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TRINITY COLLEGE
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

Life After—

Submitted by

Connor Sheridan
Class of 2016

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of the Arts in English

2016

Director: Lucy Ferriss
Reader: Ethan Rutherford
Reader: Daniel Mrozowski

Life After—

Will clenched his cigarette between his teeth while he pulled the sleeves of his blazer up over his wrists. Beneath his feet, the throbbing beat of electronic music filtered up through the open windows of the loft apartment he had just snuck out of. He was twenty six years old, too clever for his own good and not half as drunk as he wanted to be. He exhaled a plume of smoke out over the alley and removed the cigarette from his mouth, slowly pacing the perimeter of the rooftop balcony.

He just needed five minutes, he told himself. Five minutes would be enough time to take stock of himself and get a little fresh air before going back into that press of bodies. If he just had a little space, he wouldn't feel nearly so suffocated anymore. He barely knew anyone there anyway, it's not like anyone would miss him. He turned to look out on row upon row of tidy little brownstone houses built at the dawn of the previous century, lit by tall street lamps meant to evoke another time and place. Their tiny windows were illuminated from within by fluorescent bulbs and flickering television screens. The sound of footsteps on the fire escape made Will jump. He mentally rehearsed his excuse, that the party had gotten stuffy and that he had ducked out for—

"Hey Will," June said as she ascended the iron steps. To Will, June was everything that was good and right and beautiful in the world, and he wanted her as far away from him as possible. Her dark hair was coming out of her simple ponytail, the strands blowing around her face. "Jesus Christ, aren't you cold?"

Will shrugged and moved over to the railing beside her. "It's not so bad. I've got a jacket on. Do you want it?"

“I should be okay. Probably won’t be out here long. Just seeing where you went.” She glanced at his cigarette. “I thought you were going to quit.”

“Trying to.”

June smiled. “Fair, I guess. Can I bum one? Mike has my pack.”

They smoked in silence for a minute, the embers glowing in the dark. “How does Mike even know these people anyway?” Will asked. “A work thing?”

June shrugged. “Yeah, Mike did some IT work for this guy. I guess they stayed in touch.”

Will ground out his cigarette on the metal railing and flicked the butt into the darkness of the alley below. Will would never understand how someone as abjectly boring as Mike just happened to know most of the city’s movers and shakers. “Are you going back to Mike’s tonight?” he asked, not sure if he wanted to hear her say yes or no.

“Yeah, we planned on it. Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I haven’t had much to drink.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

Will sighed. “I’m going to be okay. Jesus Christ, take a night off, will you?”

“If you’re sure…”

“I am.”

June shifted back and forth. “Okay. Mike is probably looking for me. Are you going to come back down soon?”

Will glanced down at the alley below, wishing he had smoked his cigarette a little slower. “Just give me another few minutes.”

June started down the fire escape, but paused at the first landing. “Did you see the girl in the blue dress?”

Will thought for a second. “I think so? The one with the sequins?”

“Yeah. She must have seen us together, because she was asking me about you. I think she might be into you.” June raised an eyebrow. “You know, it’s been a little while since you—”

“I can take a hint, June.” Will sighed. “Look, maybe I’ll talk to her, okay?” June just laughed and ducked back inside. Will leaned against the railing again and dug in his pocket for his cigarettes. As he was about to draw out the carton, he paused and put it back. He pulled up the cuffs of his blazer again and looked out across the alley. Part of him wanted to call June back, but he stopped himself. If she was going to be all solicitous, he wanted nothing to do with her. They were always at their best when they were trading insults, but lately June had been almost patronizing. Will dug his fingernails into his palm and decided that he would go in for another drink to keep his mind off things, then he would look for a girl in a blue dress.

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June squinted her eyes against the morning sunlight as the subway briefly came out of the tunnels. The sky was still tinged with lavender, the sun barely above the tops of the smallest buildings. She had always had a hard time sleeping in, even on the days that she could. She had never needed much sleep anyway. She trudged the two blocks home from the subway stop past the old brick buildings with barred windows on their ground floors and then up the three flights of stairs to the apartment. June suppressed a yawn as she dug through her purse for her key. She swore as she dropped it before fumbling it into the scratched lock. When she finally got into the apartment, Will was standing over the stove of their kitchenette, flipping a pancake. He was already dressed in a long sleeve shirt and jeans, though his hair was disheveled. She could hear

the shower running in the bathroom. She flopped down on their couch, and after taking off her heels she propped her feet up on the small table covered with a handful of Will's paperback novels.

"Mike says hi," June said around another yawn, not bothering to cover her mouth. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through a few emails.

"How thoughtful," Will replied without glancing up.

"Well, maybe not hi exactly," June continued. "More of a groan-mumble type thing. Mike's not exactly conversational when he's half asleep."

She saw Will scoff and bite back what was probably a less than charitable remark before he finally said, "Most people aren't. Pancakes?"

"Yes please."

June heard the shower turn off in the bathroom. She turned to look down the hall to see who their houseguest was, but Will drew her attention back to him by tapping a knife and fork against a plate laden with pancakes. He was doing it deliberately, she knew. He wouldn't trick her that easily, so she paid him no mind. Her stomach growled.

The mind was willing but the flesh was weak.

When she reached out to take the plate from him, Will playfully held it out of her reach. "Come sit at the table like a civilized person."

June rolled her eyes but came to sit at the small kitchen table. "How was your night?" she asked, casting another look at the now-quiet hallway.

"I left a little after you."

"And did you leave with company?"

A woman walked quickly out of the bathroom, wearing an oversized flannel shirt and athletic shorts, her eyes low and hair still dripping from the shower. Will glanced over his shoulder. “I made—” She quickly walked out the door and closed it behind her, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the hallway as she made her way to the stairs. “Pancakes,” Will finished with a sigh. “Oh well, more for us.”

June looked up from her breakfast. “Was that…?”

“The woman in blue.” He stared at the closed door for a moment longer and shrugged. “Well, whatever.”

June tried for a smile. One way or another, this had to be a good sign, she decided. He was putting himself out there again, meeting new people, getting back to the way he had been before. “You could call her? Maybe she felt awkward now that I’m here.”

“I guess I could. She did give me her number.” Will turned to look at June. “But I probably won’t. I think she only did that to be polite. It was a one-time thing. It was fun, but… well. We didn’t really talk about a next time. We didn’t really do much talking, at that.” He absently flipped the pancake. “I liked that shirt. I didn’t say she could have it.” He put the leftover pancakes into a plastic Tupperware container and put it in their freezer.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” June asked. “That’s hardly a good breakfast.”

Will took a bottle of bloody mary mix from the refrigerator and a handle of cheap vodka from the cupboard and brusquely made himself a drink. “Not hungry. Besides, you have day shifts this week, don’t you? You’ll need those pancakes more than I will, with your schedule.” Will sat down and tossed back a mouthful of his cocktail before grimacing. June rolled her eyes. He always made them much too strong. Will took another drink and glanced up at her when she laughed. “What?”

