay, ma'am?" Matthew asked her

"No," she sniffled back, "¿Has visto a mi hijo? Mi boy. No ha llegado a casa. No come home," her thick accent wavered as she cried harder.

Matthew struggled a bit. He was a white man who didn't formally learn Spanish, but thanks to living in California for practically all his life, he managed to pick up a bit of it, even if with a broken accent, "Who's your boy? Uh, tu hijo, que es nombre?"

"Su nombre es Marty Garcia, Martin. He has eleven years," the lady began to twist her curly, black hair

"Ah, Marty," Matthew recalled the little boy on his porch. He began to talk slower and elongated his words, in hopes that the lady would understand him, "I saw him a couple of days ago. Um, dias ayer. His hair is black. Negro? Como, this tall," the man held out his hand, trying to gesture how tall the boy stood. No more than four foot nine. The woman's eyes began to light up as she sighed in relief and began to raise her voice in excitement,

"Si, si es! Mi hijo! ¿Dónde lo has visto por última vez?"

"Ultima visto? Uh, I visto aqui. He talked to me. Asked if I was nuevo vecino," Matthew thought for a moment as he was beginning to realize that his information meant nothing. He hadn't seen the kid for a couple of days now. He shifted his stance and tried to appear more confident, "Que es tu nombre? Mi nombre is Matthew Wilson. I'll let tu know si yo visto Marty,"

The lady grabbed his hand and began to shake it fervently, "Mi nombre es Carmen, muchisimas gracias, senor. Si, gracias, gracias," she forced a smile back.

After he closed his door and turned back around to face the hallway of his house that led to the kitchen, he decided to read only a couple of more chapters before bed. It was getting dark now, around 10pm, later than his usual to

Walking back to his dining table, he saw that his body was no longer there. His eyes darted from the table to the tv across from where it stood. It was off, just as he left it. So where

was the book? The mug of coffee remained seated where it originally was as well. When he finally reached the table, he picked up his now cold drink and carefully took a sip. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Maybe he just misplaced it. Maybe he took it with him when the doorbell rang and put it down along the way. Matthew looked back at the hallway that led towards the door, there was nowhere he could have set down his book. But he was sure his memory was deceiving him. *Oh well*, he figured he would just look for it in the morning.

Matthew woke up as soon as the light from outside nestled on his face. Nothing to do today, he's already retired. That was the pleasure of serving six years in the military, earlier retirement. Once he was done changing and brushing his teeth, he heard a ring again. It was the doorbell. He rushed as quickly as he could, *Carmen*? He had hoped that she had found her little boy. What a coincidence that the child had gone missing only a few days after he had met him. Matthew had read somewhere that Govan had a slight history of unfortunate events. Or maybe he was told by his neighbor when Wilson asked his neighbor for help scouting for new houses. Sure the older man had just met the child, but he seemed like a bright one. Polite and curious. He reminded Matthew of himself.

When Matthew was approaching his front door, he noticed his book that he was reading the evening prior on the floor in front of it. It was titled *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill.. He had to take a beat when he reached down for it. His knees weren't as strong as they used to be. When he picked up the book, he opened it to the first page. Something had changed about it since he read it last. With a pen, someone had written on it: *Hello Matthew*. The penmanship was familiar. From someone he had known very well and for a long time. It was a woman's writing. But, she can't be here. All this way? How did the book even get there?

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Right, someone was at the door.

Matthew opened the door. There he was, the little Hispanic boy with his comb over. He was wearing the same clothes he did the last saw him a few days prior. And yet, he also wore a wide grin, “Hola Mister Matthew!”

Matthew looked around outside, behind the little boy. No one was around. He grabbed the child’s wrist and pulled him inside, closing the door behind. “Marty,” the man called sternly, “where have you been? Your mother’s worried sick,”

“Don’t worry, senior, I went back home. She’s okay. I just went to go with some friends. I heard that she came to you, asking about me. I wanted to say thank you for comforting her, and speaking Spanish. Not many people like us here because, well, we’re not like you,” Marty held out his hand so that Matthew could shake it.

“You’re welcome,” the man felt stunned, “I’m just glad you’re okay,” he observed that the little boy had more dirt on him than before. Maybe his family didn’t have much money. It made sense. This town is old, the homes are old. It’s cheaper over here. “Tell you what, kid, would you like to watch some TV? Maybe have a snack? I have grapes or something,”

“No thank you, though they are tasty,” Marty began walking down the hallway to the dining room, which was next to the kitchen, “Did you know that grapes in Spanish are called *uvas*? Cool, huh?” He took a seat at the table. “Excuse me Mister, what do I call you? Mi mama said *Senor Wilsom*, but you don’t seem like other gringos. You’re cooler. Do you have a wife? Kids? Grandkids?”

Matthew smiled and walked over to him, then sitting down at the chair across from him.

“You can call me Matt. I had a wife. We just decided that we were better as friends. I have a son, Damien, but he doesn’t come around anymore. He had a son, my grandson, Weston. You remind me of him. Always curious and very friendly,” Matt wondered, “Where’s your father at, Marty?”

“Oh,” the little boy began to look around at the empty house that Matt had yet to decorate, “He’s back in Mexico. He figured he didn’t belong here. He tried to take me with him. Said it was too *peligroso*, that means dangerous. But my mama said that no matter what, America *is* better,” he forced a smile. “Can I come back here later, Senor Matt? Home is boring,” Marty beamed as Matt nodded.

The night had fallen, blanketing the night sky in beautiful stars. They looked as if an artist dipped the spool in white paint and shook the bristles along the canvas. Matthew had just completed his nighttime routine once again: changed into pajamas, brushed his teeth and hair. He had just laid down in his bed, covering himself with the blanket. The lamp beside him on his nightstand was on. The warm light fills the corner of the room with a yellow glow. His room remained empty besides that. He had time to decorate it, but he was never the designer kind of person. That was Adeline, who then passed on the creativity to their grandson, Weston. Adeline, he could live without all of the arguments, the resentment. People grow apart. Who he didn’t grow apart from, however, was Weston. Matthew felt as if he was betraying him by letting a kid his age hang around his house. Almost as if he was replacing his family. Marty was a source of comfort. A reminder of a life he had in California. Like a piece of it was still with him.

As he remained in his stupor, a *click* nearly shook him out of it. A click that sounded like someone turned on a light. And a light did turn on, in the hallway. He saw the glow from underneath his bedroom door that was closed, but led to the hallway. *Hello?* Matthew called, but

nothing.

Click.

The light then turned off. He waited a couple seconds in silence, maybe he could hear something if he was quiet enough. But nothing. Perhaps it was his mind playing tricks on him. Unless maybe he was being followed.

Matthew didn't wake up until the afternoon. Walking to the kitchen he noticed random articles of his clothing sprawled out on the halfway that led to it. He looked around, taking note of the rest of his house. Nothing else out of the ordinary, but he didn't remember unpacking the remainder of his clothes, even though it's been over a couple of weeks at the new house already. He tried to crouch down to reach for a shirt, but felt a pull tugging at his back, *maybe not*. He stood back up and continued his path down to the kitchen.

When he opened his fridge he couldn't find the milk. *Shit*. He probably ran out of it and didn't notice. The last time he had gone to get groceries was on the way to his house the day he moved. Shutting the door, he turned around to face the dining table. There, a pink cup sat next to the carton of milk. Matthew rushed up to it in order to catch a closer look. His eye sight was already faltering. When he picked up the cup, inspecting it, he saw a lipstick stain on it. A burgundy, as if someone who wore makeup drank from it. The shade was familiar. It was a darker shade of red, some gloss to it. A signature mark he knew all too well. "Adeline!" the older man cried out "I know you're here!" but there was no response. "Adeline, leave me alone!" his voice started to break. He couldn't see her again. Not after what happened between them. It wasn't unlike her to follow him. She would stalk him if given the liberty to. She didn't

let him divorce her until years after the incident. But if she was here, “Where’s Weston? Where did you leave him? Did you bring him?”. Silent. Silent until...

RING RING RING.

Matthew rushed to the door, maybe she left the house and wanted to come back to talk to him. Although he knew things were over between them, he did still love her. They were together for thirty years. When he opened the door, he was met with a woman. Just not the woman he was once married to.

“¿Has visto a mi hijo, Martin?” Carmen asked about her son, tears rolling down her eyes once again. Matthew stepped outside on his porch to join her outside and closed the door behind him.

“Si, Carmen. He told mi que tu knew. Que he went back to tu casa,” he tried his best to communicate with her. Now he was getting worried about the boy.

“Ah, si si. El sí se fue a casa. Lo siento, lo olvide. Me forget,” her distraught face then contorted its best to mold into a resting face. The tears that ran across her cheeks magically seemed to disappear in an instant.

The lady nodded and reached for his hand, but when Matthew lifted his, she dropped hers back down. “Sorry,” she apologized once again and turned around, rushing back towards her home that resided next to his. Matthew reached for the doorknob behind him, to open the door that entered his house. But he couldn’t help but wonder what Marty’s mom was talking about. Why would she ask about Marty if he did go home? Why was she acting so strange? When he turned around to enter his house, he saw that all of the clothes that flooded the hallway were now gone, nowhere to be seen.

Matthew decided to unpack everything. Nothing will be forgotten on the floor or in some other random place that he'll come across in the future, startling him. He knew he needed more sleep, or wasn't he now sleeping more than normal? He needed to pick up a hobby. He hung up a variety of shirts, sweaters, and pants in the closet that was in his room. It was until he took out a blue button up short-sleeve that stumped him. He had just gotten it from Adeline and Weston two Christmases ago. It still had a stain on the front from when he was hugging his grandson and the kid accidentally spilled mac and cheese on it. Matthew contemplated contacting his ex-wife to see if maybe she can bring Weston over sometime. Two weeks already was too long without contact for him.

Weston was like his own child. Damien, the child's actual dad, Matthew's actual child, fell into drugs after heavy anxiety and depression at an early age. He accidentally got his girlfriend pregnant at the time the two had just started dating and she had wanted an abortion. Damien pleaded for her to keep the baby, he believed that his girlfriend falling pregnant was a wake up call from the universe for him to finally get this shit together. Some "wake up" call that turned out to be. Nothing changed. Having a kid at twenty was a bad idea in itself, taking on a parent role while heavy on coke was another. Matthew had Damien at twenty three, not too far off. But not being hooked on drugs made things go much easier. Having a partner to help you through the journey helped a lot too. Matthew and Adeline agreed to properly adopt Weston when Damien forgot to feed him for almost two days after being high out of his mind.

Weston was a good kid. He was outgoing and extremely talkative. He was a little slow at first, as a baby. He took nearly three years to finally start walking and talking. Matthew and Adeline were worried that maybe it was because at the time of the pregnancy, Damien and his

girlfriend were always fucked up. But luckily, it was just a phase. When Matthew and Adeline began arguing, he caught her in multiple lies. Poor Weston had to endure everything. He would always intervene to try and break up every argument between them. Matthew was heartbroken when Adeline proposed that it was better for Weston to stay in California, that there were more people and diversity there. He couldn't argue against that. Matthew could still hear the little boy's voice, how he cried out for him the last time he saw him.

So worried.

Grandpa.

RING. RING. RING.

Matthew was growing tired of that doorbell. Of that door. All of the ringing and knocking. He was glad that he had already made connections, even if they were odd, to keep him from going inane in silence. However, maybe a little quiet would serve him well. Or perhaps not. Maybe being lost in thought was decaying his mental state without knowing it. Distraction could be good. He just hoped that it wasn't Carmen. *RING.* "Okay, okay, I heard you," The middle aged man cried out. He slowly made his way to the front door. When he opened it, he was met with the little boy once again, who seemed like he stood three apples tall. Either that or six foot, three inches was tall for a fifty four year old.

The Hispanic little boy wore the same bright smile on his face as he always did. This time, it seemed bigger than usual. Matthew could even see his teeth. Both of his canines were missing. It was as if Marty was a cartoon character who never showered, he still had a bit of dirt on him. Either that, or he truly did love playing outside all the time. Matthew inspected him some more, especially after the last interaction with Carmen. Marty seemed to be okay, nothing

hurt. But he did take notice that the little boy's hand was clenched around something, with his grip tight on it. "What do you have there, kid?" Matthew asked. Marty lifted up his hand and showed him. It was a toy car that was orange.

"Cool, huh?" Marty beamed, "I think it's a 1965 Pontiac Bonneville," He seemed if he was having a difficult time remembering its name

"That *is* cool, my grandson had one just like it. But he kind of ruined it with a blue marker. He drew on the car with it on the left si—", Matthew paused. As he got a better look, Marty's car had the same mark he was describing. "Martin, where did you get that car?" his tone shifted more seriously. Marty's smile faltered.

"I-It's mine now," the boy blankly stated.

"No, it's not. Where did you get it from?" Matthew raised his voice to a slight yell and took a step towards the boy on his front porch. Marty took a step back in response.

"Yes, it is. I found it outside on the sidewalk,"

"Did you? Did you find it in my suitcase?" Matthew took another step while Marty reflected on his actions, "Were you snooping through my things?"

"No sir, I promise. If you want it back," the little boy's voice began to tremble. The middle aged man saw fear in Martin's dark brown eyes begin to grow. Suddenly, Matthew realized that he was screaming at him. That the boy's body was now hunched, as if protecting himself from harm, holding himself.

Matthew took a deep breath and lowered his voice, "You know what? I'm sorry, Marty. I didn't mean it. I just— I just miss my Weston and I think I got confused."

"It was a boy's name. Weston?" he looked up, eyes now bright, "I think that's what he

told me his name was. No wonder why when he told me his name I thought I remembered it. That's him. It was his," Marty raised his arm again, displaying in the air the car once again.

Matthew felt his heart drop. He felt his stomach turn. His fingers began to tingle. He was there. Adeline was there. But where? Where do they go? Where *did* they go? Why can't he talk to them? Matthew's hearing seemed to be numb. He heard the faint chatter of Martin in the back, talking about what he didn't know and quite frankly, Matthew didn't care. He was lost in thought. Though, if Marty could tell him when he last spoke to Weston and where. Was it even Weston, *his* Weston?

Matthew held out his hands. This time, he was mindful and more gentle than before. He paced himself and made sure to lace his voice sweetly. "Martin," he called out. The little boy stopped himself from speaking and smiled back at him, ensuring that one was listening, "When did you get that car? Do you know where Weston went? Are you sure he left it outside the house?"

"Oh, maybe last night? No, the night before? I forgot, the words blend together. Summer vacation makes me forget. What do people say, blend the days together?" he forced a chuckle. Marty seemed nervous as his face fell, "It was his. His name is called inside the house. *Your* house. I thought a lady was calling him in," he pointed to the inside of Matthew's door, "Is he visiting? I wanted to show you the car. Weston didn't mention me? I would have thought he saw me. Like maybe it was meant for me," he smiled once again.

"Marty," he scratched his head nervously, feeling a cold sweat, "I haven't seen them, Weston or his grandmother. I haven't heard them inside the house either. Are you *sure* it was

Weston? My Weston? Around your age,”

“It was him. I’ve seen pictures of him in your house. I’ve heard him inside too whenever I’m over visitando. I’ve heard his abuela too, she sounds like a *guera*. Very kind though, like you. Her clothes are sometimes in corners of the room and I pick them up for you and put it in yours. She seems like a tall *senora*,”

The man grew concerned. With the amount of photos hung up of Weston along the hallway, it was difficult to forget his perfect face. As for the woman, that was her. That was Adeline.

“Would you like to come inside?” Matthew invited the boy in. He smiled and followed the man inside of the house.

As soon as the boy entered, Matthew shut and locked the door behind them to then bullet down the hallway to make his way to the kitchen, where the dining table stood. He wanted to show his guest the mug with the burgundy lipstick stain on it and ask a couple of more questions. He knew that Adeline’s stubborn, he’s known her for a lifetime, and her following him to his new house with Weston seemed like something she would do to guilt him into coming back to Los Angeles. But there was *no* chance. He preferred it in his solitude in Govan. Well, whatever he had that was close enough to it. He wasn’t abandoning Weston either. He would make sure that there would be visits. But what didn’t add up is how Adeline managed to make her way inside of his house. Or even, where it was. He had told her that he was moving to Washington, but nowhere specific. What especially did not add up was how she, nor Weston, managed to get caught by him anywhere near the house.

When Matthew took a seat at the dining table, he turned around to see Martin still in the middle of the hallway in front of the random closet that was miscellaneously built there. When the boy placed his hand on the knob and turned to look at the man, Matthew held out his hand to the seat next to him, gesturing for the boy to join him. Marty removed his hand from the doorknob and walked up to join the man at the table.

Marty placed his orange car on the surface and began to play with it, rolling it forward and backwards while blowing raspberries, limiting the sound of a car's engine. Matthew watched him with a smile on his face. He noticed how Marty's hair was ruffled, it always was. He imagined that it was because the boy loved playing outside. But he also wondered what he even did outdoors. He was aware that it was summer vacation, but he never saw him out with friends. His thought then shifted to how the kid would mention now and then about him being a nice white guy. It also struck him how he mentioned that he believed Adeline to be a nice 'guera', and he knew that *guera* meant white. Maybe he didn't have many good encounters with white people? Washington, especially. The area was full of Caucasians. He assumed that Martin, being Hispanic, has probably been bullied or discriminated against. *Such a shame* he thought, looking at the boy who was laughing. He's always wearing the same clothes, has dirt on him, his hair's never done, his dad is in Mexico, and his older brother went missing, yet he still smiles and laughs. He still remains so kind, even when so many factors are against him.

"Marty," Matthew called. The boy stopped playing with his toy and looked up at him attentively, "When you play outside, do you play with your friends?"

"Sometimes," Marty looked up as if he were thinking, "depende because Santi's mom is... strict? So he doesn't come outside much, Luis does more. Diego only if he's here with his papa," he then looked back at Matthew and stood up from his slouched position as his eyes

beamed, “But we’re all going to hang out together next week, el twenty-fourth because Diego comes back and Santi’s mom said it’s okay,”

“That’s good, what are you guys going to do?”

“We go to the gas station a few blocks from here and buy bags of chips and talk. I’ve known Santi for five years and Diego always. Diego’s dad is friends with my dad. His mom was deported. I met Luis last year, Santi was friends with him first,” he explained, now rolling the toy car absently,

“Oh,” Matthew felt bad about his friend’s mom. But wanted to shift the subject so that Marty didn’t get sad, “does your mom know that you’re here? Is she okay with that?”

“Yes, she does. Is it okay with you?”

“Yeah of course,” Matthew pointed at Marty’s car and gestured if he could hold it. The boy nodded and handed it over, “Would you like something to eat or drink?” He began inspecting the blue mark left on the toy car.

“No thank you.”

It was night now and Marty had gone home right before the sun went down. Matthew was still sitting at the dining table alone, staring at the mug in front of him with the burgundy lipstick stain on it. He had smelled it to make out what it could’ve been. It didn’t smell dangerous. After the tiniest sip, he was able to tell it was chamomile. His and his ex-wife’s tea of preference. Matthew had completely forgotten about it when talking to the boy. He was going to ask him if Adeline was wearing the same shade, but he supposed it didn’t truly matter. Martin had already explained what and who he said. Matthew just had a moment of what felt like

mania, or at least, a sense of disbelief. Like it wasn't real. When talking to Martin, he did glance at the cup however, and he could've sworn that maybe, just maybe, the stain had vanished. Unless he was just caught up in conversation. He did forget about bringing up the cup entirely after all.

The man grabbed the pink cup by the handle and held it up to his face then carefully pressed his lips against where the mark of lipstick was. He covered his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew that he needed to start going out more. At least going to get more groceries. He needs more of those. Milk, water bottles, food. Any kind of food, he basically didn't have any of that. Anything that could be a distraction from feeling like he was going insane, he had to take. As he took another sip from the cup, feeling the cold chamomile tea graze his skin, it was almost as if he could smell her, smell Adeline. She smelled of roses with a hint of lemon. A scent that he had grown so accustomed to, so fond of. It's been a while. Perhaps he missed her. He couldn't forgive her though. Never that.

THUD THUD THUD.

Matthew opened his eyes.

He stared at the ceiling where the noise came from. It was so loud that he sat up from his bed, brushing off blankets that rested on top of his face, not yet suffocating him. He must've gotten cold when he was sleeping. He turned his head towards his right, towards the window in his room. The sun was barely peeking through from outside as if it was just starting to rise.

The man looked up as he began to slowly crawl out of his bed, throwing the sheets onto the bed carefully.

THUD.

Matthew began pacing back and forth in a circle, thinking what it could be. It sounded as if someone was on the roof. Or, close enough. Do Washington homes have attics too? He was sure of it.

Quickly, Matthe began tracing every inch of the house, looking up at the ceiling to see if there was a door that led to an attic. He started from his room, then went outside to the hallway. He checked the restroom, checked the kitchen and living room. He forgot about the closet in the hallway, how could he forget? When he placed his hand on the doorknob, he remembered how in his last house back in California, the attic was in the closet in the master bedroom. It should be in *his* room. He then bolted back to his room and opened the door to his closet, which was now full with his clothes neatly on hangers. He looked up, but there was nothing. He felt his heart sink. *Wait.* He then shoves his clothes that were hung to the sides and luckily enough, he saw the door on the ceiling hidden behind his shirts, behind the bar of where his hangers hung.

Without a single thought, Matthew grabbed all of his clothes and threw them on the floor, making enough room to easily expose a path leading to the door. When he tried to reach up to push the door up, he realized that he was barely able to graze it with his fingertips. He needs a broom or something to push the door up. *Fuck, I don't have one.* Now more than ever seemed like the perfect time to go get groceries. More than groceries, a broom. Maybe a mop. Anything with a long stick that would allow him to reach higher places. Matthew would've assumed that his height would have been sufficient enough, he stood at five feet, ten inches.

He took out his phone to locate where the nearest grocery store was. He remembered how to use Google Maps from Weston. He would try to teach Matthew the most recent "trends"

Matthew would like to refer to them too, knowing that learning how to use one's phone isn't necessarily considered a trend. He knew that he wasn't too old to be completely unaware of what was going on in today's day and age, but old and stubborn enough to initially be adamant.

He pulled up Google Maps and to his surprise, there was no grocery store or anything that seemed to be lively in Govan, Washington. However, around an hour and a half later, a few towns over in Moses Lake, Washington, there did seem to be a Walmart. The drive was almost half an hour, but something was something and Matthew knew that he needed to get out of the house. Or more specifically, needed to get to the attic of the house.

The drive to Walmart felt dead, there was nothing in sight the entirety of the half an hour other than a miles and miles of dead grass. It made sense, there was no one around who could water or slightly take care of it. There were no houses around for people to even live in. It did make Matthew suspicious, the fact that he had to drive all the way to the next town over for the basics, for anything. His neighbor back home in Los Angeles, Theo, was the one who helped Matthew find his home in Govan by looking online through some website. Theodore was quite a character in his early twenties, very ambitious. It was easy for Matthew to trust him to help find a house following the divorce. Matthew had known Theo for years now and had practically watched him grow up. Matthew and Adeline were friends with Theo's parents, Chris and Maria, who were only a little bit older than them. It was a shame leaving them behind in California as well. But he still had to push forward in life. He had to leave. Embarrassment had to have some factor into it. He knew that he couldn't stay with Adeline knowing that even the neighbors knew what she did to him.

There, Matthew finally saw Walmart right in front of him, and in the parking lot, were people. More people than he had seen within the past few weeks. He got out of his brown 1972 Chevelle and locked it with his keys. Excitedly, Matthew sped walked inside. He put milk in his cart, eggs, bacon, and other miscellaneous foods. Finally, he went to go looking for a broom at the cleaning supplies aisle. He got one of those, and a mop just in case he needed to clean rather than just explore his new house. After he paid for his items, he began to walk off towards the direction of the store's exit, but the wall of 'missing persons' posters caught his eye instead. The people's ages ranged from babies to young adults, but the young adults were mainly girls. He noticed the range of age of the posters themselves as well. The most recent person that went missing was a few months ago. However, some posters even dated back decades ago. They were covered up by the newer ones that were stapled on top, but Matthew could still see who was hiding underneath.

Matthew let go of his cart and approached the wall closer, but making contact with it. He began to look through the papers. Shuffling, he found someone who had gone missing in the 80's, 1987 to be exact. It was a little hispanic girl who was only thirteen years old. Then, he read it: *Last Seen: Govan, Washington*. "Horrible, huh?" Matthew heard a feminine next to him on his right. Looking through his peripheral vision, he saw a young woman walking up to him. She silently stood beside him.

"Yeah, but since 1987? Why don't people take the old posters down?" he responded back, turning his head to look at her. But she wasn't returning the eye contact and was looking towards the wall instead, so he looked back at it as well.

"Some people believe they're still out there. I had a great-tio who had gone missing back in the early seventies as well. I don't think his poster's here, though. But my grandma would put

posters up *everywhere* since he was like his mom. Their actual mom was hardly there. To this day, she's never taken down a single one, wherever she put them up at. She says that one day, he's coming back home," she said, inspecting the older man. "Unfortunately, the entire family doesn't think so. There were never any leads. It makes no sense either, Govan was horrible in the early nineteen hundreds, even around nineteen-thirties. Years later, people would try to kickstart the town again, but it never succeeded,"

"That's so sad. And people still often go missing around here?"

"Not here. I would assume as often as anywhere else. It's just less documented here since we're a smaller community. So, where did you move here from?" she asked

"Cause, 'smaller community'?" Matthew repeated back at her, figuring that she knew he was new around here because of talk in a small town. She nodded. Matthew then made eye contact with her, "I'm from Los Angeles,"

"Ah, see? I'm sure there's loads of crime there, just no one really cares because, well, there's a lot of people," she forced a laugh and pulled her hand out enough where it was noticeable, but not enough for Matthew to reach out and shake it, "I'm Elisa,"

"Matthew," he introduced himself and examined her. She talked as if she were outgoing, but her body language said otherwise, the way she then crossed her arms and immediately broke eye contact. He assumed it was easier for her to talk to him since he was older, and new-er. "It was nice to meet you, Elisa," he stated and grabbed a hold of his shopping cart again

"You too," she then blurted out awkwardly, as if she was trying to stop him from leaving, "My family just opened a coffee shop down there street called *Leaf & Latte*, I can give you your

first drink for free,”

Matthew stared blankly. He wasn't much of a caffeine drinker, but he did enjoy tea, it that's what the "Leaf" hinted towards. "Sure, someday soon, thanks" he forced a smile and continued to make his way outside of the Walmart and to his car.

Moving to a smaller community was nice, but he did notice how there seemed to be a lot of younger people. The only one who he's come in contact with that seemed to be around his age was Carmen, and she did not seem like someone Matthew wanted to engage with. It was as if she was not all there mentally, making it even more interesting how she managed to raise such a nice and put together kid. Maybe it was the fact that her older son also went missing that messed with her mental health. If his kid went missing, he wouldn't be straight in the head either. No matter how much of a fuck up Damien was. At that moment, Matthew thought that she should have gone back to look if there was a poster with him. Alas, he had already reached his car and never asked for the boy's first name, or when he went missing. The man knew that he could never ask Marty, that would wreck him, let alone his strange mother who was not aware of what was going on half of the time. But after thinking about it, he couldn't judge her.

When Matthew pulled up in his driveway, he saw Marty running around in the middle of the road alongside three other Hispanic boys. They had their arms out and blew raspberries, almost as if they were imitating planes. Playing make-believe was something Matthew had loved doing as a kid, especially since there was no internet in the 80's, when he was a kid. It was nice to see kids this generation appreciate the outdoors. As Matthew parked, he glanced outside

again, looking through his rearview mirror to see the four kids laughing amongst themselves. Marty had even doubled down in guffawment. When he managed to bring himself up, he made eye contact with the man and seemed to say something to his friends before quickly walking up to him. Matthew opened the door and smiled and the boy who was then standing in front of him, “Hi, Senor Matthew. How’s your day?” he beamed.

“It’s going pretty good, kid. How about yours?” Matthew asked in response, looking over at the little boy’s friends.

Martin then looked over at his friends as well and whistled a note so loud that caught Matthew by surprise. The three boys looked over at Marty who then signaled for them to go over, and they did.

“This is Santi,” he pointed at the tallest boy, whose hair was long and as ruffled as Marty’s, “This is Luis,” he held out his arm towards the middle boy with short hair and a darker complexion, yet with bright green eyes, “And this es Diego,” he introduced the smallest boy with curly hair, his skin was almost as white as Matthew’s.

Matthew smiled at all three of them. None of them seemed as friendly as Marty, but they seemed nice enough. Observing the boys a few more seconds, he noticed small things about each of them that might give away more of their character, Matthew was assuming. Santi’s hair was messy in knots, almost as if he hadn’t been brushing his hair. Interesting since Martin had mentioned that his mom was strict, so he would have assumed that hygiene to be something taken seriously within the family. Luis’ hair was basically buzzed, so he didn’t need to brush it. However, he had a few scratches on his face and along his arms. Dry blood lingered on his skin such as his elbows and knees. He even saw a bit of dry blood plastered on his knuckles, which made the dirt underneath his fingernails more apparent as well. It was almost as if he was

always going out and getting into trouble. Finally, Diego seemed the most taken care of out of all of them. But he also seemed the most timid.

“Hi Santi, Luis, and Diego. I’m Marty’s neighbor, Matthew”

“His name is Martin,” Luis spoke up, almost aggressively, Matthew looked over at Marty, who forced a nervous smile

“Oh, I’m sorry, Martin,” Matthew corrected himself.

The tallest boy then began to laugh, “You say his name like a *gringo*,” Santi snorted.

“Ya, callensen,” Marty barked at all of them. Luis then jostled Matthew’s neighbor with his elbow,

“¿Si, si? ¿O que? ¿Que vas a hacer?” Luis raised his voice at Marty, pressing his chest against Marty’s, almost making him fall since Luis was a few inches taller.

“There, *there*,” Diego finally spoke, coming in between them and pushing the two apart from each other, one hand on each boy. “Sorry, Matthew,” Diego apologized about his friends.

“It’s okay, I was your age once. I know what it’s like to play rough,” the man then began to get out of his car and closed the door behind them, now towering over the boy, causing them to go silent.

It was quiet for a few seconds. Martin began to look around in embarrassment, “Uh, Senor Matthew,” he called. Matthew looked over at the boy. “You might want to go inside your house,”

“Oh,” Matthew was confused by what the boy meant by that. “I was going to do so. I just wanted to say hi,”. Marty had never acted like that before.

After Matthew finished bringing in all of the groceries that he purchased and put them away such as apples, cereal, salmon, and others away in their respective places, he fell asleep on the couch in the living room. However, when he woke up, there was only one thing on his mind. He grabbed the broom and bolted down the hallway from the kitchen to his room and went straight to his closet. He ducked under the bar of where his clothes were supposed to be hung and pushed the attic door up with the broom. With its support, he was able to lift up the attic door enough that stairs fell from above. The perfect passageway that allowed him to go up.

When he placed his hands on the old wooden stairs, now crawling upwards, he only imagined what could be waiting for him above, Or *who*. Is this where they have been hiding? Why not say anything to him? All he wanted to do was to speak to Weston. He tried to hurry up the stairs quickly, but at his age, he needed to follow each step with a deep breath. Finally when he reached the top, it was almost too dark to see. There were a bunch of old, dark brown wooden pillars along the room. It smelled of dust. The best way Matthew would have been able to describe the smell was to compare it to the *Home Depot*. Not the worst smell, just intriguing.