"Nothing, I was just beginning to worry you were sober"

Will looked down at his now half-empty glass and shrugged. "It's half past ten so… no. You want one?"

June sniffed the glass and recoiled. Too strong for her, and much too early. "I'll pass. I'm still dealing with the hangover from last night." She reached across the table and touched his hand. "Are you sure you're all right? Not hungry at all?"

Will stiffened at the touch but did not pull away. "I'm as well as can be expected. Trust me. I'm fine." His fingers tightened around the glass and he downed the rest of the cocktail in two swallows. June saw him try to hide the involuntary shudder the liquor burn caused as it went down, but she had known him for years. She knew most of Will's little cues. Will set his glass back down on the table and tried to keep his expression neutral. He picked up June's empty plate and brought it over to the sink. "Why don't you shower while we still have hot water? I have a couple things I want to work on."

Will cleaned up from cooking and sat down at the table again with another cocktail, opening up a document on his laptop. He scratched idly at his wrist before realizing what he was doing and turning his attention to the task at hand.

Beatrice stands on a bridge spanning a dark river, running so still that the smooth surface reflects the stars above her. She tries to talk to Adam, but she can't make him see that she has to leave him. For all that she loves him, she was like a shard of broken glass, pretty to look at but dangerous to hold, and more likely to cut than to bring any pleasure. Adam tries to respond, but…

Will's fingers flew over the keyboard as he worked on the story, though he wound up deleting almost as much as he was writing. "Just two pages," he muttered to himself. "I just have

to get through two pages." It hadn't been this difficult before. He used to have a vision. He wasn't sure what had changed.

Well, of course he knew, but still.

But everything Adam says just seems to pull her in more. It was as though he didn't care that she would hurt him, rip him to pieces and flay him alive. But she has seen the scars he had brought back from the war and she cannot bear to carve deeper invisible ones so she drops his hand and turns away to…

June came out of her bedroom with her damp hair wrapped in a towel. "How goes it?"

Will shook his head. "Beatrice is still on the bridge. The fucking bridge." He took a drink and glowered at the screen. "I had the scene mapped out so clearly too, but it's just slipping through my fingers. I know I had it, I just can't remember it. And Adam can't get his damn words right."

"You mean you can't get Adam's words right?"

"More or less the same thing."

June shrugged. "You'll work it out. Just give it some time." She dug in her purse for her cigarettes and slipped out the window to their fire escape. Will watched from the other side of the glass as she fumbled with her lighter, trying to get the spark to catch. He watched the way she held the cigarette between her index and middle finger, the middle one bent just so, and the way she leaned with her hips against the fire escape railing. There was something about the posture that made it seem like it was lifted from an eighteenth century portrait. Will looked up from his writing for a moment, trying to reconcile the image of a European noblewoman in all her finery with June standing on the fire escape, smoking in her sweatpants and her hair in a

towel. Will scratched at his wrist and almost went out to join her and let her share the joke, but he mentally crushed the impulse and dug his fingernails into his palm.

He was trying to quit, he reminded himself.

He turned back to his manuscript and tried to type again. Maybe, he thought, he should just kill someone. That was supposed to help with writer's block and move the plot forward. Beatrice could just jump off the damn stupid bridge. That would end things with Adam. But that would mess up something else he planned later down the line, and Adam wasn't a good enough character to take over in a main role, like he would have to. Granted, he might forget what he wanted to do with Beatrice later just like he had forgotten this bridge scene, and then it wouldn't matter. Maybe, Will thought, he should just kill Beatrice out of spite. He might even have fun with that.

June watched Will through the window as he worked, occasionally tapping the ash from the end of her cigarette over the edge of the metal railing. She absently blew a loose strand of dark hair from her face as Will's face contorted into a scowl. She turned to look out over the alley, squinting in the early morning sunlight reflecting off of the windows across the street, and her thoughts turned to Mike.

At least Mike hadn't made her choose. She had been worried about that. But he had been calm and reasonable, and had helped her ever since she had told him. He had tactfully let the matter of moving in together drop a few months ago, but things were different now. Will was doing better, or at least she thought he was, it was hard to tell with Will, and Mike could see that too.

And it wasn't like June didn't want to move in. She loved Mike, of course. Or at least, she thought she loved Mike. Mike was stability and consistency and everything else that a proper

functional adult was supposed to look for in a partner. When she was with him, there weren't any surprises, and they didn't have fights, and he obviously cared about her. He was older than her by a few years, and he seemed to have a lot of things figured out. And if she was honest, she liked being out with Mike. June had had to convince Will that she wasn't just some girl Mike was keeping around for arm candy, that she wasn't grooming herself for trophy wife-dom. Besides, she wasn't trophy wife material anyway.

June knew that practically, moving in with him made sense. The money they would save by only paying one rent could be set aside so they could start saving up for… other things. Things like a family. A house in the suburbs. Going back to grad school. A wedding, maybe.

Those were the things she was supposed to want.

June never felt like Mike was trying to force her hand, but she hated deflecting. He deserved an honest answer, but no matter how many times she said to herself, "My roommate still needs me," it always sounded like "I'm putting another man first, because he's more important to me than my boyfriend." Maybe Mike wouldn't see it that way, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that June did.

***

Will knew that he needed to stop drinking on Sunday nights, because Monday hangovers were the absolute worst kind of hangovers. He had been telling himself that he had to stop for a year now. And now it was Monday morning, and he was hung over again.

Will dug through his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of Tylenol. He quickly swallowed two, briskly massaging his throat to make them easier to swallow. He took a deep

breath, shook his head and pulled out the next file from the stack next to him. The other nine people in the office tapped away at their keyboards, and through his headphones he could hear the soft murmurings of a conversation between Clara and Alice a few desks over.

Will skimmed over the file as he opened a new window on the screen in front of him. As he started to input the information on the screen, he saw Randall try to catch his eye. Randall raised one nicotine-stained finger and tapped his ear, and Will took out one of his headphones, raising an eyebrow. Randall smiled, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. “That’s hardcore, man.”

“What?”

“Those pills, man. You just throw them back dry like it’s no big deal.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “Thanks, I think.” He went to put his headphones back in, but Randall quickly shook his head.

“No, listen man. I mean, I’ve met guys like you. You know seem like you know people.” He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I was just wondering if you had a good dealer you could hook me up with.”

Will clenched his fist and dug his fingernails into his palm. “It’s not like that. I just have a hangover.” He turned back to his screen and began typing.

“If you say so. But we’re all here for a reason, huh? Hard to think why a smart guy like you would end up with us.”

“Shut up, Randall,” Will growled. Some guys had a face where just looking at it irrationally pissed you off. Randall was one of those guys. Will focused on the files in front of him and resisted the urge to pull at his shirtsleeves.