Matthew tried his best to scan around, but had to pull out his phone from his back pocket and turn on the flashlight. Something he used often whenever Weston lost one of his toy cars from under the couch and asked Matthew to retrieve it for him. With the assistance of the illuminating device, he was able to make out his surroundings. In front of him, on the floor, was a singular glass plate. One of his glass plates that he had brought with him from California. On it were a couple of green grapes. A snack that his family would eat often. Beside the plate, was a large navy blue knitted blanket. The one that his mother-in-law has made for him years ago. He had left it back at his house in California. There also seemed to be two pillows resting on top of the bedding, also ones that he remembered from back in Los Angeles. Matthew felt his body

crawl as if bugs were walking up and down against his skin. So he wasn't crazy. He knew the feeling of being followed. He needed to in the military. *Adeline?* He called, but there was no response. *Weston, buddy?* He called for his grandson, but nothing as well.

Matthew began to feel his face heat up. From anger or fear? He was unable to tell. He continued to examine the attic, walking around the entire room slowly, but there was nothing else there. This frustrated him a little. How could he have a lead on what exactly they do in the house? Then his mind began to trail off and he absently began to stand still in one place. What was the point in hiding if they weren't going to show themselves? Adeline most likely told Weston to not make any contact with him. Why would he listen? Most of all, how would Weston even be okay with this?

Matthew slowly walked back to the door on the floor that led back down to his closet. He bent down so that he could place his right foot on the staircase and slowly began to climb back down. When he finally reached the floor of his closet, he then heard scurrying footsteps from what sounded like in the hallway outside of his room. The steps were light, as if it were a kid. As if it were Weston. Instinctly, Matthew quickly ducked underneath the bar in the closet that was there to hang up his clothes, and once on the other side, swiftly made his way to the hallway. He looked on the right side of the hallway that led to the kitchen and living room, but nothing seemed to be different there. Then, he looked to the left side of the hallway, there wasn't much there, only the main door led outside the house. But as his eyes fixated on his left view, he saw the door close. As if someone had just left the house and closed the door behind them.

With heavy, but brisk steps, he rushed and opened the front door. He saw that across the road, a kid jumped inside a bush in hiding. Matthew was only able to see the back of the kid's

head. But it was dirty blonde and the hair was long enough to flow in the wind. The child's build was around five feet and skinny, it was the build of a little boy that the man knew well. That the man was related to. *Weston! Weston, don't be afraid! Come to grandpa, I'm not mad at you!* Matthew cried. He stepped outside of his house onto his porch and closed the door behind him. Absently, he began to run towards the boy. He got such tunnel vision that the last thing he heard was—

HONK. HONK. HOOOOOONK.

Matthew paused and looked to his left. He had stopped in the center of the road while crossing. He wasn't running as quick as he believed. His eyes were caught in the headlights of a car that had almost run him over, as if he were a deer. He couldn't tell what car had almost hit him or even who was inside because the lights were so blinding. Matthew hadn't even noticed how dark it had gotten outside. "What are you doing?" he heard a voice yell at him from inside of the car. Matthew did not respond. He felt so surprised, so dumbfounded. "Hello? What are you doing here? Especially out in the dark?" the voice of a man shouted again.

Shit.. "Uh, sorry, boss. I could've sworn I saw someone run into the bushes right there," he pointed to the other side of the road where he believed Weston had gone hiding.

"Excuse me?" the man then turned off his car engine, perhaps to gain a better sense of hearing, "You saw someone run into the bushes? Who?"

"My grandson. He's nine years old, about four eight, blond hair. I saw him. He ran from my house across the road here and to the bushes!"

"A little boy ran from your house, here, in Govan? Across the street and to the bushes? Did I hear you correctly sir?"

Matthew started to feel his heart racing. Talking to this stranger was wasting his time. Maybe Weston managed to run further away and he wasn't able to see in which direction because it was dark out. Since the man in the car turned off his car, his headlights also turned off. Now it was completely pitch black. "Yes you did," Matthew responded, "His name is Weston. If you excuse me, I'm now going to go look for him before he runs any further away," Matthew continued to cross the street and headed towards the bush as he heard the car's engine start again.. His back was now facing the driver's door of the car. Matthew only needed a couple more steps towards the bush when he heard a car door behind him open,

"What's your name?" the man in the car answered. Matthew turned around to see the man once again, and he now saw the facial expression plastered on the stranger's face. It was the look of suspicion, and he did not like that.

"What?"

"You heard me. There shouldn't be a kid running around at this time of night. Especially here," the man then took a step outside of his car and made his way over to Matthew.

Fuck. "Look, I promise, my grandson—" Mathhew began to walk backwards slowly as the stranger, who was a few inches taller and much more built than him, from his car approached him slowly, "my ex-wife, his grandma, has been stalking me and I'm sure—" he unknowingly tripped into the bush behind him and fell flat on his ass, "they're here. I know they're here," there was a whimper in Matthew's voice. The stranger who almost ran him over was now towering and observing him. His face up closer revealed him to be younger, around his forties perhaps. Matthew felt as if the stare could burn directly through his skull.

He knew that the man standing in front of him sensed his fear. But could he tell that Matthew was scared of getting beaten up and not from being “caught”? He could only assume what the stranger was thinking about him.

After a couple of moments of feeling interrogated from the stranger’s look, he began to observe the bush. Matthew had hoped that Weston was there, maybe waiting to be found by his grandpa. He couldn’t imagine what Adeline had told him. What nasty lies were being told to him. Waiting from the stranger to look for his own blood within the bush felt like an eternity. But just in case Weston was found, Matthew was already attempting to get up, ready to pounce if the strange man did find his grandson.

“What’s your grandson’s name?” Matthew heard the voice ask, but still only saw the back of the man’s head.

“Huh?”

“Your grandson’s name, what is it?” the stranger looked back with an irritated look. However, Matthew could now also sense apprehension as well.

“His name is Weston,”.

There was a moment of silence, then the man continued to walk past the bush and further down the same path calling the little boy’s name. “Weston! Weston, are you okay? I can take you home if you’re lost! I’m not sure if this is your grandpa but—”

“What?” Matthew stood up and swiftly approached the man and placed his right hand on the guy’s back, now not caring about the height difference, “What do you mean if I’m not his grandpa? What are you trying to say?”

The man turned around irritated, "Look sir, I'm sure it is. But you have to understand the situation here. What is an older guy like you doing here and with a young kid? Sure he could be your grandson, but what are you doing raising a child here? And I'm not convinced something about your ex-wife stalking you, but you have to understand that this doesn't look too good for you," he looked at Matthew with pity. Now he could tell that the stranger felt sorry for him. He didn't need his sympathy, though, he needed Weston. Matthew looked over at his surroundings, what was around the bush, but he couldn't find his little boy. "Look sir," the stranger began to speak again, "I'm not sure if what you were seeing or saying is real, but no one is here. You should go back to your car and go ho--," Matthew interrupted him by swinging at his face. The impact from his fist sent the man doubling down, holding onto his knees for support.

Matthew took a huff. He didn't know what had possessed him to do that. He just couldn't be insulted anymore. He couldn't be lied to or led astray. Too many things have happened. Before he knew it, Matthew was punched in the gut with such force that it also sent him to his knees and when he looked up to look at the man, the stranger then sock his face. That was the last thing Matthew remembered.

The sound of the birds chirping and sunrays on Matthew's face is what woke him up the next day. He was laying on his back, facing the sky. The sun was too bright for his eyes and out of reflex, he shaded them with his left arm and took a deep breath. It hurt him to breathe. His stomach was still sore from the blow he took from the night previous. He couldn't believe what

had just happened. He couldn't believe that Weston wasn't there. Why does he keep on hiding? What is wrong with him, Matthew, himself? He felt as if he was going mad. Maybe he was. Everyday felt like he was getting closer to the truth, but still nothing.

He was being so tormented by his past that he wasn't allowed to live in the present anymore. Maybe he should just go back to California. What would've solved all of his problems? He could see his Weston peacefully, without Adeline being the snake she is. Sure, she would have won and gotten everything she wanted, but at least she would leave him alone. Matthew just wanted for this nightmare to stop.

It could've been that the sun was too bright for the older man's eyes, but tears began to trickle down Matthew's face. It could've been the sensitivity in his retinas, but the tingling around Matthew's face said otherwise.

He silently ate his scrambled eggs at his dining table. There was nothing but him, his eggs on a glass plate in front of him, and a glass of water to the right. It was filled up to the brim. He had not taken a single sip, but was scarfing down the four eggs he made. His stomach hurt with each swallow of food, it was still sore although many hours had already passed. There were no thoughts in the man's head but hunger. Finally, his mind was going silent, as if he was accepting that this is his new reality. He had just now noticed the smell of the house, and it was strong. It also reflected the attic. A strong sense of pure wood. There was a little ash to the aroma. Like a fireplace where the fire had gone out. It smelled nice and homey.

Today was his opportunity to finally accept where he was at in life. He had traveled to Moses Lake, but never truly appreciated Govan since he had arrived. *Today is the day to*

explore. Maybe he would even come across people who were his age and make friends with people that society would deem “acceptable”. Being friends with a little boy wasn’t ideal, but a part of him felt like the heart of the town itself. Marty felt familiar. Matthew wondered how the kid’s mom was before all of this. Before her eldest child went missing. Govan seemed like a quiet and simple place. The missing posters of people from Walmart seemed out of place. He would’ve never suspected that someone went missing in a place like this.

GAG.. COUGH.. COUGH.

Matthew began choking on a fork-full of eggs. Lost in thought, he must have forgotten to swallow. Quickly, he grabbed the glass of water and began to chug it, trying to pass the food that was stuck in his throat.

CHUG. CHUG.

It was midday and the sun was still beaming. That was the beauty of summer. Thank goodness for the time change. Matthew sat down in the driver’s seat of his Chevelle and started the engine. He adjusted himself a little bit in his seat before he got comfortable. Then, he lowered the windows down and turned on the radio. He wasn’t too sure of what the new radio stations were around his area, so he just let play whatever was on. Matthew was unable to recall what the current song was, but let it play anyway. Today was a day of exploring, the music in the back was not too important.

It didn’t take long pulling out of his driveway to truly take notice of all of the dead grass that Govan, Washington was made up of. He also didn’t notice that all of the houses he passed

looked old and run down, or lack thereof. His neighborhood seemed to be the only one within miles and all of the paint that was once radiant, for lack of a better term, died. Matthew was surprised that he didn't take notice of this on his way to Walmart a few days back, or whenever that was. It brought a new form of appreciation to live in the moment rather than being in his head all day everyday. Not letting what seems like the demons follow him felt like a blessing. He enjoyed this. He enjoyed driving around what seemed like the ghost town of Govan.

It must have been a few miles down when he was approaching a run-down building. It was chipped and the color of the red bricks it was made of was heavily faded. Matthew was surprised it was still standing. It looked like it had been burned down and the skeleton of it was barely standing. Something about looking at the structure sent a shiver down the entirety of his body. He even felt goosebumps begin to form scattered around his skin. Yet something about it seemed to draw Matthew in.

He listened to-what seemed like silent whispers of his name and parked in front of the pile of burnt wood. When he got outside of his car, it was as if he felt the wind shift. Outside of his house, he felt the temperature around eighty degrees fahrenheit. But now, he wouldn't have known the difference if it were night or day. He could have confused the temperature where he now stood as forty degrees.

Despite the weather, he could now get a good view of what he was seeing. He normally needed glasses but never wore them because he felt stupid in them. But currently, he could even say that he had 20/20 vision. The building up close wasn't something that he would have expected. From afar, it seemed like a run down church. Now, it was an abandoned schoolhouse. It wasn't burned down, but it lacked life. If it were a person, it would be in every sense of the

word, hollow. The building itself felt like an entity. Like it had a spirit that wept everyday to be refurbished. Yes it was hollow, but Matthew also had a gut feeling that it had a past as if it were human as well. Like something happened to it.

The wind got stronger and began to whistle although there were no trees in sight. As if it were taunting Matthew to go inside, calling him once again. Checking to see how much temptation it would need to offer until the older man caved in. Temptation is what always gets the best of us. It felt so wrong, yet so incredibly right.

Matthew took a couple steps towards it before he stepped on the first step of the small stairway that led to the entrance. Matthew only needed to take a couple steps up before he reached the entrance. Once at the top, he was met with an entrance where double doors were supposed to be placed. However, they were no long attached to the frames. There were no doors in sight. Matthew wondered how long exactly this place was built.

Peering through the the doorframes and inside of the building, he got a clear view of the inside of the building. It was completely empty and the first thing that truly hit Matthew was the strong smell of dust. It wasn't the good *Home Depot* aroma either. This one was nasty. It smelt like death himself. The floor was stained wooden planks. They were stained with ash. Some black specks as well. Maybe it was blood, if someone had scraped their knee unknowingly and drops of their DNA seeped onto the ground. The top half of the wooden walls were shaped resembling bricks whereas the bottom half matched the planks on the floor. Adeline used to watch a show on Netflix called "Anne with an E" that took place in the early 20th century. In it, it depicted a small schoolhouse where the children studied. This building reminded Matthew of just that. Like he was placed within the show.

Matthew slowly made his way inside and to the center of the building. He made sure to

move his body ever so carefully, fearing as if he would fall right through the ground, given how old the structure seemed to be. Although the room was so hollow, inside, it was as if there were a room full of eyes on him. The feeling of unease almost caused him to lose his balance. It was so quiet, but he could've sworn he began to hear the faint laughs of children from all angles of the singular room. It started off with small giggles to louder chuckles.. *HA.. HA.. HA..*

It was a tap from behind his right shoulder that made him jump. He turned around to face the doors that were wide open, but nothing or no one was there. "Hello?" Matthew called out, but nothing. Just as he suspected.

TAP TAP TAP..

He now heard footsteps from behind him. He didn't have to think twice and began to dart straight forward, exiting the building.

Passing through the building's entrance and the lawn in front of the building, he reached his car. Thank goodness he did because he was able to secure himself within the vehicle quickly. When he sat back down in the driver's seat. He pulled down on the brake and shoved his car keys into the slot and twisted it so that the car could start.

He looked back before he drove off and saw that the two heavy double doors that greeted the building were now closed. But how could they have possibly closed if Matthew had left them open? They didn't close behind him when he had walked inside. After a couple seconds of pondering, Matthew came back to reality and realized that his thoughts currently did not matter at all. That he had to get the hell out of there. Without a second thought, Matthew shifted the stick to drive and made a circle around the lawn, back to the main road and headed towards the direction back to his house.

The radio was silent once again and the older man was alone with his thoughts. Did he truly want to go back to his house? The whole point was to explore and he couldn't stand going back there, especially after what he just witnessed. Slowly, Matthew placed his right foot on the brake and turned his car back around, heading out of town and to Moses Lake.

The drive didn't feel long, it felt as if it was 20 minutes at most. Probably because Matthew was in his head the entire time. When wasn't he? But now, he couldn't escape how something so supernatural felt so real. He could have sworn that he had heard the faint laughter of children echoing in the room of the abandoned schoolhouse. For all he could have known, it was. He would believe it. It was abandoned after all, but for how long was the true question.

As he was driving to Moses Lake, he wondered where exactly he would stop. He had no clear destination and yes, he had money on him, but he didn't want to spend much. That's when he remembered about that teenage girl that he met at Walmart the other day. Elisa was her name? Probably. But all that he vividly remembered was that she had offered him a free cup of coffee. If only he could remember the name of the place to search it up on Google Maps as he was driving. Should he even be on his phone and driving? Probably not. Most likely not. But damn, if there was one normal thing he could encounter right now, he would love it to be a free, normal cup of coffee.

After a few minutes driving, he remembered, it was called *Leaf & Latte*. Very creative, he had to give props to her parents. By the time he had remembered, the GPS had let him know that he only needed twenty minutes to get there. It was perfect, as if it were meant to be. Matthew slowly pressed his right foot down on the gas peddle and he managed to reach his

destination in fifteen minutes instead.

Pulling up, the parking lot wasn't too generous in size and neither was the cafe itself either. It was a hole in the wall building, part of a small shopping plaza surrounded by other small family owned businesses. If it weren't for Google Maps telling him where the cafe was, he would have easily driven right past it without a second thought. After Matthew had parked and stepped out of his car, he noticed the temperature change once again. It felt as if it were at least twenty degrees hotter than back at the old abandoned school house.

The atmosphere felt much lighter. It was easier to breathe. Which was a surprise given the fact that there were a noticeably larger number of people residing in Moses Lake in comparison to Gpvan. However, Moses Lake itself was also such a small town. It definitely did not stand a chance to Los Angeles in comparison. Matthew did not miss Los Angeles in that sense. It was difficult just to get from point A to point B. He always wanted to move somewhere more secluded in a small town. At first, he was really eager to move somewhere in Oregon, but Adeline was always against it. Something about California had a grasp on her. Maybe it was the stigma or the fact that all of her family was there. Their family was there. But Matthew always felt the need to be alone. He was never close with his family growing up or anyone for that matter. Anyone except Adeline, who he met when they were both fourteen years old. That's why he had loved her so much. She was his real home. Before everything had happened.

Entering *Leaf & Latte*, as soon as he stepped foot inside the cafe, he smelled the strongest scent of coffee he had ever smelt before, and he loved it. It was everything to him. The place itself was compacted. It was a perfectly squared building. On the left wall was the cashier and straight ahead was a little lounge area with small couches and sofas. Towards the right wall,

there was a long table with three community laptops and chairs sat right in front of them for customers to use. The hole in the wall felt very homey. On the outside, Matthew was not the most impressed but inside, although very simplistic, it felt perfect for him.

Matthew was met by a woman not much younger than him at the counter. She looked like Elisa, but older with slightly different features. Her upturned eyes were a direct reflection, only with very faint crows feet. However, her nose was a bit smaller than the girl he met at Walmart. “Hello, how may I help you?” the lady around her mid to late forties asked. Wilson was not too sure, he looked down at the counter and saw that they had the menu displayed on a paper that was taped right on top of the white marble surface.

“Oh yes, may I get the drip black coffee?” Matthew responded

“Yes, that would be five ninety-nine,” the lady nodded with a smile and slowly began to step away backwards,

“Oh wait, my apologies. I was promised a free drink by this young girl I met at the store. Elisa?” he quickly coughed out, hoping that the free transaction would follow through.

“Oh, yes. If she said so. One moment please,” the authentic smile on the woman’s face quickly turned performative as she walked through the door behind her and disappeared.

Matthew waited there for a few seconds before the girl he had met at Walmart emerged from the other side of the door with a nervous and embarrassed face. Her short, black hair was in two pigtails. From the other side of the counter, she seemed much shorter than he had remembered her, but he knew that she was not tall at all.

“Hello, sir, so you did end up finding your way here,” she forced a nervous laugh and

began to play with your hands.

“Please, call me Matthew,” the man responded while registering how her leg started to bounce. “Sorry, did I get you in trouble?”

“Oh, no no. My mom is just not the happiest with me right now because you're like the fourth person today that came in saying how I promised you a free drink. But it's not your fault, it's mine,” she looked down. There was a beat of silence before she looked back up with the fake customer service smile, “So let me get that drip coffee ready for you, Matthew,” she beamed and quickly ran to the back.

“Thank you, Elisa.”

Matthew looked over his right shoulder, viewing the couches in the middle of the building and the computers in the back of him. Only then, did he notice the jazz music that the building was playing. A couple of others were in the cafe, but not much. He really enjoyed the ambiance. Maybe this place would be his little escape whenever he needed to take a breath or two.

He made his way over one of the sofas in the middle of the cafe. It was red and the material felt like velvet. There was a small circular table that stood right in front of it. It was of dark wood that was obviously very old. It didn't seem long before Elisa walked over towards him with a good sized wooden platter. When she set it on the small table in front of him, he saw that on top was a white glass mug and a grey, stainless steel drip coffee pot containing, what he was assuming to be his coffee. He smiled at her as she stood on the side of him.

“Thank you,” Matthew half-smiled

“You’re welcome. Be careful. It’s still a little warm,” she then, with minimum and half-assed effort, bowed down and headed back towards the register.

Matthew reached over to the table and picked up the white mug glass that was halfway filled with coffee and blew on it after feeling the heat of the tupperware. He stirred the cup in the air for a couple of seconds before finally first taking a small sip and then a bug chug. Putting the mug back down and licking his lips, he was quick to the conclusion that he really enjoyed it. This place was his new favorite place.

After a couple of minutes passed and he noticed a young man walking through the door and making his way very briskly to the register. His hair was a light, messy brown. He was tall and lanky, maybe in his early to mid twenties. Something about him also felt familiar. It’s weird how these places have their own way of tricking you. How things completely new bring you back to your old life. “Hello, a medium Americano for Eddy,” Matthew could hear the young adult order his drink.

When Eddy was done at the counter, he walked towards the community computers behind Matthew and took his seat there. He stared at the dark screen in front of him, but never turned it on. As if he would rather spend his time in his own head. Matthew was able to relate to that. Wilson would jerk his head every now and then while drinking his drip coffee to glance over at Eddy. Twice, the young adult would look back, sensing someone was looking at him. But when he did, Matthew pretended he was looking elsewhere, doing his best to avoid eye contact.

“Eddy!” Elisa had called the young man. He quickly stepped up from his chair to go get the coffee. When the girl was handing it to him, it seemed like he had asked her a question, but

Matthew couldn't make out what it was. Whatever he said had made the young woman laugh, though. Matthew was going to pour more coffee into his mug when he noticed that the steel pot was now empty. He scanned around the room to see if there was anywhere to put away what was left of his drink, but there was nothing. Some lady in the back corner of the building had also ordered drip coffee and he noticed that she just picked up her purse to leave and left the pot and mug on a nearby table. *I guess* the older man thought to himself.

Matthew stood up from the sofa and patted his left pocket to make sure that his wallet was still there, and that it was. He glanced over at Elisa again, who was still immersed in her conversation, so he couldn't thank her. Next time, though. He walked outside of the building and tried to remember where he parked, but it slipped his mind. The warm air didn't help either, putting him in a dazed trance.

BUMP.

"Sorry, sir," someone had shoved Matthew from right behind him, bringing him back to Earth. He looked at who had shoved him, it was a young man with curly, dark brown hair. He was tall and lanky, around his early to mid twenties. Matthew clutched his hand into a fist while winding it back. He then socked the young man in the face with full force, causing the kid to double down, groaning. Matthew stared before kneeing the young man in the face, now causing him to fall to the floor. "Fuck you, Theo! Fuck you for *everything* you've done to my family. I trusted you. You *were* family," Matthew began foaming at the mouth.

"Eddy," Wilson heard a gurgly back.

"What?"

"My name's Eddy,"

It hit Matthew. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Please don't tell me I did it again.* Matthew opened his eyes and saw the young man who was inside talking to Elisa. His hair was light brown and straight. This kid isn't who he thought he was. It then hit him harder, Eddy had blood running down from his nose and mouth, he looked so defeated as his spilt coffee was all over his t-shirt and pants. Not only that, there was a crowd of at least five people now staring. One of them included Elisa herself. She by the door, covering her mouth in fear and shock.

Matthew hesitantly took a step back until he realized that any form of recovery from this incident would be for him to help the kid. So quickly, he lunged forward and bent down, lifting a hand, hoping that Eddy would leverage himself up with the support offered. Instead, Eddy just stood there, blankly staring. The fear from his eyes was prominent and he looked hesitant. "I'm so sorry, something is terribly wrong with me. I thought you were someone else. I am so very sorry".

"What just happened?" Matthew heard a yelling come from behind him. It was a woman who had just burst through the entrance of the door, the lady who was first at the counter when he had entered the café. It was Elisa's mom. She stomped her way up to him, and up close was when he noticed how short the woman was. He prodded her finger against Matthew's chest. Her eyebrows furrowed and Wilson could almost visibly see Elisa's mom's face turn red out of anger. "You, sir, should be ashamed. Please get out of here. Apologize, or I *will* call the police. What is your name?" she demanded, her short, black hair now swaying in the wind.

"Matthew Wilson, ma'am. I am so sorry," he then turned back down to Eddy, "I am so sorry. Please do not press charges, I will do anything. Money, do you want money?" He then quickly rummaged through his front pockets in his pants to find his wallet.

“No, no,” Eddy slowly managed to pick himself back up from the floor, “I’m good, man. But you’ve got serious issues,” he then looked at Matthew up and down as he rubbed the blood off of his face with his right forearm.

Eddy looked over to Elisa’s mom, the corner of his lip quivering. Maybe from fear, adrenaline, or both. Matthew felt defeated. The glare given by the girl’s mom let Matthew know immediately that it was his time to leave. Before he took a step back towards the direction of his car, he looked at each person in the crowd individually. From a mom holding her son’s hand to another man around his age, shaking his head shamefully. Matthew felt shameful. What has been going on with him lately?

Matthew sat in his car and waited for Eddy to come back outside from the shop. After everything had gone down, Elisa invited the young man back inside. Probably for a free drink since the one he had previously purchased was spilt all over him. Now that Wilson had a clear shot of the kid a few feet away from him, he opened his car door and stepped out. Eddy immediately made eye contact and visibly clutched his cup of coffee with a stronger grip. He then glanced around, no one was watching them and it was obvious how much fear was evoked inside of him.

“Eddy, right?” Matthew called out and made his way closer to the boy, but stopped at a distance to ensure Eddy felt safe.

“Uh, yeah. Matthew, you said?” the young man asked with a sing-song voice.

“Yes,” he took a beat, “I just wanted to apologize again. If you want money or anything. I just moved her recently and ever since, I have been feeling so paranoid. I’m not sure what is

wrong with me. I thought you were someone else from a past life. I owe you, I sincerely apologize, sir,”

Eddy looked Matthew up and down with an eyebrow slightly raised. “Paranoid?” he asked, “Where’d you move here from?”

“Yeah, I feel like.. Like someone is following me ever since.. I came here from California, Los Angeles,”

“Los Angeles all the way to Moses Lake? Such a downgrade,” he then stood awkwardly, as if he was thinking of something to fill the silence, “Why?”

“No, no. I live in Govan—”

“Govan?” Eddy interrupted. He was gobsmacked, “Can you even live there? That’s probably why you feel like you’re being followed. Do you even know about how—”

“All the missing persons? Yes. But that’s not who I’m followed by,” Matthew debated whether or not to tell this stranger about Adeline, but ultimately decided against it. He already seemed crazy as it was. He also had this hunch that even mentioning his ex-wife’s name would summon her.

“Well, thanks for the apology. Hopefully Miss Velasquez will let you back into the cafe. Next time I go, I’ll let her know you’re okay. I’ll let Elisa know as well. She told me that she was the one who invited you?”

“Yeah, she did. Okay, thank you, kid. Once again, you sure you don’t need money or anything?”

Eddy took a beat and smirked, “If we ever bump into each other again here, ‘cause I

come here regularly, then you owe me. Yeah?”

“You got it boss,” Matthews stated. Eddy held out his hand and Wilson shook it. Directly after, the young man left back to his own car.

Matthew, already not too far from his own, went back to his own vehicle and immediately took off back home to Govan. The drive felt much shorter than before. Despite the events that had happened in the coffee shop, his mind seemed to be more clear than before. The air felt lighter to digest. Something about interacting with real people was rejuvenating. Not that Marty was not a good kid, but there was hardly any life back where Matthew resided. Maybe he should have moved to Moses Lake instead. He still technically had time to. It would be easier to hide from Adeline as well. Even find a true clique. Maybe even find a new woman. A new wife, who would not drive him crazy. Who would not hurt him as much as Adeline did. Or a backstabbing friend.

The car’s window was rolled down the entire way home. The wind felt good in Matthew’s hair. It reminded him of the time almost two years ago when he was driving down to San Diego. Adeline was in the passenger and Weston was in the back, playing with his orange Pontiac Bonneville. On the way to Sea World, they stopped at some gas station on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere because his ex-wife needed to use the restroom. Matthew didn’t need to since he had just stopped an hour prior to piss on the side of the road like a dog would, but it didn't matter. Thank goodness it was socially acceptable as a man.

When Adeline had gone down, she left her phone on her seat. Or it must have fallen out of her back pocket, Matthew still had yet to decide what exactly happened that day. But when

she was gone, she had received a text from a family friend. The text that would absolutely shatter Matthew's world. A reality that he chose to live with moving forward in their marriage, but eventually became too much.

When Adeline sat back down in the car, she had the brightest smile as if there were no worries in life. As if she did not have a secret life that she never told Matthew about. The way that she moved her long, blonde hair out of her face made it hard to be upset with her. The light in her eyes felt so warm and soft, Matthew would have never guessed that she could do something so betraying to him. Married for decades, and he still had butterflies every time he saw her. What he saw on her phone didn't feel real to him. She buckled her seatbelt and adjusted herself in her seat., unaware that she sat directly on her phone. Then, she looked at the back of the car towards Westons and nodded, making sure that he was ready to go. Weston smiled back at her. She then glanced at Matthew,

"You dropped your phone on your seat," he pointed out to her, starting the engine.

"Oh," she lifted herself and grabbed her device. She put it back in her pocket without even looking at it. "Thank you, love," she turned back around to Weston, "Ready, baby boy?"

"Yes!" their grandson squeaked back.

Matthew looked back at the child through the rearview mirror and took a deep breath before backing up the car out of the parking lot and began to drive back towards the road, continuing their journey to the theme park. Internally, Matthew felt like yelling and crying. But he couldn't, he had to compose himself, especially from Weston. Weston couldn't witness this. In hopes to make things better, Matthew lowered the windows down to feel the summer sun.

"Do you really need to? The AC is already on," Adeline mumbled under her breath, but

Matthew ignored her. He ignored her the rest of the day, even though she eventually caught on to what was happening when she saw her notification the moment they entered Sea World.

The summer wind blowing from outside of the car to rustling between his hair felt similar. He hated those memories. It was one of the hardest days of his life, pretending that everything was all good until they got home. The confrontation. It all brought back horrible memories. Matthew quickly rolled the windows back up and turned up the AC. It was already on anyway.

Pulling into the driveway, Matthew saw Marty sitting down on his porch, his head perched on top of his hands, while his elbows stood firm on his knees. He looked gloomy. Wilson slowly got out of his car and approached the kid ever so gently.

“Is everything okay?” Matthew asked. The boy looked up with his eyes only,

“No, Diego left again. I tell him to stand up for himself, but nothing. I don’t know when he’ll show up again,”

“I’m sorry, did he go back with his other parents?” the man couldn’t exactly remember the little boy’s home situation

“No, not that it’s.. It’s just happening again. I’m not sure what to do. Every time he leaves, it takes longer and longer to come back. What about his... sister,”

“Come back?”

They then heard yelling towards the direction of the little boy's old, run down, one story house. It started like a cry. Both of them turned their heads, Marty to his right and Matthew towards his left. They both saw Marty’s mom walk out of their house and onto the porch

bawling. Her curly hair looked tangled and her skin, from afar, appeared more pale than usual. The two boys then looked back at each other.

The older man then jerked his head towards the house letting the kid know to go home.

“I don’t want to,” he muttered under his breath, “She doesn’t care about anything. All she does is cry about my brother, never about me. Once I disappear, she will hardly notice. She doesn’t even notice when I leave,”

“Hey,” Matthew stuck out a finger, “don’t say that. She cared about you. She always seems worried about something. She’s asked me about you, remember? I think I even hear her knocking on the door at night. That’s how much she cares, okay?” he reassured the boy.

“Okay,” Marty croaked out and stood up.