What bothered Will was that Randall wasn’t entirely wrong. He and his coworkers didn’t have enviable jobs, not that Will hadn’t worked worse when he was younger. But all of them

were where they were today through some kind of connection with the hospital. It was a temp program, to help people get their feet back on the ground and prevent any major gaps in work history. Will had been there for two months, and he had four to go before his six month contract was up. Karen, their supervisor, had mentioned to him that if he wanted to, he could stay on after that, but in a different department with a more permanent position. Some bookkeeping kind of thing. On the one hand, Will appreciated the offer. On the other, when she made the offer, she said she "saw something of herself" in Will, and the implications of that irritated him. Karen's associate's degree had long since gone yellow with age on the wall of her office, and the certificate the hospital had given her for twenty years of service was starting to go the same way. She was probably just trying to say something nice, but the implication that the best Will could do now was to be like her had put him in a bad mood for days.

At least the work wasn't very hard. The hospital was trying to digitize their records, and they needed people to enter the old print files into the new system. It was textbook data entry. Occasionally the phone would ring, and they all took turns answering it. Will could go in, put in his headphones, work his eight and a half hours and collect his paycheck at the end of the week. June had helped him get the position, and he appreciated it. The money wasn't great, but he could make ends meet, keep his alcohol stocked and buy himself a new book every once in a while. That was all he needed, really.

They were all a little messed up. No one pried, and for the most part they all kept to themselves. Over the past two months, he had learned that Alice had had an abusive boyfriend who had beaten her up badly enough to lead to a miscarriage, and she had various health complications because of it. Her boyfriend had left town and hadn't been heard from since she started talking about pressing charges. Once she had gotten off suicide watch, one of her doctors

had gotten her the job here, because she couldn't keep working in the plant she had been in before. Clara had been a heroin addict who was a year sober, give or take. Jay was a war vet with bad PTSD who was trying to keep himself off the street and out of his cups. Randall changed his story whenever he told it. Will wondered if he was a pathological liar or just generally slimy.

The end of the day rolled around, and they packed up their things. Will finished up his last file of the day and made his way outside, blinking in the evening sunlight after having been cooped up in a windowless room all day. He walked slowly to the hospital parking structure and leaned against the hood of his car, typing up a few emails on his phone with one hand while keeping the other balled up in the pocket of his coat, resisting the urge to smoke. June joined him fifteen minutes later, looking tired and worn. She was already most of the way through a cigarette. She leaned against the car next to him and smoked in silence for a moment.

"Rough day?"

"I had to handle two people with seizures today. Two! I think I got a bruised rib." She exhaled a plume of smoke. "And *then* I had to extract a buildup of cerebral fluid, but the lady had this disease I guarantee you've never heard of, so we couldn't get to it the normal way. We had to do it *through her eye.* Do you have any whiskey at home?"

Will gave her an aside glance and scoffed. "I *always* have whiskey."

"Thank God. I'll need a double."

Will had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from smiling. June only ever drank whiskey when she was wound really tight. The last time she'd asked for a double, she had singlehandedly dealt with five catheters in a few hours. He found himself wondering exactly how one extracted cerebral fluid through one's eye, and how painful such a procedure would be. Will remembered reading that Newton had jabbed a needle in his eye once just to prove they were

round, and once he got it out, the eye was completely fine. He wondered if it worked like that. He was about to ask June when she looked up from her phone. “Hey, Mike’s going to come by later,” she said as Will turned onto their street. “That cool with you?”

Will shrugged. “It’s whatever. I’m not going to be around anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, Erik called me the other day. He wants to catch up. I thought I might be good if I went.”

“Oh, Will, that’s great!”

“Yeah. I’ll stick something in the oven for you two.”

“You don’t have to do that. We can get takeout or something.”

Will pulled into their parking space. “I don’t mind. I’m not meeting Erik until later. Go take a shower and lie down for a bit.” They plodded up to their fourth floor apartment. “The whiskey is on the table next to my bed.”

Half an hour later, June sat with her hair up in a bun, feet propped up on the coffee table and glass of whiskey in hand. Will stood over the counter, chopping up vegetables for a salad. June watched his hands as the knife rose and fell, flashing each time in the fluorescent light. When Will slid the vegetables into a salad bowl, cleaned the knife and replaced it in the drawer, June let out a breath she wasn’t aware she had been holding. “You should eat something before you go,” she said to fill the silence.

Will shrugged and poured himself a glass of wine. “I’m not kidding!” June said. “How much weight have you lost?”

Will looked down at his hands and clenched his teeth. “Ten pounds.”

“Jesus Christ!”

"What's it to you?"

"Will, you don't have to shout at me."

He snatched a small bowl from one of the cupboards and tossed a bit of salad into it. "Fine. Happy?"

"I'll take what I can get."

Will cringed. "I'm sorry." He took a forkful of lettuce and chewed thoughtfully. "It's not like I'm consciously starving myself, you know. I just have no appetite. Like, ever. Without that little voice in my head telling me to eat, I just forget to. I guess," he said, drinking a sip of wine, "I'm just getting most of my calories from drinking now."

"That doesn't reassure me," June said, setting the whiskey glass on one of the books on the table.

"Hey, not on my Joyce," Will said. "That was a gift."

June moved her glass to the increasingly shrinking bare tabletop. She was going to have to buy Will another crate to keep his books in. He had already filled up several more, and yet no matter how many he piled in, he always knew exactly which one held which book. June didn't understand why he didn't get rid of some, seeing as he very rarely went back and read his books again. When she had confronted him, he had simply told her that surrounding himself with books made him feel good, and, if June was honest with herself, it was a fight she didn't care enough to have. Still, she moved the Joyce on top of a volume of Keats's letters, which Will liked more than his poetry. "All I'm saying is, there's this support group I've heard about. It might help you to check it out. For the drinking thing, I mean."

"I'm not going to fucking AA."

"It's not AA. It's through the hospital. A place where people can go and talk about their problems because, you know, sometimes that helps people. To just put it all out there. And I just thought, like, normal therapy wasn't your thing and…"

"I don't need therapy," Will snapped. "I don't need AA, or some damn support group, or your pity. I'm not *broken*, June!"

"I didn't say you were. I'm only saying that maybe there are other people that can help you in ways that I can't. I don't get it, not really, but some of these people might!"

"I never asked for your help in the first place. I never even wanted it." June's face fell, and from the way Will stiffened, she knew that he had not meant to cut as deeply as he had. She watched him as he reached for the wine bottle to pour himself another glass and then hesitate. Will sighed, ate another forkful of salad instead and checked the roast in the oven.

June tossed back the last of her whiskey and nearly felt it come back up. It was far more than she was accustomed to drinking all at once "I'm sorry," she said after an almost-dainty cough.

"You shouldn't have to apologize. It's just who you are. You help people. But I'm not someone who can be helped. I'm a goddamn time bomb."

"You don't really believe that. You're just saying it so we can let it drop."

Will turned and looked June in the eyes. Not just at her, but stared directly into her irises. It always unnerved her when he did that, like he wasn't just looking at her, the physical person, but also everything about her, her thoughts and experiences and all the little fibers that wove together to make June. Some men stripped you with their eyes, peeling away your clothes layer by layer. When Will looked at you, he was stripping you down to your essence. He wasn't

concerned with clothes, just peeling away all the little defenses you built up to keep the real you secret and safe. June nearly relented and looked away, but forced herself to hold his gaze.

Will sighed. “I’m just trying to keep you safe.” He tapped the oven. “This should be done soon. I need to get going. Heat it back up for about ten minutes before Mike gets here. I’ll see you later.” He took his coat from a hook by the door, picked up his keys and left without another word. June could do nothing but sit in silence for a moment, taking in the stillness of the apartment. Every time Will left like that, his absence was a palpable thing, like the sudden stillness that descended after a storm. The sense of absence pressed outward, straining at the walls of the small apartment and leaving no room left for June. She stood, poured herself another two fingers of whiskey and went out onto the balcony for a smoke.

***

“Will! Over here!”

Will’s lips pursed in something approximating a smile. As though he needed any help in finding Erik Torsson even in the dim light of the bar. Erik was a shade over six and a half feet tall, and seemed nearly as broad across his shoulders. The flannel shirt he wore strained over his chest, and his red-brown hair and equally vibrant beard gave him something of a rugged and unapproachable look, belied by the glint in his eye. Erik’s palm thudded down on the small table as Will sat down. “You’re fashionably late, same as ever. I hope you don’t mind that I’ve already ordered the first round. You still a stout drinker?”

Will gave a brisk nod and felt his smile widen before he could think to stop it. “You remembered.”

Erik tapped his nose. “There aren’t many men who can keep pace with me on a bender. When I find one that can, I remember his order.” Erik chattered on until a girl in a miniskirt carried over their drinks on a tray, a stout for Will and a local IPA for Erik. “You’ll have to tell me what you think,” Erik said as Will lifted the pint to his nose. “It’s a new microbrew. I didn’t mind it, but then again, those dark beers aren’t exactly my thing. Your palette always was more discerning than mine, anyway.”

Will took a small drink and nodded. “Heavy, but kind of sweet. Is there vanilla in it?”

“I thought the same thing!” Erik exclaimed. Then again, with a booming baritone like Erik’s, everything he said sounded like an exclamation, one way or another. “Discerning as ever! Really Will, all you have to do is say the word and I’ll fire my food critic. You can have the job by Monday.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll have to pass.”

“The art critic then. You’ve always gone in for that gallery opening stuff and the woman we have now is on her way to retirement anyway. I can hasten her out the door.”

“I’m flattered, Erik. But I’d rather not.”

Erik sighed and leaned back. “I’d do anything to get you back on the paper, Will. The readership was up in arms when Jonathan Strand announced his intention to leave. No one but Strand could get so many people to care about budget advice.”

Will took a long drink. This was starting to sound rehearsed. He didn’t doubt Carlisle had coached Erik on just what to say, tweaking everything to be just right. “I’d hardly say they were up in arms. There were a few letters to the editor saying they would miss my column. No one cares that much about financial planning.”

"You could have a new column if you wanted. We could come up with a new *nom de plume* to keep people from expecting more from Strand. I can put you on the front page of my section for however long you want, top billing—"

"Erik," Will said softly, placing his hand over his friend's. "I left the paper. I don't think it's right for me to come back yet. If I decide to, and that's a big if, I'll be sure to let you know right away." He drained his glass. "I thought you invited me out to catch up. If you're just trying to get me to take my column back, I'll see myself out." Fortunately, he had figured Erik was going to try to pitch this, and he'd spent most of the day thinking up possible rebuttals.

Erik's face crinkled up into a grin, making his eyes sparkle. "You can't blame a man for trying, Will. But if you insist, I'll shut up about it." He tossed back the rest of his own beer and signaled the serving girl over for them to order another round. While they waited, Erik drummed his fingers on the table thoughtfully. "You know, Carlisle has been asking about you lately. Were I a different sort of man, I might even get jealous. You ought to come over for dinner soon."

Carlisle was Erik's longtime boyfriend, a banker for one of the firms in the city. He and Will had done a fair amount of work together in the old days when Will had worked for Avery, Smith & Wesson, and it was Carlisle who had introduced him to Erik. They made an interesting contrast with Erik, the broad-shouldered, garrulous ruddy giant to Carlisle's slim frame and pale face. And oftentimes, a healthy dose of Carlisle's sarcasm and self-deprecation was just what it took to get through a conversation with Erik. After a few outside-the-office chats that had turned to writing and literature, eventually Carlisle had cajoled Will into letting him see what he was working on. Then he had put Will in contact with Erik, the editor of the local paper's city desk, where Will soon had a weekly column where he wrote about budget advice, economic outlook and market speculation.

“I should,” Will replied. “I’ll let you know what my schedule is like and we can set a date.”

“So tell me, what have you been up to? You completely disappeared after you left ASW. Complete radar silence. What are you doing now? Still living with Juney?”

“Yeah. You’re still the only one who can get away with calling her that, by the way.” The waitress came back with their drinks, and Will thanked her automatically. As she walked away Will let his eyes follow her back to the bar. He had come to this place with Erik a lot back in the old days, and knew it was one of Erik’s favorites. It had never left a mark on Will, but now more than ever it seemed terribly gauche. The red lighting that was intended to make it look alluring and comfortable just seemed gaudy. The waitresses wore too much pale makeup, making them look sepulchral.

Everything was just pretending to be something it wasn’t.

Will had the sudden vision of a bar staffed by the undead and lit by anachronistic gas lamps. He thought it might make an interesting short story. Erik snapped his fingers in Will’s face. “Hello, anyone home?”

“What?”

“I asked you what you’re up to these days. No one’s been able to get ahold of you.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. I’m working at the hospital now, helping them consolidate old records and information.”

“Like as a consultant?”

“Something like that. I’m contracted for a few more months.”

“Kind of a big move for you. Sounds pretty different from what you used to do. You sure it’s not a step down?”

Well, it wasn't in Erik's nature to beat around the point. "I needed a change. ASW just wasn't right for me anymore." Will tried to put enough edge into his tone to make Erik back off. He didn't want to talk about it anymore, and besides, Erik wouldn't have understood. Nothing bad ever happened to Erik. He had everything he could ever want.

Erik nodded. "I think I get it." Will had to hold himself back from scoffing. "Being in a firm like that is like swimming in shark-infested waters. One little cut and you've got nothing but fangs as far as the eye can see."

Will shrugged. "Sure, if you say so." At least if Erik thought he understood, he wouldn't press. Will decided to change the subject. If he got Erik talking about himself, the conversation was unlikely to steer back to Will. "How are things at the paper? Are you still writing obituaries?"

"For anyone who doesn't have family to write it for them." Erik smiled. "Everyone still thinks I'm crazy. The obit page is basically journalistic purgatory, or so I'm told. But I love doing it, morbid as it sounds. It makes me feel like a gumshoe."

Will rolled his eyes. "Sure, Erik. But if it makes you happy."