The kid slowly made his way back home and Matthew kept an eye on him every step of the way. It was as if Marty was dragging his feet. He radiated the epitome of sorrow. When he met up with his mom, he smiled at her as she blatantly ignored him, looking directly past him as if he was a ghost. Although his vision wasn’t the best, Matthew could tell that it hurt the little boy who immediately walked inside his house, slamming the door behind. Carmen stayed outside, crying. Perhaps Marty was right. Matthew has read and watched shows how parents can neglect everyone else once a loved one has gone missing, especially a child. Especially if they were murdered.

Matthew stood there for a second, thinking. No child should feel inadequate, especially

towards their own parents. Quickly, Matthew started walking towards his neighbors' house. With each step forward, he felt like he was making the wrong idea. He still believed that Marty needed to be defended, nonetheless. If he had even accidentally made Weston feel so small, he would never forgive himself.

Approaching the house, Carmen realized that he was headed towards her direction. Once they made eye contact when he was a few feet away from her, just let out a couple last sniffles and wiped her face of the tears that had run down. Matthew even felt comfortable enough to walk up the steps and join her on the porch. He had forgotten how tall she was. It was especially easy to forget how frail she looked as well. He quickly observed her before stating anything. The woman was wearing a red turtle neck. Maybe it was her favorite because she always appeared to be wearing it whenever he had the pleasure of seeing her. But Matthew was not one to judge a family and their financial situation.

"Hi Mrs. Garcia, I just wanted to.. Check in with your boy," he stated forwardly. Once he did, it was as if the light in the woman's eyes had been restored,

"Alex?" she questioned with her thick accent, "you find him?" she asked

"No..." Matthew hesitated, "I meant Marty. Martin. Your other son?"

"But si see Alex? Is he okay?" her eyes quickly began to tear back up with her voice now cracking.

"No, I have not seen Alex," he took a step closer towards her and pointed at the front door of the house behind her, "But I have seen Marty, and he is *very* upset. He feels like you don't love him. Okay? El feels como tu no amor ello. All you talk about. Todo tu habla is Alex," he tried to translate, but he was not met with a response. Instead, she just stared at him blankly.

He felt dumbfounded.

He glared back at her, towards the door that entered her house. He wasn't going to do it, he would never do it, but he was so tempted to just waltz inside and asked how Marty was. Maybe just explore the house to see the way it was set up. How Carmen even takes care of her little boy who seems to have the liberty of doing whatever he wanted because there was no supervision. Matthew doubted to the extent that Martin was right. He was sure that Carmen did love him, but the more he interacted with the woman, the more he realized how strange she was. The thought of neglect then passed through the older man's mind. The way that the kid always seemed to wear the same clothes, that his hair was always rustled and had dirt on his face.

Matthew was beginning to feel guilty. Maybe who he dismissed as an active little boy who loved to be outside was actually going through something else much more serious than he could have imagined. Maybe he should go grab help. He was sure CPS would be located further out. Perhaps going to Moses Lake for help would be more beneficial. Wait, but he couldn't just report something out of suspicion. Matthew needed real evidence. He needed to keep a close eye on the boy. Matthew was sure now that Marty's quick attachment to him was a cry for help.

As for Alex, he had now also sparked an interest in him. If Eddy was nice enough to tell the truth when he said that he'll report back that Matthew was a good person, he was sure that Elisa can help him in his search. Or at least know a little something about Marty's missing brother. At least an idea would be a start.

There, he solidified his thoughts. He will try and help the family out. Looking back through the hollow eyes of Carmen, he pitied her. Yes, her eldest son had gone missing, but it

was as if she had completely forgotten about her other boy. He was the sweetest thing too. So playful and outgoing. Kind and he seemed very smart. Marty almost mirrored Weston. Wherever Weston and Adeline were. Matthew didn't want to think about them again. He had hoped that they were long gone. Not his grandson, of course, but for the sake of being stalked. He knew that even though Adeline could be a monster towards him, she would never in a million years be the slightest bit cruel towards Weston.

Matthew took a step back without saying a word towards his neighbor and quickly rushed back to his own home. Reaching the porch, he grabbed out his keys and shoved them inside the keyhole, twisting it and unlocking the door. When he entered the building, something immediately felt off. Maybe the air was cooler, or maybe it was something else that made the hair on Matthew's arms stand up. Whatever it was, he also felt a presence. By the door, he immediately flicked the switch on that turned on the light. It was just him and the hallway that led to the living room and kitchen. He waited a couple seconds in silence, as if he were waiting to hear something. "Hello?" he called out to the dark room at the end of the hallway. But there was no response. Wilson trudged his way forward, squinting his eye as if it would help with his vision. He was tired of constantly feeling on edge. Perhaps he was right this time, perhaps they were here.

Although the hallway was long, empty, and dark, he saw a little light shining through from the outside. It was coming through a window in the kitchen. By now, outside was dark, but the light from the moon was just enough to illuminate shadows peeking through the opening of the blinds. When Matthew reached the end, staring through the window and to the outside, his backyard, it hit him. He never opened the blinds. Someone must have been there. Someone must have opened the blinds themselves.

No. Stop thinking like that, you keep on jumping to conclusions. Take a deep breath and go to sleep, you have had a long day.

The man turned around to face the table behind him in the kitchen. On top of the table sat a pink glass mug with a burgundy lipstick mark on it once again. As if someone wearing makeup had drunk out of it. The shade was dark burgundy. It was hers once again. Matthew stared at it for a few seconds. He was still trying to convince himself that what he was imagining was not real. That there was a very valid explanation as to why Adeline's favorite mug was sat on top of the table, empty, marked by her favorite and signature lipstick shade. But there was a limit where the line blurs between imagination and reality.

He knew he was going crazy. How long has it been where he has constantly felt at qualms with himself? He could never win. It was seeping into his social life, and that he could not have. Beating up a kid in public was not right. Constantly being filled with anxiety, anger, and bitterness was not right.

He felt like a broken record, constantly repeating everything in his head, trying to convince himself he was not going crazy. *Creek*. Matthew cocked his head towards the direction of the hallway. Although it was dark, he could do something darker scurry further down towards the door. It was a shadow, one of good height. As if it was an adult. The initial creek sounded like it came from the closet in the hallway. The last door before reaching the kitchen and living room.

Pat. Pat. Pat.

The footsteps sounded like the owner of them was trying to quietly and quickly escape towards the opposite direction of the house. Immediately after registering what he was hearing,

Matthew ran towards the hallway to see what the noise was.

Reaching the entrance of the hallway, he saw his room, the last one down on the left, right in front of the front door of the house. The door to his room remained closed, however, the light was now on inside. Michael took a beat. His mind drifted for a second. This was it. He would come face to face with Adeline or maybe even Weston. Instead of running down to his room, he took very careful steps, trying not to make too much noise. He didn't want to scare off whoever the culprit was.

He was light on his toes. There would usually be noises from the old, dark wooden floors. But Wilson managed to avoid that. Finally when he reached his door. He placed his hand ever so gently on the knob. Once the entirety of his hand managed to wrap itself completely around it, he twisted it very carefully and pushed gently, trying to make sure that the old white, wooden door also would not make creeks.

When he opened his door, he was met with his lifeless room that he had failed time and time again to decorate. He was never the "creative type", that was always his ex-wife. His ex-wife decided to not show herself once again. He looked to the right of the room, where his personal bathroom was in the master bedroom. There was nothing. The unmade bed was in front of him. On the right side of the wall was his closet. *The closet.*

He quickly made his way over and opened the closet door. He ducked underneath the hangers and grabbed a hold of the ladder. He then angled it to head up the attic. Once he had finally reached the top, there was nothing but darkness. Just like before. Nothing had changed. There was a plate that he never moved. The pillows and blankets also remained. However, they were sprawled out across the floor, undone. "Adeline? Weston?" Matthew called, but no response.

The next day, Matthew decided to go back to *Leaf & Latte* around the same time that he did prior to unwind. He needed to be around a social setting. That was his true medicine nowadays. This time around, he ordered an iced Americano with stevia, the sun's heat was getting more scorching every passing day. At the counter, Elisa took his order with a smile. Eddy must have told her that it was an accident. She didn't make conversation, however. That was okay with him.

He waited at the sofa once again to be called. Looking around, he saw Elisa's mom in the back corner of the store dusting the table, windows, any and all crevices. She would occasionally shoot a very mean glance over at Matthew, which he understood. He was just happy to not permanently be banned from the establishment.

Ring.

The bells that were attached to the front door jingled as someone opened the door to make their way inside the cafe. The older man cocked his head towards the entrance. It was Eddy once again. Matthew shot a quick look over the teenage girl's mom again, who was already looking back at him. He tried his best to not immediately break eye contact, but it was too hard. He was filled with too much shame.

Matthew heard Eddy order an iced vanilla latte before the young boy then turned around, now making eye contact with him as well. *Perfect*. Matthew forced a smile, but Eddy beamed back authentically, to Wilson's surprise.

"Hey, man! Matthew, right, can I sit there?" Eddy called, pointing at the spot next to Matthew/

“Yeah, buddy,” the man replied, “Be my guest”, Matthew replied back.

When Eddy took his seat next to him, they glanced at each other, then both looked down at their own shoes as if they were a young couple bashfully in love. There was a beat of awkwardness. Matthew tried to find words, or any subject for that matter to break the ice, but that answer never came. He didn’t dare to look up. He felt stupid, why was an older man nervous to make small talk with a kid? Then it hit him, Eddy quite literally had all the power to get him kicked out of the cafe at any given moment. Matthew had to almost bend over backwards for the kid just to keep a clean reputation. Maybe he was overthinking it. Eddy didn’t seem evil. He definitely wasn’t. Matthew quite literally punched the shi t out of him for no reason. He could have sued. Eddy was more than a decent person. He was—

“So, did you ever get confirmation about your wife stalking you?” Matthew heard a voice from behind him. Matthew looked up to his left, where the young man sat. He could tell that Eddy was nervous, forcing small talk, almost as if he was afraid of Matthew. Wilson could tell that this was the young man putting up a white flag.

“No,” Matthew meekly replied, “But I know she’s there,” a wave of passion compelled his body, him now entering flow state, “I hear her, but I can’t see her,”

The light in the older man’s eyes began to dim when he noticed that a look of concern had washed over Eddy’s face. Matthew forced himself to cough a couple of times to clear his throat and stood up straight, “Look, kid, I’m aware that I seem crazy. But ever since I moved here to Govan, I have just had this *feeling*. ”

“Govan?” Eddy repeated back slowly, laced with such concern. “You’re from Govan?”

“Yes,” Matthew confirmed, raising an eyebrow, “How come?”

“That place is a ghost town. I swear, like, *no one* lives there,” Eddy sat back in his seat, looking around them to see if anyone else was hearing in on their conversation.

“Well, I live there. But you’re right, hardly anyone lives there, it’s why I come here,” he threw up his arms.

There was a beat of silence. Matthew noticed Eddy’s bulging eyes took a minute to deflate, but once they did, he began to stare at the ground, lost in thought. “Iced Americano with stevia!” Elisa shouted from the counter. It broke Wilson’s concentration on Eddy, allowing him to stand up and go get his drink. When the girl handed him his coffee, she smiled, “I’m sorry it took so long. My mom wasn’t sure how she felt about you being here, but I assured her it was okay,”

“Thank you, Elisa,” he returned the grin, “Yeah, I appreciate Eddy over there,” he cocked his head towards the young man’s direction. He knew that the boy had to be at least a couple years older than the worker, “Are you and him a thing?” he questioned anyway. Elisa began to blush a bit,

“Maybe,” she squeaked as she awkwardly broke eye contact, “but please don’t tell my mom, she would be very upset,”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” he lifted his coffee as he turned around to head back to his seat next to Eddy.

As soon as Matthew took his seat, he held his coffee up to his mouth to take a sip. Once he placed it back down, he saw the young man staring at him, Eddy’s eyes were laser focused.

The older man quickly took notice of the other's body language as well. The young man was almost leaning towards his direction, slowly, but noticeably inching closer by the second.

Matthew scooted a couple inches away. Before the older man could say anyway,

“Okay, I'll help you,” Eddy blurted out

“Pardon?”

“You live in *Govan*, man. I'd be paranoid too. I mean, I can help you set up cameras if you really think that you're being stalked. Then, you can look back at the recordings. Catch your ex-wife in the act. Show the police, I don't know. I just wanna see your house. Not in a creepy way or anything, just—”

“Cameras?” Matthew interrupted him, “I don't know why I have never thought of that,” he looked away, taking another sip of his coffee.

“After I get my drink, I can go with you to the store. You know, get them and help set you up,” Eddy forced a smile.

Matthew thought for a moment. He did suppose it would be easier with someone younger who understood technology. Teddy used to help him all the time back home in Los Angeles. However, there was that one incident. Matthew looked back at the young man and stared into his eyes. This guy didn't look like the one back home. Plus, if he truly wanted to see Govan, it was the least Matthew could do for him after beating him up.

“Alright, sounds good,” Wilson smiled.

“Eddy!” Elisa cried out from the counter, letting him know that his drink was ready for pick-up.

Before Matthew knew it, they were looking up and down the store aisles looking for cameras. He wasn't sure exactly which store they were in, Eddy told him to just follow him in the car, and the kid was going incredibly fast. The older man wondered why he was so enthusiastic. It was truly as they called it: a ghost town. Nonetheless, now, Wilson was staring at Eddy crouching down at the lowest shelf on some random aisle. He looked around at their surroundings. The store they were in seemed large inside although the outside presented itself as some hole-in-the-wall place. Practically everything here was. Los Angeles has some similar places.

"So, how was life before here?" he heard the young man ask as he was shuffling through whatever boxes were there. "Who do you even talk to? Especially if your wife... Nevermind, my bad,"

Matthew paused at the first question. Now, things were so complicated. Then? Then, things were much different.

"Life was beautiful," he managed to mutter out, "It was everything. That cost of everything wasn't," he fell into a soft chuckle. Eddy looked up at him. His face molded into something soft. Was it admiration or pity? It was difficult to say. However, Wilson paid no attention to the face plastered on his company, "Adeline and Damien.. Damien was a little shit, but not his son. Weston came out as this embodiment of light. All the good that his dad gave up. Now I'm friends with a kid his age," he looked down to his feet. The shame crept up on him.

Eddy immediately was able to tell the emotions swallowing up the man and continued to shuffle through the cameras on the shelf, even pulling his arm, along the rest of his body towards the very back of the shelf. "Yeah? Another kid? In Govan, how's that?"

“He reminds me of my grandson. His name is Marty. Or Martin,” then he remembered, “Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you, or anyone actually.. Have you heard of Alex Garcia? He was a kid who had gone missing what I’m assuming a couple years ago? He’s Marty’s older brother. Their mom is devastated and isn’t really doing a great job parenting, you know? I think Marty is being neglected. But I can’t call Child Services of anything yet without proof,”

“An Alex Garcia?” Eddy’s voice broke as he quickly stood up, staring back at the man. Matthew nodded. The young man gulped and grabbed whatever the three nearest cameras were on the shelf, “Here, we’re taking this”, he quickly began to walk away towards the aisle’s exit.

They were checking out the cameras, it was some brand that Matthew had never heard of. When the total came up to “four hundred and fifteen dollars”, the middle-aged cashier had stated. Eddy, who was in front, extended his arm for Matthew to hand him the debit card to pay. When Wilson took out and handed over his Chase card, he noticed Eddy’s hand slightly shaking. It sparked curiosity to a point that he didn’t care about the total price of the cameras. He directed his eyes from the boy’s hands to his face. Eddy’s eyes told a story. It was screaming how nervous he was. But of what? He watched him very intently.

When the cashier finished ringing them up and handed Eddy the bag, he began to head towards the exit of the store quickly. Almost as if he had forgotten that they had gone together. Matthew jogged his way back up to him, but it took until the parking lot since his knees were not as swift as they used to be. Once he had finally caught up, he dropped his arm on Eddy’s shoulder and yanked him back, physically stopping him in his tracks. Eddy turned towards him slowed, but his eyes remained glued to the ground, almost as if he knew that he had left without

him.

“What happened back there? You didn’t even look at the price of the camera,” He then pointed towards the bag that the young man was holding, “Do you even know what kind of camera you ended up getting?” the fire in his eyes began to intensify.

“No, sir, I just—”

“What happened?” the lack of information he had been receiving since he moved there was finally reaching him. The mysteries, the accusations, all of it.

“I-I’m not su—”

“THEN WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED, Theo?” he yelled. He yelled again. Something he didn’t register until a man passing by then began to dog him.

Shit.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Eddy. I don’t know what came over me. I truly am sorry, it won’t happen again,” his felt his face begin to warm up by the embarrassment that followed. The young man’s face expressed no emotion. He looked so incredibly tired, “Please, I cannot leave here. I’m so sor—”

“Respectfully, shut the fuck up,” Eddy shoved the plastic bag carrying the cameras towards Matthew’s chest for him to grab it, “I’m sick fo this shit. I’m trying to help you and... you’re a grown fucking man, Matthew. You need help. And enough of this ‘Theo’ shit, okay? Set up the cameras yourself. I’m out,” he began to walk away.

In a panic, Matthew ran back up to him. This time much quicker, perhaps it was the adrenaline. “I’m so sorry, I truly didn’t mean to,” he pleaded, however, Eddy continued to walk. “You look like him, you act like him, like Theo. Theo ruined my marriage. I’m sorry. He was

like family, you just.. You *are* him,” he stopped walking. That’s when the young boy turned around to look back at him in pity. He paused his strides.

“I’ll put them up for you, but you didn’t pay for my coffee this time. So give that, it was six dollars flat, and give me an additional six for being a dick. Might as well throw in an extra six too. I have a feeling you’ll fuck up again,” he responded blankly. No chuckle, no eye-roll, nothing.

“Yes, that sounds good,”

“Do you have Zelle? Apple pay?”

When they both parked outside of Matthew’s house, Eddy exited his car first. He has parallel parked his on the road whereas Matthew parked inside of his driveway. In Wilson’s right-side mirror, he could see Eddy’s face when he stepped outside. He looked horrified. His entire face went pale, as if all of the blood was drained from his body. His body language was not as animated as it was before. When Matthew stepped out of the car, he cocked his head towards the front door and led the way.

Unlocking the entrance as walking inside his home, he noticed that the young man wasn’t following behind him anymore. He stood in the middle of the driveway where Matthew’s Chevelle was parked.

“Aren’t you gonna come in?” he called, but no response. It looked like Eddy was going to have a heart attack. “Eddy?” he called again.

“Matthew, what the fuck is this?” he questioned

“What?”

“How did you even move in this neighborhood? I’ve never been here. Yeah, Govan is small and no one really passes by here anyway. But literally no one seems to live here. The grass is... all dead. The plants are dead. Everything is dead. This is where spirits come to die,” he rambled on with a singsing tone

“Oh, it’s not even bad here. But why do you think I drive out to Moses Lake? Let’s finish setting up these cameras, okay?”

“Yeah, before it gets dark.”

It only took a couple of hours to install the three cameras. One was outside at the entrance of the door with a motion detector. The second was right when you entered the door, the wall facing down the hallway, and the final camera was in the kitchen, facing the living room. In order to install the cameras that were inside, highly perched on the walls, Matthew had to get the ladder from inside of his closet. Now, it was getting dark out, and Wilson noticed how every twenty minutes or so, Eddy would look outside to see if the sun was out. It was now seven twenty in the evening and the two men installed the last camera on the wall entering the house.

“I guess that’s it.. No offense man, but why does it smell so awful here?” Eddy started awkwardly with his hands resting on his hips.

“What do you mean?”

There was a beat of silence. The younger man then forced a smile as if something wasn’t bothering him, “so, why’d you have a ladder in your room? Just in case of emergencies?” he chuckled, but Matthew couldn’t bring himself to force a laugh. “Okay, um, can I use your restroom before I head out?”

“Yes, of course. This is the first door here actually, on your right,” Matthew directed him, who was staring towards the hallway as if he had just entered the room.

When Matthew was waiting for him, he began to inspect the ladder. It seemed to be older, despite the fact he had just purchased it. He noticed that at the top of the ladder, it was chipped, and not just minorly. There were scratches as well. Had they always been there? They shouldn’t have been.

CRASH.

Eddy came running out of the restroom with both of his hands clutched in fists. There was once again fear dancing across his face. There was a pause for a second.

Then, he took a couple steps forward and reached out his hand to hand Matthew something. Before he knew it, he was holding the crumbled up piece of paper. He slowly began to unwrap it hesitantly. The paper wasn’t a full sheet, rather a ripped out piece of one. It read:

You’ll never find anything, Matthew

He paused for a moment. Finally, more direct evidence. Evidence that another was also able to witness. He felt a surge of release, but couldn’t tell if it was truly relief or terror. He felt cold. His body began to feel like ice as if someone had cranked up the AC.

When he looked up, he could see how confused Eddy was. Was this supposed to be something out of the ordinary? Surely it had to be, but he couldn’t quite tell.

“I think I’ll let you do that. It seems like it’s written for you,” he began to take the two steps it took in order to reach the door,

“You see this, right? She’s here, she’s someone where. I’m not crazy,” he began to

scratch his head. As he was talking, he felt everything getting foggy.

“Okay,” the young man’s voice snapped him out of it. “Then I wish you luck, Matthew... if that’s even your real name. But I recommend going back to the cafe. Talk to Elisa about Alex and Marty Garcia. She knows all about the racist history that goes on in this town,” he quickly unlocked and yanked open the door,

“The history?” Wilson questioned, but Eddy had already darted outside and back to his car.

Matthew had gone back to his living room and took a seat on his brown, leather couch. He sunk into it because of how old it was. He had gotten it at an auction a couple of weeks ago. It smelled like the definition of “old” did. He had only made the one stop there and back because he was still in hiding? embarrassed of making Eddy bleed at the cafe. The couch wasn’t worth it though, Matthew had to pay extra for the seller to tow the furniture over

He was now inspecting the piece of paper very carefully. It looked like her writing, it had some lingering scent of her favorite perfume, Jasmine Amber. Or maybe it didn’t look exactly like her writing. No. The authentic version of her writing wasn’t so “loopy” or even neat. She would usually scrawl, as if she was always in a hurry. Maybe she could have entered her penmanship since the split, be he doubted it. So was this the real thing or not? He held it up to his nose. It did smell like her .

RING. RING. RING.

“Eddy?” Matthew called, but no response. Eddy left around half an hour ago by that point. Was he running out of gas that he had to turn around? “Eddy?” He cried out again.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

The man hesitantly stood up and looked around his house. The lights were off and it was completely dark, except for the lamp sitting on a small coffee table that stood in front of him, which he had turned on.

KNOCK. KNOCK. RING. RING. KNOCK. KNOCK.

He took a few steps towards the hallways and paused to see if any more noise came from outside. It seemed urgent, but he was now practically sweating bullets. Eddy wouldn't scare him like that purposefully. Not after the note they had just read.

After giving it a few seconds to hear if there was any more, he was met with silence. Silence that was too loud. Who had been knocking and ringing the doorbell then if it wasn't too important that they had left? The quietness that swallowed the house whole opened a window of thought. Why would he need to ask Elisa about Alex and Marty? She does seem to know a lot about these neighboring towns. But what would history have anything to do with them? Why wouldn't Eddy just speak up himself?

RING/ RING. RING.

Now Matthew felt irritated. It sparked enough courage within him to march completely down the hallway and open the door. He was met with a woman who had tears streaming down her face. Her familiar curly hair seemed to be more knotted than usual. She never truly had a glow in her eyes, but this time, all of the life from them was stripped away.

"Carmen," Matthew croaked in surprise

¿Has visto a mi hijo? Mi boy. No ha llegado a casa. No come home,"

The exact line she asked gave him deja vu. Or was it deja vu? "No, me no visto,"

"Su nombre es Marty Garcia, Martin. He has eleven years," she cried.

Wilson paused. What was wrong with her? He inspected her. She was wearing a long, flowy dress that had long sleeves and was white with pink flowers. She was crossing her arms, trembling.

“I-I know, Carmen. Estoy Matthew. Yo know Marty. El es bueno boy. Que paso otra vez?” He was trying to figure out what happened with the boy this time.

“Pues no se que paso, pero mi niño. Mi boy,” she moved her hands to her head and squished her hair together in stress. It was that moment where her flowy sleeves had fallen down towards her elbows where it left her entire raw arm uncovered. There were scratch marks that ranged all along her forearm to her wrists, which were more severe. They weren’t just “scratch” marks, no, they were cut marks. Some were fresh, others were scarred.

The older man took a step towards her and tried to reach for her hand to yank her arm towards him to get a better look, but she dodged him and immediately took a step back. Her sorrow quickly melted away into rage. Her eyebrows were furrowed as she swatted the man away, yelling what sounded like witchcraft to him. The way she spoke was quick and her thick accent made it more difficult for Matthew to grasp even an idea of what she was spewing.

“Carmen, Carmen, Carmen” he interrupted her. She actually shut her mouth to listen to what he had to say “Que paso? What is wrong?” he pointed towards her slitted wrists. She looked down in an abominable manner. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. He could tell that she was struggling to say something, but more tears began to form in her eyes.

He held out his hand towards her and smiled, offering some sort of comfort since he could tell that she did not want to be touched.

“I’ll look for him, me veo por el” he assured her. He felt guilt. Everyone in that house

was going through something. She was incapable of being a good mom, but now he knew it was for good reason. She couldn't function herself, it was not like she was neglecting Marty or making him feel insignificant on purpose. She felt that way about herself too. Matthew understood exactly how she felt. Maybe he somewhat acted that way towards Weston too after he found out what Adeline had done to him. He felt so worthless that he couldn't function, he couldn't provide or serve. Most days it was just difficult to exist. The thought of self-harming had crossed his mind once or twice. But maybe he was too scared to. Instead, he projected those negative thoughts to boxing for a while, even at his older age.

He glanced over at Carmen's wrists again. He wanted to stare, but didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. He was sure she didn't seem like the kind of woman who would be interested in a box. Or the type of woman to even be interested in leaving the house.

“¿Cuándo was the last tiempo tu veo tu hijo?” he asked, silently proud of his so-called Spanish abilities,

“Ayer. He went out a play en the bosque. En the woods, con sus amigos” she tried to explain through her thick accent.

Matthew then peered behind the woman, where the woods were. Just on the other side of the road, past the pushes, maybe a mile away. He had never gone in that direction before. Why would he? It seemed like danger just waiting to happen. He nodded at her with a smile and furrowed brows, trying to assure her that he would go to try and find him. When she forced a smile back, she paused for a second and batted her eyes from his to the rest of his house. Almost insinuating that she wanted him to search for her son at the very moment.

Wilson gawked, hoping that she would say her “thank you’s” for now and head back home, allowing him to mentally prepare for the search. Now that he was thinking about it, Marty hasn’t been coming around as much as he used to. He knew that the kid was also having a rough patch, but if it is true about what Carmen has been saying, that he constantly runs away, maybe it has to do more with just being a dysfunctional family.

Giving it a few seconds didn’t change much. Matthew took a deep breath and zipped up his sweater that he was already wearing. It was one that Adeline had gotten him a few years back from a thrift store. It was a brown, thick leather jacket. What Adeline had done to him could never come between him and his favorite article of clothing, that jacket. He then took out his phone from his front right pocket to see the battery percentage. *53%, that’s not too bad.* He was planning on using the flashlight on his device to guide him to its best abilities. A phone can only do so much when it has hardly any wifi. None at all if you go in the woods.

Cough. Wilson signaled for Marty’s mom to step aside so that he can head out in search of her boy. She smiled, doing just as he requested. When he took a step by her, he got a whiff of her scent. He wasn’t too sure what Eddy was talking about prior, how the house supposedly smelled like something was going rotten. But that exact description was now matching what he was smelling now.

He tried to ignore it, addressing it would be rude, disrespectful. Everything she has been going through of course made it difficult for her to care for her personal hygiene. However, not caring for your child’s was a different story. Especially when your child was a pure angel. Matthew had cared for Damien through thick and thin. Through his good days and bad. Through every time he would get his shit together or every time he relapsed. He still tried to bathe him

and brush his teeth. It didn't matter that he was an adult with a child on the line. Matthew did eventually give up on him after the fourth time Damien fell from grace. Weston must've been three. But by then, Damien had already ruined any chance he had with his son. The bond between him and the boy was stronger than blood it seemed.

But for an innocent and sweet child? It's not uncommon for a mom to remind her kid to brush their teeth, bathe, or even brush their hair. Maybe Wilson was being a little too judgemental. She *did* lose a child after all. But in a way, he did too. Damien would disappear for weeks at a time. No note, call, or anything. Maybe a ring here and there whenever Damien would beg for money. But Matthew eventually realized what he was spending it out on, where he would hang out and stopped giving him anything, hoping he would come home. Instead, his son would cuss him out and go MIA longer out of spite, not even caring or thinking about his own child. Weston's mom only made everything worse, getting Damien to start. Calling your own son a "crack baby", Matthew couldn't decide who was worse.

After that, it made him step up even more as a parent for Weston. He knew that he had lost Damien, but here was a chance to do another right. It didn't mean that he was replacing Damien. He was just not who he used to be. The once pure version of him was dead. He had to mourn someone who was still alive. But Matthew guessed that he shouldn't compare that to Carmen either.

Who knows, maybe Alex was as close to perfect as Weston is. Someone like that who had gone missing for who knows how long? An innocent life was most likely taken, there was no excuse for that. Wilson would still be distraught if Damien was murdered. Well, who's to say that Alex was even murdered? Even dead. Now that he was beginning to think of it, when was

Alex even taken? But should he even ask Carmen that question, especially right now that he was going to seek for Marty? Marty *had* to be okay, though. It was common for him to go “missing” at times after. But this late at night? And when Carmen had previously asked him if she had seen her son, it seemed as if he would come back home before it was too dark anyway. Hopefully this time, he just happened to lose track of time.

Matthew took a deep breath of the crisp fresh air from outside. It smelled like rain, though it wasn't or hadn't been earlier. *Odd*. He ruffled up the red and black flannel that he was wearing and took a couple of steps forwards and down the front porch into his front lawn.

With each step he took in front of him, he sank into the Earth as if those sprinkles had been on, moistening up the soil. He felt the ground swallow his black Doc Martin's as he paced his way towards the end of the grass that grew in front of his house. Once he did, he took one more look back to see the mother of Marty's face before searching for him. It seemed as if each time he saw her, her face became paler and more sunken. The woman forced a half smile and waved, her way of thanking him.

It held no comfort, however. After receiving another note and how Eddy had been previously acting, things around there were beginning to seriously spook him. He had practically always felt “on-edge” of that town, but now, he was given more reason to move back to Los Angeles. Perhaps he would. Maybe all of this nonsense would come to a complete silence. Forget about the notes and how things keep getting misplaced. Forget Matthew's random anger outbursts towards even strangers. As he was approaching the road, knowing he would have to travel past that, the bushes and towards the woods, forget how he almost got run over last time trying to look for Weston.

Matthew knew that he had to stop stalling, stop thinking and just search for the boy. But

he couldn't stop his thoughts racing everywhere, even the crevices of the deepest and darkest of memories. He had this pit in his stomach. Something was waiting for him. Maybe even someone. But was it even in the woods? Who is waiting for him? Who is waiting for Matthew to find them? *Who is waiting for me?*

Matthew continued to push forward every so slowly. Treading with each step, he was dreading what he had stepped up to do. He felt a calling, however. Those things were going to connect together. He wasn't exactly sure how though.

When he reached the end of his lawn and the beginning of the road, he came to a hold once again. Before crossing, he looked both ways ever so carefully. He didn't want a repeat of his last encounter. Especially not right now. It would be embarrassing in front of Carmen, but it would hurt. Bad. Luckily, there were no cars. It was surprising that there was even one last time to begin with. It seemed as if Matthyew was the only one actively leaving their house. Even if it was to get groceries. He wondered how often Carmen would leave her house to get food. But he never paid any mind to her anyway. Marty was the only one he cared about and the boy would frequent him.