"Well, maybe not happy. But satisfied? Something like that. I don't know, it isn't much. A dead man is a dead man, and I don't flatter myself to think that what I do is helping to put these poor souls to rest, or helping them on their way, nothing pagan like that. I'm not putting a coin under their tongue to pay off the ferryman. I just feel like someone needs to tell their stories." Erik looked into Will's eyes. He had always been one of the very few people who could hold Will's gaze and match him for intensity. Will could respect that, even if he hated it sometimes. One of his preferred tactics was to just look at people until they stopped talking. "You understand, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I thought you might. You of all people."

Will scowled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you're a storyteller," Erik said with a placating gesture. "You're like me, like all good reporters. You look for stories wherever you go to help you make sense of the world." The large man was quiet for a moment. "Speaking of, how's that book of yours coming?"

Will groaned inwardly. "Poorly."

"Ooh, yikes. Do tell."

Will really didn't want to tell, but if anyone would understand, it would be Erik. He sighed and bit the bullet. "I've had to put it aside for a while. I just feel like I've hit a wall with it." Yeah, he had hit a wall. What he didn't say was that he had tried to climb it, took a spill and now all the king's horses and all the king's men were having a bitch of a time putting him back together again. "I'm working on something else though. More realistic than all the swords and horses I used to do. Love and loss and a second coming of age and all that."

"Sounds a little dry," Erik said. "That's what every book that gets hyped up nowadays is about. There's a man and a woman, and one or both of them have this dark secret, or some inner demon, or they're just wallowing in their own angst. And it's just so damn boring and heteronormative. All the reviews are just copied and pasted from the last *revolutionary* and *genre-defining* cookie cutter plot. Besides, I *liked* what you used to write."

"You were probably the only one."

"It was like Melville with an interesting dose of Tom Hardy, but it didn't put me to sleep. Dickens, but with more action and less exposition. There was excitement and cunning and

swordfights. I mean, it was just plain *cool*. Besides, that stuff was your passion. You loved doing the research and the plotting."

Will looked down at his beer. "Maybe you thought it was good, but no one else did. Hell, even I got sick of it. It was time to move on." It had been a diversion while he was in school, something to do to procrastinate while still feeling a little productive. Now, when Will looked back on his old work, he couldn't believe how much he came off like a hack. It was embarrassing to think how proud he had been of that stuff years ago.

"But you enjoyed doing it." Erik pounded the table. "Even if no one but you reads it, why give up doing something you're passionate about?"

Will ground his teeth. So much for Erik understanding. "I guess I just have a hard time being optimistic about it. I just don't have it in me anymore to write about someone daring and valiant. There aren't brave and clever heroes in the real world, or if there are, they don't last long. All that bravery and cleverness gets pressed out of them. Most people know that. I've decided it's best to stop lying to myself and pretending there are." He hoped the barbs in his words were enough to get through to Erik.

Erik placed his hand over Will's and sighed. Apparently not. "I don't agree with you, but if that's what you want to believe, so be it. I saw talent in you, and I think that's a terrible thing to waste. If you start writing again, tell me. I'd love to read anything you come up with." He smiled. "Especially if it's about pirates. Villain protagonists are in vogue, don't you know."

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June stared over Mike's shoulder, watching the blue glow of the television in the apartment upstairs flicker on the brick wall across the alley outside. It was weird how they always seemed to have the TV on, but it was always muted. Even when the windows were open and she was outside smoking, she never heard any noise.

Mike chewed slowly. "He could make money off of this, you know."

June cut into her baked sweet potato and spread a bit of margarine into the orange center. They always only ever had margarine here. It was cheaper than real butter. If Mike was the type to notice that kind of thing, she might have been embarrassed. "I've told him as much. But if he went to make money off cooking, he wouldn't enjoy it anymore, or so he says."

"I guess I can respect that. Still, if you're good at something, never do it for free." Mike adjusted his glasses and cut into his roast again. "I just wonder where he got this good."

"He and his sister used to cook a lot growing up, he's said," June replied. "Their parents were busy, working late and all that. So if they wanted something that wasn't precooked and frozen, they had to learn on their own."

"Your face looks a little flushed," Mike said. "Are you feeling all right?"

June blushed and looked down. "I was, um, I was drinking a bit before you got here. I'm a little tipsy, if I'm honest."

"Rough day? Want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly. How was work for you?"

Mike sighed and leaned back in his chair. "So you know that new client I've got?"

"The old Mediterranean guy?"

"That's the one. I mean, he obviously has no idea how computers or programming work. He keeps asking me to do these ridiculous things that aren't even really possible, or if they are,

they're totally not under my job description. And every time I try to explain to him that what he wants is *literally impossible*, he gives me some reply like 'I'm hearing a lot of excuses and not a lot of solutions' or 'I don't pay you to tell me why you can't do things'. At least the guy's administrative assistant can get through to him sometimes. I swear to God, whatever he gets paid, it's not nearly enough to deal with this guy's bullshit all day."

June laughed. "Couldn't you just drop the contract?"

"I wish," Mike grumbled. "But for all that this guy is the biggest asshole I've ever had to work for, his money is good. I can't pass up a payday like this one."

"Brutal."

June took a sip of wine and let her eyes track over to the window again. It seemed like Mike had a special talent for finding rich, obnoxious assholes, and he was competing with himself to find the biggest, most obnoxious ass in the city. Their money was always good, but June sometimes wondered if it was worth the trouble. It always seemed like Mike's clients didn't know a thing about computers, and he was always going uphill just to get the most basic tasks done. Maybe that's how it was, and maybe all those old people really were just that stupid and obstinate. Or maybe Mike just liked being able to complain about them, so he sought them out intentionally.

God knew, she could have plenty to complain about if she felt like it, about work, about Will, about the weather. And it wasn't even that Mike would brush her off. He listened to her when she talked, which was more than Will seemed to do sometimes. But for all that, something kept holding her back. She had spent nearly three years building a picture of herself for Mike, the kind of person that she thought she wanted to be, a well-adjusted person who could do adult things and talk at cocktail parties without worrying about sounding like a vapid idiot. She was

twenty seven years old, and she knew that she was a perfectly functional adult, but more often than not she felt like she was just a kid playing dress-up, saying lines in a play that she didn't understand, just that she had memorized from a script. And when she was with Mike, she felt like she was closer to the person she wanted to be. When Mike introduced her to people as his girlfriend, she felt a thrill not because it showed what they had, but because it seemed like the right thing to have. Adults were the kind of people who had long-term relationships, and because she had one, it followed that she was an adult too.

So she couldn't complain to Mike, because to do so would be to put cracks in the image she had built up around herself, and for herself. Every so often, she would let something slip, that she had a tough day, or not everything had gone well, or whatever, just to keep things looking normal. No one had a perfect life, obviously. But June took was careful to curate hers, just in case.

They finished eating and went over to the couch where Mike poured out a bottle of wine and June found an old Western movie on TV. They watched the cowboys shooting it out with a group of racial caricatures and laughed at the cheesy special effects. When commercials were on, they talked but never about anything important or interesting. June had thought to wait up for Will, but when midnight came and he wasn't home yet, she and Mike went to bed.

She didn't hear the door open about half an hour later, and had no idea that Will stood for a moment in the kitchen, his fingers itching to pour himself another drink but knowing that it was a bad idea. As he walked to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he heard small noises coming from June's room, the sounds of shifting weight and moving sheets, the soft sighs and breaths that accompanied sex. Well, the kinds of noises that accompanied boring sex. At least as far as he was concerned, for sex to be remotely good, it needed to have some percussion.

Will allowed himself a cynical smile as he spat out his toothpaste and looked into the cracked bathroom mirror. But hey, good for her. She had sex two nights in a row, and would probably have it again in the next few days. The perks of having a stable relationship.

He tossed his shirt into the growing pile in the corner and didn't bother changing out of his jeans. He looked around at the few picture frames he had around his bedroom, all turned facedown so he didn't have to look at them. He kept meaning to put them in a box somewhere, but he worried that if he did, he would never take them out again, and a small part of him didn't want that. He opened up the novel sitting on his bedside table and read a few pages, but his eyes were passing over the words without really taking them in, and when he realized he was reading the same three sentences over and over, he put the book aside and tried to go to sleep.

Sleep did not come easily to him now, and he counted himself lucky if he managed to get more than four hours a night. But he usually managed to find a way to relax. Sometimes, that helped him to drowse, and while he very rarely felt rested in the morning, at least he wasn't a walking zombie. He had tried sleeping pills, and they had worked for a little while. But after the first few months, they had the opposite effect and made it even harder for him to sleep. Drinking helped, sometimes. And at least when he was drunk, he didn't dream.

Morning came eventually, like it always did.

Will trudged into the kitchen, turned on the coffee machine and put a piece of bread in the toaster. Mike was sitting at the kitchen table, scanning the news on his tablet. He looked up and smiled. "Good morning. June left a while ago, and I'll be taking off soon."

Will shrugged. "Okay. Have you eaten?"

"I had some cereal before you woke up. How're things?"

“I’m doing all right,” Will gave the standard response. When people asked you how you were, they didn’t really care. Or at least they didn’t expect an honest answer. You just told them you were fine. That’s just how it worked.

“Your toast is burning.” Mike’s voice startled Will out of his reverie and he quickly popped the bread out of the toaster. As he spread on some peanut butter and poured himself some coffee, he watched as Mike typed up an email. He wondered if Mike felt like he was slumming it whenever he stayed here with June. Will had been to his apartment before a few times, mostly for parties Mike had thrown. It was all very new and shiny and artificial. The appliances were all top of the line and chrome. The art was all modernist crap, colored geometric shapes on monochrome backgrounds. All of it reeked of an excess of new money and a dearth of good taste. Mike had the good fortune of having learned a couple of coding languages in high school, sticking with it through college, and then getting into the tech boom on the ground floor. He worshipped at the altar of Silicon Valley and paid homage to the great prophet Steve Jobs, peace be upon him.

“Help yourself to the coffee,” Will told him, because that was also something you said when you had a houseguest. He made himself a sandwich and put it in a paper bag. “I have to get going. Make sure to lock the door when you leave?”

The wind was blowing harder than it had any right to, much too cold and violent for mid-October. When Will left work after putting in his eight and a half hours, he saw Jay and Clara walking together towards the train station, Clara standing behind Jay and using him as a windbreak. Will tried to remember if he had seen them talking together before now, if they were friends, but he couldn’t recall.

The gale continued to howl even after Will reached the underground parking structure, whipping dust through the air and stinging his eyes. When he finally got into his car, he checked his phone, something he usually did on the walk over. June was working late again and asked him to pick up some milk on the way home. There was also a text from a number he didn't recognize, asking him if he was free this weekend and if he wanted to go for drinks somewhere, because whoever had sent it had fun the last time.

It took Will a moment, but he eventually realized that it was the girl in the blue dress. He must have given her his number, or she had gotten it from his phone. Will put his phone down and put his car in gear. As he navigated the route home, he considered how he ought to respond, and if he should respond at all. This girl in blue only thought she liked him. If she really knew who he was, she wouldn't want to see him again. She was happy and well-adjusted and normal. She deserved better.

But she deserved a response, at the very least. Will quickly typed back that he was going to be out of town this weekend and they could try to go for drinks some other time. It felt strange to lie, but it seemed like the best way to put it to avoid hurting her feelings. Then again, she had walked out on him without a word, so maybe he didn't care. Perhaps she would get the message that he wasn't interested, or maybe he would feel better about it if she reached out to him again, though he doubted it. He changed out of his work clothes and tried to write for a little while, to settle his thoughts until June got home, but he quickly became frustrated. The words never seemed quite right.

Eventually, he put it aside and went to make dinner, preheating the oven while he set out what he needed for the mushroom and onion sauce he would serve it with. Once the oven was hot enough, he put in two potatoes and began to cook two chicken breasts on the stovetop.

Normally when June worked late, she got home a little after seven, but Will had started cooking early. When he finished, it was still only half past six. He put the mushroom sauce in a small pan on the back boiler and turned the heat on a low simmer, while putting June's portion in the oven to keep warm. Will set his laptop on the small kitchen table next to his plate and began picking at his dinner while he worked.

The moonlight shone silver on the lakeshore, making the bare birch trees glow with an ethereal light that seemed to drink in the darkness more than dispel it. The trunks reached for the inky black sky like grasping hands eager to pull the dark curtain back. Beatrice picked her way along the rocky shore…

"No, damn it, that's just—" He muttered a brief stream of profanity as he deleted everything he had written. It all sounded too stilted, too overwrought. It needed to sound natural, the way Beatrice would say it. He reached for the open wine bottle and poured himself another glass. Beatrice wouldn't say how it looked, but how it made her feel, the chill that it sent through her and the loneliness—

The door to the apartment swung open. "I'm home!" June said from the front hall.

"I left some chicken and a potato in the oven for you," Will called. "It should still be warm."

"Did you get the milk like I asked?"

Will paused with his wine glass halfway to his mouth. "Oh, damn it." He saw June bite down on her lip and sigh like she always did when she was trying not to show her frustration. "I'm sorry, I got distracted on the way out and it totally slipped my mind. I'll get it tomorrow, I promise."

“You always do this,” June said. “You know what, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. It’s better if I do it myself.”

“June, I’m sorry.” Will watched as June retied her hair and took her dinner from the kitchen. He let her sit down and have a few bites. “How was work?”

“About what you’d expect. Twelve hours of being up to my elbows in blood, piss and shit.” She cut into her baked potato and spread a bit of margarine into the gash before pressing it closed again so that it could melt. “Pour me some wine?” Will obliged and let her get back to her food. He forced himself back into the moment he had been in when June stepped through the door, using the moonlight to convey how isolated and cold Beatrice felt, the way the night air pricked at her skin and—

“—called me on my lunch break and we talked about moving in again. And I know it makes sense but…” She trailed off, sighed and went back to eating.