Matthew made his way across the street and towards the bush which he meticulously managed to get over despite it being full of thorns. He almost stumbled a bit when he went over it, but caught himself before he could fall. He was proud of himself. But now that he turned around to look back at it, it was not too big and he could have just walked around it. Yes, it would have taken a minute or two because of how long it was, but it would've saved him anxiety. Wilson regretted it. He regretted all of this but this was for Carmena and Marty. The older man looked up from the bush to view his front porch once again. Hopefully the mother

didn't see him almost eat shit.

However, the mother wasn't even then. His vision went from his own home to the one story next door. The house's front door was closed and no lights were in. Did she really leave him when he finally went a distance? She didn't even want to bother making sure that he was okay after he had crossed? That's something Adeline would have done. Well, a couple of years ago. Maybe now too since she just happens to supposedly keep such a close eye on him. He couldn't think of her right now. Right now is Marty.

Despite being Summer, the air at night was extremely cool. Goosebumps began to form and scatter all around the man's body. He was beginning to regret not bringing a jacket with him. The breeze would come in and out inconsistently, interestingly enough. But when it did, it would cause Wilson's nose to twitch out of being cold, but also as if it sensed something.

The deeper into the timber he went, the more it seemed that his body was starting to vibrate. As he would step on and hear the crunch of the leaves. He would always jump. He now felt as if he was being watched. His surroundings began to become too dark to the point that Matthew had taken out his phone and turned on its flashlight. The feeling of eeriness consumed him so much that he almost forgot what he was even there for. It took ten minutes before he even began calling the little boy's name.

"Marty!" he would cry in a hushed tone, almost scared as if someone else would hear him instead, "Where are you? You need to get home now! Your mom is waiting for you!" but no response. *Fuck.*

After calling out for a few more minutes, he began to wonder when would be a good

time to head back home? But if he did go back home alone, what would he tell the boy's mom the next day? "Marty?" he screamed out a couple of more times.

CRUNCH.

Matthew paused and looked down. Good, it was just a twig that he happened to snap in half by accidentally stepping on it. He continued to slowly push forwards. Entering the belly of the place, it felt as if more eyes were on him. It felt very similar to when he had driven to the old abandoned schoolhouse earlier. He could almost hear laughter surrounding him now just as before.

"What are you doing here, *gringo*?" Wilson heard a little boy speak. He quickly turned and began to look around to find the owner of the voice. It wasn't Marty, he knew that for sure. However, he also knew that he had heard it before. After looking around aimlessly, his heart began to sink. He had forgotten which way was the direction back home.

"Who are you?" Matthew's voice shook a little, "Did you happen to see where I came from?" he thought it was worth a try asking. There was a beat of silence but within that second, possibilities of never being able to find his way out of the woods lurked through his mind. He couldn't die there. This is probably the reason why there are so many missing people from Govan, they go in the woods and never come out. No one would care to even find him, no one stops by this town anymore. Even those from Moses Lake wouldn't bother looking for him after the miserable reputation he had built for himself. Oh, wait, Eddy! Eddy knows where he is! He would probably, most likely, eventually wonder what happened to him, Question why he stopped frequenting around *Leaf & Latte*. Yes, yes, he reckoned he would.

“No, y why would I?” the voice spoke again with such an attitude. It was ringing a bell.

“Do you know where Marty is?” Matthew asked again

“Ah, Martin, y porque esa información es importante?” the boy questioned back, with his slight accent. With that response, it rang the bell for Wilson. He was talking to one of Marty’s friends. He forgot who he thought was, their name. But he did know that it was the aggressive one

“Your name is Santiago, right?” Matthew changed the subject, holding up the flashlight on his phone to make out any sort of shadows at least.

“Santi? Chingate, I’m Luis,” There was rustling in a nearby bush to his right. He hesitated for a moment to go check, but how threatening can a child be? He surely couldn’t be so tough last night, it was a talk. A facade out of fear, most likely.

Matthew crept up to the pile of leaves and raised his brightness before deciding to crouch down. He wanted a closer look. When he had flipped his device back towards the bush, there was nothing.

RUSTLE.. RUSTLE.

Matthew turned back around and saw a shadow silhouette in the distance laying down on grass that wasn’t there before. *What the fuck?* He looked around once again to see if he was being pranked or not. Assuming Luis was a dick through and through, it wouldn’t be so far-fetched. Wilson lifted up his phone to illuminate whatever was on the ground.

It was a little boy.

Matthew launched himself forward, running towards it as fast as he could, ignoring the pain that was radiating all throughout the left side of his ribcage. “Marty! Marty!” he cried, but only silence followed. Now hovering over the kid, he dropped his phone to his side. The device crashed on the cushion of nature gently, saving itself from death. Wilson dropped to his knees and tried to wrap his arms around the child, but he couldn’t. He psychically couldn’t. It was too dark to see but it was as if his arms went through the boy’s body. As if Marty was nothing but air, an illusion. Matthew shifted his body to his right and scurried around the floor, holding out his hands, trying to desperately feel for his phone.

Finally he felt his device within the shadows and clutched it tightly into his fist. Luckily the flashlight remained on, it just landed upside down. When he lifted up his arm, he saw what was in front of him. *Who* was in front of him. It wasn’t Marty.

In front of Matthew lay another little boy around Marty’s age. This kid’s hair was buzzed and there were scratches, bruises, and dried blood everywhere. Surrounding the body were patches of grass that were far from green, but were a dark red, stained with what could have only been blood. Luis’ brown eyes were open, yet stared at the sky above him lifeless. Wilson noticed how his hands were loose, but appeared if the tension from fists were released. The young boy’s knuckles were bruised, as if he was fighting someone off, protecting himself. He was young, but there was no way that someone around his age was the perpetrator of this.

Things were tying together in Matthew’s head. He remained frozen, alarmingly calm for how he thought he would react, but his brain began to feel fuzzy, as if all of this was not real. “Luis,” he whispered towards the body. Luis was laying down straight, as if whoever did this to

him purposefully and carefully arranged his frame.

Wilson began to shine the light closer to the kids face, trying to examine him. Luis' face was of stone, as if he had died calm, or even upset. With that spunk he had always had, as if even in his final moments, he was not ready to accept defeat. It took Matthew a minute to notice the giant slit on Luis' neck. It was stained red as well. When the older man tried to touch it with his left index finger, he saw his body go through the other as if it were a hologram. There was no feeling, just a visual.

Someone coughed.

Matthew heard noise coming from behind him. He jolted and snapped his head backwards. There he was, Luis standing in front of him. This time, all of the blood that was dry, was leaking from every open wound on his body. His eyes were red as if he had been crying and although he had no hair, you could see the sweat dripping from down his face. "Have you seen Marty?" the little boy's voice cracked.

"What?" Matthew looked back up at him as he felt his body began to shake

"Ya se lo drowned Diego, no see what happened con Santi. They took him," water began to flood his eyes, but the majority of his face remained still, as if he was trying to be strong. You could sense the heartbreak from him, the corner of his lip was quivering.

"Who took him?"

"Do *not* decir mentiras! Do not lie to me gringo. Your people took them. Tu hombres también llevaron a Alex too! We were looking for him," the boy winded up his left hand, which was now in a fist.

Matthew held up his hands, pleading, "I don't know what happened. And I don't know

what you're saying about Alex. No se! No se! Please, por favor, where is Marty?" he shut his eyes tightly in fear. There was a beat of silence.

When he opened his eyes, the boy swung.

Matthew closed his eyes once again, but when he opened them again nothing happened. The boy was gone. He turned around to see if the body still remained on the floor. He saw nothing but continuous grass and trees. It was as if nothing had happened.

"Luis?" he cried, but only the wind responded. She was cold and hollow, as if she bore no feelings. "Luis, come back! Where is Marty? Where is Santi..." he dropped his head in what felt like defeat after losing the boy. *What is going on...*

"I didn't see anything," Matthew heard a softer voice than before, but still strong. "I was the first one they took. We just wanted to play,"

Wilson raised his head slowly to see another kid looking down at him with tears in his brown eyes. He was slightly shorter than the last. His longer, black hair was wet, and his skin tone was whiter than Matthew last remembered, which was astounding since his natural skin tone was already closer to paper. It was Diego.

"Who took you?"

"A few gringos. They're racitstas. I've seen them here and there along the roads, staring at us. I should've known it was them doing it,"

"Doing what?"

"The secuestros," his voice broke. Matthew stared at him blanky, trying his best to convey that he wasn't sure what the word meant. "The kidnappings" The little boy caught on..

SNAP.

It sounded like a twig had snapped in half on the right of him. Matthew turned his head, but no one was there.

“I couldn’t breathe,” he heard the boy speak again.

Matthe turned his head back to his left and towards the boy. His eyes were now grey, his pupils were no longer visible. His mouth hung open and water began to spill consistently, as if there was no end. As if he swallowed the ocean.

The water poured from his mouth, onto his clothes, soaking them, and finally reached the Earth. As soon as it crashed onto the soil, you could see mud forming from the ground. As the water was now approaching Matthew, he panicked. He had the inkling feeling that his time was running up to ask questions and this boy was more open to answering questions than the last. “What happened to Santi, Alex, and Marty? Is at least one of them okay?” he managed to force out.

The boy quickly shut his mouth and just like that, all the water stopped pouring from within his endless void of a mouth. Matthew took a deep breath, awaiting an answer, but Diego just stared back aimlessly as if he did not possess any answers. The little boy looked at the woods around them and forced a smile, “I tried hiding in here before they caught me and drowned me in a lake nearby. They made Luis watch after they beat him up. He, me, Santi, and Marty were all playing on the road. We had been waiting for such a long time. Some man in his truck approached us with other guys in the back. They called us ‘wetbacks’ and ‘beaners’. To go back to Mexico. That upset Luis and he picked a fight. Normally Marty calms him down, but I wanted to this time. They punched Santi and when they did, all of us tried running, but I was too slow. They said they were going to make him watch me die. That all Mexicans should,” he

looked back at Matthew.

“I’m so sorry, Diego,”

“Alejandro is dead. We never found his body, but we knew he died as soon as we...” he stopped himself. Wilson understood what he wanted to say.

SNAP.

Another twig was broken in half.

“He is. Lo escuche yelling that a Marty when we were trying to get away,” Matthew heard another voice from his other side. When he turned his head behind him, he saw a darker, taller, young boy with long, knitted hair and bright green eyes. His face read full of sorrow and was covered in dirt and scratches. His entire body was.

“Did you... get away?” Wilson at least knew the answer for him, “Did Marty get away?”

“They caught me. No se que paso con Marty,” the boy spoke, but Matthew at least understood what he was saying, “They kept me tied for a few days in some barn, school, or house. I think weeks, I’m not sure. No me dieron food. I starved. They laughed, beating me up with todos los dias. They talk about my friends. They called me mean names, telling me how I deserved this. How I deserved to die,” Santi looked down at his dirty and torn up, non-branded white sneakers, “I don’t know what happened to me. I went to sleep one day and when I woke up, everything was different,”

“I’m sorry Santi.. When was this? Maybe I can go find Marty if no one knows for sure what happened to him. He could still be okay,”

“I don’t know,” he muttered

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I can’t remember,” Santi looked back up not at Matthew, but almost through him and over to Diego. As if he was asking if the other boy knew.

Matthew looked back at the smaller boy who looked more lost than Wilson himself. He was initially looking up towards Santi but when he noticed the older man turned his attention towards him, Diego made eye contact with him instead.

“I– I,” the boy who drowned began to stutter, “I don’t remember. I can’t remember. Why can’t I remember?” he began to fall into a small panic.

Matthew jerked his head back behind him and towards Santi but when he did, no one else was there. *Fuck*. He turned back around towards Diego, but he had vanished as well. “Boys?” Matthew yelled. “Santi? Diego?” he cried.

Crickets began to sing, trying to soothe him.

“Mister Matthew?” He then heard the softest of voices. A familiar one.

Matthew quickly got to his feet and pulled out his phone’s flashlight, aimlessly looking around. “Marty?” he asked, “Marty where are you?” he paused once he saw a shadow move behind a nearby tree.

Shit. He was afraid to approach him. This had all felt like a dream. An awful one. After talking to each of Martin’s friends, he was surprisingly able to keep his cool. You can only do that in a dream, right? When he keeps on experiencing things that are not truly there where your body can separate the physical from the mental? But Matthew was not crazy..

As he got closer, he heard scurrying footsteps, as if the little boy was trying to get away from him. As an instinct, Wilson pranced forward, behind the bushes. His light illuminated his neighbor on the floor. There he was, lying down limp. He was on his back, his body barely

visible from the tall grass surrounding him. There were scratches and dried blood that covered his body. His hair was more rustled than used.

Matthew immediately crouched down in a panic and took the hand of the cold body. The cold wind sent chills down the older man's spine.

"Hey," Wilson called. But there was no response. "Hey, wake up!"

He began to shake the body, but was met with silence. While pushing the boy back and forth, he noticed the wet substance that was now dripping on his hands. It was thick, an ichor.

Matthew pulled back his hands and held them up to his nose. It smelled of copper. He didn't want to believe it. His heart began to speed up, his chest tightened. His voice, or his scream, was stuck in his throat. It was getting more difficult to breathe. Besides the quick, deep breaths that barely slipped Matthew's lips, there was only silence. Many thoughts filled his head at once...

Who could have done this to someone so sweet?

"What's wrong?" he heard from behind him. The older man turned around to see the body in his arms standing up before him with a smile on his face. There was no blood, though his hair was not combed as usual. Matthew quickly cocked his head towards the body on the floor, then back at the one who had just posed the question. *What. the. fuck.*

Matthew gawked at him. The rest of the boys? Who cares? He hardly knew them. If they were even real. For all he knew, they were just figments of his imagination. Martin, though? This couldn't be happening.

“You’re there. But, you’re also there?” he cocked his head towards the body on the floor behind him.

“What are you talking about, senior?” The look on Marty's face was of pure innocence and confusion.

“You’re, you’re there,” he turned his neck behind him. There was only grass. Matthew looked back towards Matthew’s direction. He was faced with only trees.

Matthew was all alone in the forest.

When he opened his eyes, he was staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, comfortably tucked underneath the covers of his bed. His body was covered in beads of sweat, a hot sweat. He immediately shot to sit upwards, launching himself forward without his hands, but only the core of his stomach. The adrenaline was all the force he needed.

What just happened?

Surely it wasn’t just a dream. The boys were right there. Marty was right there. Matthew looked to his left where the nightstand stood. His phone laid on top. He reached over and grabbed it. When he turned it on, he said that the battery stated that it was nearly dead. So did he or did he not use it the night prior? He then opened up his contacts with Eddy in mind. Then he realized that he never got the chance to exchange contact information.

He took a minute to take a deep breath. He didn’t know what to do next. As seconds began to slip away, all of the worry did as well. As if all it was, was a dream. As all dreams do,

the feelings that they conjure up when you are asleep eventually dissipate as you are awake. But one thing did stick with him. Why did Eddy tell him to contact Elisa?

It clicked. He remembered that the young girl kept track of missing people around this area. Rather older or current, it seemed as if she took such an interest. She could possibly help him. Why didn't he think of that himself?

Matthew got out of bed and headed towards his closet to get clothes. As he turned the doorknob to his closet, he realized his sleeves, he was wearing his long-sleeve navy blue pajama set. He *was* sleeping this entire time. But when did he even dress himself? Did he fall asleep on his living room couch and eventually woke up to go to bed without him realizing? Maybe he was half asleep. That would explain it.

After changing into a green, short sleeve flannel and dark blue jeans, he walked outside of his room and to the bedroom hallway. He didn't even get to make it two steps out before he froze after what caught his eye.

On the floor of his hallway, only two feet in front of him laid a kitchen knife. It was "cleaned" but stained with what seemed to be the color red. There was also a pile of clothes. Weston's clothes, such as overalls, pants, and shirts.