Will blinked and tried to trace the conversation back, pouring himself a little more wine to buy himself time to think. “It would be good for you to get out of here. You’ve been dating for almost three years. He cares about you, and you care about him. Now’s the time, right?”

“I guess. But I’d worry about you.”

“I can take care of myself. I don’t need you.” An edge had crept into Will’s voice. He hadn’t meant for it to come off as harshly as it did, but from the pained grimace June gave him, it was clear he had hurt her. He started to apologize, but June cut him off.

“I can’t just leave you all alone.”

“I’ll be fine. You can go and not feel guilty.”

June rose to her feet. “You know I can’t just do that! I’m not walking out on you again!” June shook her head. “I need a cigarette.” She took her pack from her coat pocket and opened the

window to the fire escape. Will heard the click of her lighter and muffled swearing as the wind kept putting out the flame. The chill from the open window quickly became uncomfortable, so Will wandered to his bedroom to put his hands over the heater. When he had calmed himself down, he went to his bureau and picked up his bottle of antidepressants. The pills messed with his head, made him feel like he wasn't fully in control, and more often than not he didn't bother taking them.

He had learned early on that he couldn't write well when he was on the pills. June had looked over the stuff he had written back then and said it didn't read any differently than his usual work, but it didn't *feel* right. Besides, she didn't know anything about writing anyway. He decided that trying to write helped him more than the pills did, and if he could only have one, he would do the thing that made him feel best.

Will sort of wished that June had called him out on not taking the pills so they could have had this fight weeks ago. Will picked up one of the family photos he kept face down on his nightstand. It was taken at a cousin's wedding a few years ago, back before everything. Back then he had worn his shirt sleeves rolled up, and the photographer had snapped the picture right before he had burst out laughing at a witty quip Katie had made. His smiles had reached his eyes a few years ago, he noted with a pang. He slowly turned the picture frame back down.

He was okay with that usually, but sometimes being reminded hurt more than it should.

Will walked back into the living room and refreshed his glass. June was back inside, and the window was closed again. "Hey, sorry about that," she said. She stuck her plate in the dishwasher and sat back down. "I wasn't really thinking right."

"You don't have to apologize," Will replied. "I was being an ass. I shouldn't have snapped at you. You have a rough enough day as it is, doing what you do." Neither of them said

anything for a moment. Will rolled his shoulders in a small shrug. “But I was serious. You ought to move in with Mike if I’m the only thing holding you back. It’s not like we couldn’t be friends anymore. I’d still see you around. You could still use the car, if you needed.”

“I know, but you all alone…”

“I’d manage.”

“Maybe you should find someone. It would be good for you.”

Will froze for a second and he barely stopped his hand from creeping down to the phone in his pocket, to cover it, to hide it. “I’m not ready for that right now. Maybe when I start feeling like myself again. Maybe in a few months.”

“You know, I think it would help to have someone you can open up to and be honest around, someone other than me. Someone who will get to know you over time, like I did.”

“I’m better off on my own.”

“Take it slow. You would have time to be able to explain everything.”

“It’s not that simple, June.”

June put her hands up in a gesture of surrender and backed down. When the silence between them grew too long and uncomfortable, she walked back into the kitchen and began rearranging things in the drawers. After a moment, she put a hand on her pocket. “Um, Mike is calling again. I’m going to go take this.” Will nodded and watched as she walked into her bedroom. June had never been a good liar, and Will wondered why she even bothered to try anymore. She knew that he knew Mike wasn’t calling. She never left her phone on silent when she was home. But they both had little white lies they would tell each other when they needed a few minutes alone and wanted to save face. It just so happened that Will was much better at

spinning his than she was. Will tried to respect her space the same way June tried to respect his. It was one of the biggest reasons they had been friends this long.

Will pulled on his coat and took what was left of the wine bottle out onto the fire escape. He leaned against the rusty iron railing and tipped the bottle up to his mouth. Will closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the dark city, the car engines and alley cats and distant police sirens. Someone was shouting somewhere. A throbbing bass beat played in a nearby building. The shrieking wind and cold air tore the breath from his throat and brought color to his cheeks. It was a chaotic mess out here, dirty and noisy and nothing made sense. And knowing that made Will feel at peace, if only for a little while.

He steadied himself on the railing as his head started to spin, the full effects of the alcohol just now getting to him. He put the bottle down by the window and braced himself on the platform, letting the cold sober him up a little. June stepped out onto the platform not long after that. “You feeling okay?”

Will nodded. “Come on, drink with me.” When June took the bottle, Will turned his head over the railing and spat. “I don’t deserve a friend like you. You put up with all my bullshit.”

“Of course I do. That’s what friends are for.”

“Don’t be so modest.”

“You’re just at a rough point. You did the same for me back when we were in college.”

“I guess so. But you were never this bad.” Will reached out for the bottle but stopped himself, digging his fingernails into his palm. “I’m glad you’re still with me.” The wind whipped past, howling through the alley between the buildings. Will looked up at the narrow rectangle of sky above their heads. “Remember how we used to stay out all night and watch the sunrise? How long’s it been since we did that?”

"At least a year and a half." June saw Will was scratching at his wrist again. "You shouldn't pick at it, you know. It's a bad habit."

"Yeah, sorry." He smiled at her.

June smiled back and took another drink, hoping the alcohol would warm her up. Will was leaning out over the rail, his eyes closed and face turned up to the sky. The wind caught his coattails and made them flap about his waist. He looked almost like a crow ruffling its feathers, ready to spread its wings, to leap into the air and fly, even if it was just for a moment. "Careful," she said. "It's a long way down."

Will seemed to consider that for a moment before shrugging and stepping back. He took the wine bottle from her and drank. "I read somewhere once," he said slowly, obviously picking his words carefully, "that the people who jump off bridges and buildings and whatnot, the ones they manage to save with the big mattresses and stuff, they almost all regret what they'd done. They wished they hadn't jumped."

June recoiled. This was dangerous ground, and Will was obviously not thinking right. She had to be careful what she said next, couldn't push him too hard, or else. Will considered the wine bottle for a moment. "But you know, I think that's a load of bullshit. I think those people just lacked resolve. If they had been serious about it, they would hate the fact that they had been saved."

June steadied herself and tried to stop shaking. "And you? You had resolve?"

Will glanced down at the cuffs of his jacket that had ridden up enough to show a collection of mostly parallel vertical scars on his wrists. "Yeah. When I woke up in the hospital, I knew what had happened. And I *hated* you for it. I understood why you did it, I mean, it is your job after all. But still." He sighed and shook his head. "I got over it. I'm okay with it now."

"I know things were bad for you, but really, there had to have been another way."