Nothing else surrounded it. No note, no other silverware. No dishes, no clothes, no mug.

Matthew didn't have time for this, not right now. He patted his front pocket to make sure that his keys were there and headed outside to the driveway. He needed to get to *Leaf & Latte*. He needed to see Elisa.

Opening the door to the shop, he immediately noticed how many people were there. Every place to sit was taken. I guess that's what happens when it's the weekend. Or was it? He kept losing track of time. He couldn't hear the voice in his own head over the bustling of everyone's conversations. He quickly looked to the left where the register stood. Elisa's mom was there taking the orders of the long line. In the back, he could see an older man of dark complexion making coffee. Matthew could only assume that it was the young woman's father helping out. However, he didn't see Elisa herself.

He really didn't want to wait in line, but it seemed to be the only option to get any sort of assistance. Unless he went straight up to the counter to ask for the girl. But after everythinking, he had an inkling that everyone would get upset with him. That Elisa's mom would get upset with him after he had made himself quite the reputation.

To the back of the line he went, behind at least eight people. He loved this place and their coffee. But when did hole-in-the-wall's receive such a following? He thought that the underground-ness was part of the appeal. As he waited, customer after customer, he truly noticed how many white people there were. He had never paid attention before. One pale complexion after another. The only other ones who happened to be of darker tone was the family who owned the place. Them and one other lady who was two people in front of him. She seemed fairly young, around her mid-thirties, from what he could tell. She only glanced behind towards his direction a couple of times, looking around as if she were paranoid.

Matthew heard when she had ordered: "one iced caramel latte please, for Natalie," when she finished paying, she turned around to try and wait by the wall behind them. On her way there, she accidentally bumped into a shorter, older man with white hair. He was around his

sixties and definitely Caucasian. “Watch it, Mexican,” he heard the old prune mutter towards her. The look on her face immediately turned into embarrassment as her shoulders hiked up to her head.

“Hey,” Matthew couldn't help but say something. The older man turned around. Wilson couldn't exactly interpret what the man's face was saying, “How do you even know if she's Mexican?”

“Excuse me?” the White man's eyes shrunk in shock

“I asked how do you even know that the young woman is Mexican?” he repeated himself, but was met with the old man's gulp instead. Matthew then looked over at the woman who was staring and smiled, “Where are you from?” he asked her.

“Uh-um,” she stuttered, clearly uncomfortable, but the look in her eyes were thanking him, “El Salvador,” she answered

“That is very lovely. Tell me, what's your name?”

“Natalie,”

Matthew then looked over towards the older man, “Sir, Natalie here is Salvadorian, not Mexican. Please apologize to her,”

“What are you talking about?” he groaned

“You know exactly what I'm talking about. You are being racist. That is not okay,”

There was a pause.

“Aren't you that one man who beat up the young boy?” the older man retorted.

Fuck.

Matthew felt a tap behind his shoulder. He turned around to see Elisa staring at him, her eyebrows furrowed as if he was doing something wrong, but her body language of picking at her fingers still displayed her awkwardness. Wilson glanced behind her to see that no one was there. He was next in line. “Did you want to order anything?” she forced out a happy tone, but it was clear that she wanted him to step aside.

“I’m okay, thank you,” he glared back at the old man and back at the young girl, “I actually came here to ask you a question. Can we step aside, please?”

“Uhm, sure,” her smile dropped, now raising an eyebrow.

They headed not towards the opposite wall of the register where Natalie stood, but towards the back of the building when you first entered the building.

Matthew took a step closer to her, they were maybe two feet apart. Elisa looked a little uncomfortable, but she didn’t sway.

“I saw Eddy the other day,” he whispered to her. Her face contorted, as if she was having a difficult time hearing what he was saying, but still managed to,

“Oh?”

“He said that you might know about some missing kids? In Govan,”

“Missing kids?” she took a step back, “Nowadays? What are their names?”

“I’m not sure about their last names, but they are Luis, Santiago, and Diego. But there’s also Marty and Alex Garcia,”

“Wait, wait,” she held up her hands, “Why them right now?”

“So you know them?” his eyes lit up,

“Martin, right? He was friends with the rest of the boys?”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“The other boys’ names are Luis Lizama, Diego Ortiz, and Santiago Martinez,”

“How do you know? Do you even know who I’m talking about?” Matthew scratched his head. She held up her right index finger to insinuate to wait for him before speedwalking behind the register and tapping on her mom's back while the lady was making some kind of iced coffee.

Elisa’s mom turned around towards her and they began to talk. The look on the mom quickly changed from curious, to what seemed to be furious. The young girl then pointed in his direction and an older woman glanced at him. Elisa’s mom put down the plastic cup she was holding, the one she intended to pour the coffee in, and pulled out his phone from her back left pocket. She then began to aggressively tap on it.

It took a couple of more minutes before Elisa came back, holding her phone up to reveal a photo. The photo was a picture of an older polaroid. In the polaroid picture, there were four boys: Luis, Diego, Santiago, and Martin. Matthew absently took the phone from her and zoomed in on Marty.

“Where did you get this?”

“My mom,” she then directed the frame from Marty and zoomed in on Santiago, “That is my great-tio Santiago. He went missing in the seventies. Him and his friends, right there,” she then zoomed out for the entire picture.

“What? No, that can’t be. He’s my neighbor. I see his mom, and they tell me about their brother—”

“Alejandro went missing a few months before the rest of them. I used to hear stories about this. This is why I’m not allowed to go to Govan. It’s always been dangerous, for one

reason or another,”

“But, his mom,”

“Martin’s mom killed herself a few weeks after the boys went missing. She slit her wrists with a knife. Everyone was hysterical, she didn’t even wait a month in case Martin came back, which he never did. No one did. But hardly anyone even lived in Govan anymore, there was no proper search party. It’s why my family then decided to move here. We’re told to never go to that town, that it’s a ghost town for a reason,”

Matthew shook his head, beginning to laugh. It started from the core of his stomach, “I just saw her. I just saw Martin and Santiago, I just saw them,”

Elisa began to look around worried, as if she didn’t want anyone listening to their conversation, “That’s what the very few people who lived there at the time said. It’s why everyone decided to leave again. The dead kept on coming back. Sometimes what they said made sense, as if they were learning new things as time passed, others seemed to be in limbo,” she coughed, “What my mom said is when she was younger, she drove there herself, not believing my grandma, who lived in the same neighborhood at the time. Santiago, that little boy who went missing, was her brother. She went to Martin’s house because that’s where my grandma said to most definitely never look, and she found his mom. All she did was cry and ask for her boys,” Elisa turned off her phone.

Matthew took another step back, feeling a pit in his stomach. She looked around again, as if she were now paranoid. It only confirmed that she at least believed some truth to it. But Matthew saw Marty frequently. Last night, was it a dream, or real? The older man stared blankly at the girl, not knowing what to believe. It was as if his heart had dropped. His body felt numb.

He tried fidgeting his fingers, but he couldn't feel anything.

"They, They're real. I see Marty so often. But, how?"

"I'm not sure. But stay here, I want to call Eddy to come over too. I think... *We* think something is wrong,"

Matthew waited at least an hour on a community sofa. It took at least half an hour to even get a seat. When Wilson saw Eddy walk in through the front door, it felt as if the world got a bit more colorful. Like he held some light, some truth. The look on the young man's face seemed earnest, like he knew something. Exactly what Matthew needed, more of the truth. By the time Eddy came in, the rush had died down, so he was able to sit down next to Wilson. It looked as if the young man had a lot on his mind.

As he took his seat towards Matthew's left, Elisa had reappeared from the back of the store. While Matthew had been waiting for Matthew, she was called back by her mom to continue making orders. It seemed as if that currently did not matter anymore. She took the seat on the other side of who Wilson assumed to be her boyfriend.

Eddy looked around, not as if he was nervous, but as if he had a secret that he kept under wraps. Did he happen to hear more about Marty and the rest of the boys? "Have you noticed anything off today?" Eddy asked in a hush tone.

"Huh?"

"Has anything out of the ordinary happened again? Like, things moving around? Footsteps maybe?"

"There uhm, there was a knife outside of my door, with a note. I think it was from my

ex-wife again. There were also clothes of my grandson, Weston,” Matthew leaned in, lowering his tone, “The knife was stained,”

Eddy and Elisa shared a look with each other, a firm one. As if something was confirmed. “I think we know something about that. It may all be connected,” Eddy turned his head back around towards him, “Can we come over later tonight? Maybe around seven?”

“Yeah, for what? If you even remember how to get to mine? I can send you the address,”

“Don’t worry, Matthew,” Elisa pushed herself forward into frame from behind the younger man, “I know how to get there. I’ve grown up around this,”

Hours had passed and Matthew was waiting on his living room couch once again.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Wilson turned his head towards the right, facing the long hallways and to the entrance of the front door. He saw blinding lights coming from the outside. A bunch of white ones and in the top right corner were hues of red and blue.

WEE-WOO. WEE-WOO. WEE-WOO.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Matthew froze. Was that the police?

“Matthew!” he heard the sound of Eddy’s voice very faintly, “We’re going to need you to come outside!”

Matthew slowly stood up and headed towards the door. Once he reached it, he gently placed his hand on the doorknob, but didn’t twist it, nor unlock the door.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

He heard the thuds over any other sounds. “What are you doing?” Matthew yelled back,

“We just want to talk! I promise! Please let us in! I promise everything will be okay! I got you, remember!” he yelled.

He was right. Eddy always had his back up to this point. Wilson slowly twisted the doorknob, unlocking it, and opened the door.

It immediately swung open, knocking the only man back. There were two police officers who emerged from outside first, looking around in such a crazy manner, it almost seemed cartoon-ish.

Then came Eddy. His face was smothered in guilt. He forced a smile, Matthew knew it was to make it seem like everything was okay. But as soon as she saw the forced expression, he knew that something was seriously wrong.

“Over here! Oh, God, what the fuck. It smells fucking terrible,” a police officer screamed after opening the closet door. He was a buff and tall man who had to be around six-three dressed in his uniform, but looking inside the closet, he even doubled down out of shock.

The other officer, who was a woman, heard him and walked up swiftly. Once she saw what was inside, she covered her mouth, Matthew was able to tell from behind her. Although he stood behind them a few feet, he still couldn’t see what they were viewing inside. *What did Adeline do?* Eddy glared at him, then took a couple of steps towards the direction of the closet door as well. When he saw what was inside, he took a deep breath, then looked back at Wilson. The look on his face was difficult to describe. It was as if he knew what he would find, but also of disappointment,

“What? What is it?”

The two officers stepped aside for Matthew to get a better look at himself since it was directly in front of him now. Inside were two corpses, decomposing. Their skin, or what is supposed to be skin, breaks down always. A lot of hair was missing. The bodies were extremely skinny and maggots were crawling all around. The bodies were one of an older woman and the other one of a younger boy. They seemed leaning on each other, maybe they were initially sitting up. The boy was on top of the woman. It was challenging to make out at first. But upon closer inspection, him slowly walking up towards the closet door, suppressing all three of the people standing outside of it, he realized who they were. It was Adeline and Weston.

Matthew fell to his knees, his hands pulling out his hair from his skull, but he felt no physical pain. The wood on the floor beneath them was stained red. It was surrounding the woman whereas the boy, not, it was only surrounding him. The color stains were splattered all across the woman's clothes, she was wearing a long, white, flared dress. The flowers were a light pink. The boy was wearing a pair of dark blue overalls with a white shirt underneath. The remnants of his blonde hair were ruffled as if something seriously wrong happened to him.

Before he registered his surroundings, he felt his hands being held together behind his back and the cold metal of handcuffs hugged his wrists. "What? What's happening?" he turned to the young boy,

"I gained access to the cameras too," Eddy stared blankly, as if he were now unfazed, "I saw you pretend to be her. You wrote those notes yourself. You took out that stained knife from your room. You must've brought it with you,"

"What?"

"The murder weapon,"

“No, I mean, you have it all wrong. I-I don’t know what your talking about” his voice broke as the officers grabbed him by his upper arms and forced him to his feet, “That didn’t happen,”

“You set up all their clothes yourself. You grabbed them from your room, I saw you go in and out. Right after you had come back home after hours. It was some time after I had left your house. You were waiting, weren’t you? Planning things,”

“NO I promise you, this wasn’t me, how could you believe it?”

There was a pause.

“Who’s Theo?” Eddy questioned

“Theo?”

“Theo,”

“He was our neighbor, around your age. We watched him grow up. We were close to his family. Eventually Adeline cheated on me with him. I tried to let it go, until she did it again,” he went quiet for a few seconds, reminiscing on the hurt that he had suppressed for so long. It felt like a knife itself.

“So you killed her,” Eddy stated. The officers were trying to shove Matthew towards the door, but Eddy held out his hands towards them and gave them a look to trust them. After exchanging faces, the officers paused, allowing for Eddy to continue. “What about your grandson?”

“I didn’t kill anyone, I promise!” tears began to run down his eyes. He didn’t take prior notice that they were even forming.

Eddy looked back at the officers with a look of approval. Before Wilson knew it, he was sitting in the back of the police car. Staring down at his feet, he took a deep breath. Exhaling, it all came back.

The initial shock of walking into his own bedroom to see Theo, young Theo inside of his Adeline. The yelling that followed. The fights between him and who thought to be “the one”, after establishing an entire life together. How could he be so stupid? But he tried to make it work, he saw that the tension was already taking a toll on Weston, his academic performance was going low and the ability for the little boy to speak even lower. He became depressed. So, Matthew agreed to try and make it work again.

It took only a couple of months before he noticed a shift in Adeline’s personality. Theo was nowhere in sight anymore, despite him living nearby. Adeline did not try as much with Matthew anymore, she lost all interest in “winning” him back. All extra effort and favors such as food, cleaning, sex, or anything else went out the window. Seeing that text going to Sea World confirmed everything.

He decided to act. He guilted Theo into helping him find a place unreachable, where he could be in his solitude. If the young man wouldn't help, Wilson was going to tell his parents what happened.

Adeline and him were arguing in the kitchen again after Matthew confronted her about the text. Matthew had no intentions of harm. All he wanted was a civilized conversation. But when she told him that he could leave, that she didn’t care anymore, he blanked. He saw red, he felt red. It was until Weston walked in to see the scene, did Matthew remember what happened. He was holding the knife over Adeline boldly. The look on Weston’s face was something

Matthew thought he would never forget.

He immediately pounced on the little boy, wrapping his arms around him, assuring him that everything was okay. They only got into an accident. That the yelling was nothing. That it was ketchup on her neck and torso. But the boy wouldn't stop screaming yells of terror. He was punching and screaming. Wilson held him tighter, trying to get him to stop, trying to calm him down. His chest pressed against Weston's face.

When his grandson stopped yelling, kicking, and punching, the grandpa let go in relief. But when the little boy's limp body hit the ground, it struck Matthew what he had accidentally done. He didn't mean to. He truly didn't mean for all of this. It was like a horrible dream. It was a dream. He needed to get out of this. He needed to get out of this.

Matthew took another deep breath and raised his head when he finally felt the cop car starting to drive forward. He looked towards his right and out the mirror. In front of him in the grass, in the distance right in front of the bush, he passed a little boy. It was Marty. For once he didn't look like he hadn't showered in at least two weeks, but finally well groomed and put together. His hair was patted down and there was no dirt on him.

The car was driving very slow, making it easier to see the kid. When they finally drove completely past him, Matthew lifted himself from the car seat and turned around to see his little neighbor still looking at him. Marty held out his hand and waved with such a bright smile, as if nothing had happened. As if everything was okay.

Wilson sat back down and back at his feet, forcing a smile, knowing that everything was at least over. The visions, the steps, all of the noise. All of the disturbances. WHO cared if

everyone at Moses Lake was right about him. Matthew still couldn't completely process what was in that closet. But there was one thing for certain, it would be silent at last.