"I don't know." Will's voice was different now, more detached, almost rehearsed. "I'm not sure there was. I wanted to embrace eternity, to be transcendent. People can't do that. Not when they're alive, I mean. I guess I just wanted a straight answer as to whether or not there was a hereafter."

"You didn't embrace the sublime or any of that crap. All you did was nearly bleed out in our goddamn bathtub."

Will shrugged. "I suppose that's how you'd see it. I thought if I did it my way, you could just run some water, toss in some toilet cleaner and wash it out afterwards. I didn't want to leave a mess. That wouldn't have been fair to you."

"You think I'd want to live here after you… you…?"

"Killed myself? You should say it out loud, June." Will sighed. "No, I didn't think you'd stick around, but I didn't want you to have to repaint a room or anything to cover up the blood for the new tenant. I'd assumed you would just move in with Mike after I was gone."

June shook her head. "Fuck you. How can you be so calm about the whole thing? If I hadn't gotten home when I did, and if I wasn't a nurse, I mean, Jesus, Will."

"I already said I didn't regret doing it." A note of anger or perhaps impatience had crept into his voice. With Will it was hard to tell, because one so quickly led to the other. "I mean, I'm not going to cut open my wrists again, but at the time the decision seemed the right thing to do." He held up a hand. "No, I get it, I should have talked to you, or somebody, and gotten some help. But back then I wasn't exactly being logical, was I? Objectively I can look back and know my thought process was flawed now, but then I didn't really care."

"How can you approach this so clinically?"

“It’s easier that way. I didn’t want to be alive anymore, so I decided to not be. I mean obviously I fucked it up so I’ll have to try something different.”

“After all this shit, and you’re talking about doing it again?” June snapped.

“Well, not in the same way, no. But I’ve considered it.”

“Will, you need help. I know therapy didn’t work. I know you don’t want to admit there’s something wrong, but Jesus fucking Christ you need help.”

Will shrugged. “I’d rather not drag anyone else down with me.”

“You wait there,” June said, and ducked back inside. Will shrugged as she rummaged around through the back of one of their drawers, behind where she kept the first aid kit. When June stepped out onto the fire escape again, she was holding something wrapped in a dishtowel. She held it out wordlessly to Will.

He took it from her and slowly unwrapped the towel. Some of the ambient light from inside the apartment glinted off the reflective surface of the object inside, and Will switched his grip. He held up the broken mirror shard and turned it over in his hand. Some of the blood had crusted over on the jagged edge, and it was obvious June had never bothered to clean it. The mirror shard was tarnished and the sharp bits he had used to open up the veins in his wrists had dulled with time. “You hung onto this?”

“Yes.” She studied his face, looking to see if there was any reaction. “Why did you use the mirror?”

“Part of the process. I knew I’d have to break the mirror to do it, and I had a feeling I’d wind up hurting my hands if I did that. And obviously, it hurt like a bitch. I figured if I didn’t have the nerve to deal with that pain, I wouldn’t be able to go through with it and then I could have backed out and passed it off as a panic attack or something. But honestly, after breaking the

mirror I mostly just felt numb, so I went through with it. The rest is history. Plus," he said with a shrug. "It was kind of poetic. Why did you keep this?"

"I don't know. It seemed like the right thing to do."

Will grunted by way of reply. His muscles tensed, and June moved to grab him before he could hurt himself again. Will shook out of her grasp and hurled the mirror shard at the wall of the neighboring building with a kind of fury June had never seen in him before. The way his face curled into a snarl, the potential for violence lurking in his eyes told her that no matter what Will might claim to the contrary, that hatred was still there. When the piece of glass and silver cracked into a multitude of glittering pieces, Will barked out a short, humorless laugh before seizing the wine bottle from her hand and draining it in three swallows. He coughed once and then nodded, his strange aggression seemingly abated. His face had shifted back to normal, and his eyes had cleared.

"Well, that felt good!" Will's tone was remarkably cheery, and that made it all the more chilling.

June was silent, standing as far from Will as she could be. He shrugged and leaned against the railing again, eerily calm. June tried to get her breathing under control, and pulled her coat close around her. When the silence had stretched to the point where it became acutely uncomfortable, she managed to find her voice. "Why?"

"I didn't need it anymore." Will didn't look at her. June traced his gaze and saw him looking down at the collection of fragments in the alley below. "I told you, if I was going to try again, I wasn't going to do it the same way. Keeping that thing around wasn't doing any good."

"I guess. I honestly can't say why I hung onto it." June fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes. When she managed to extract her lighter, she held her hand up in front of her mouth

as a windbreak. She could tell Will was trying without much success to not look at her while she struggled to get the flame to catch. Finally, after she took a long drag and exhaled a cloud of smoke, she turned back to her friend and tried her best to sound casual. “So how would you do it? If you were going to do it again?”

Will gave an almost imperceptible shrug. “I thought about that for a while. I think I would probably jump off a cliff, into the ocean. That’s a little more poetic than the mirror thing. I’ve always kind of fancied dying in water.”

June found she couldn’t help but burst out into nervous laughter. The sound was strange and, to her ears, just a little too shrill. “Diving off a cliff into the sea? That’s how you want to go out? Just like fucking Ophelia?”

“Well, I was thinking a little bit more like Percy Shelley,” Will said. “But I guess you’re right, just like fucking Ophelia.”

June shook her head. “I can’t believe you. I really can’t. After everything I’ve done to try and help you.” She went back to smoking in silence.

“I told you.” Will’s voice was quiet, but the anger was back, a menacing and tranquil fury. “Having this kind of plan is good for me. It’s the only way I can have any control in my life, knowing how it’s all going to end.”

“*Bullshit*.”

“I’m not asking you to understand. I don’t want you to. I’m doing this for me, not for anyone else!”

“But it affects everyone else! Don’t you how selfish you’re being?”

“It’s *my* life! I should be able to with it what I want. And if that includes ending it on my own terms, well, that’s my prerogative, isn’t it?” Will took a deep breath. “Look, I’m trying to

give you a way out here, June. I know I'll never be able to make you understand why I feel the way I do, and I know you're only trying to help. But I don't need it. Right now I'm fine, and when the time comes for me to end it all, I want to have as little collateral damage as possible. You've got a chance to make a life for yourself with Mike. Go and take it. There's nothing you can do to stop me, and I'd rather you don't get hurt when it all plays out."

"I'm going to get hurt anyway," June replied softly.

"I know. But you'll get over it. You'll have something else by then. Kids, maybe. Your own practice, like you've always talked about. For God's sake, you've got a life to live."

"So do you."

Will shrugged and leaned out over fire escape railing. "Maybe. Maybe not." He sighed. "I don't want to get old. I've cured myself of the fear of death, but only because I'm afraid of living."

"You're insane. You're a fucking psychopath."

"Yeah. So you tell me." All the anger and aggression had vanished from Will's voice. He just sounded tired now, weary from the same kind of tiredness that seeped into June's bones at the end of a twenty-six hour shift when she could barely stand.

June finished her cigarette and immediately pulled out another one. June knew it was bad for her to smoke like this, but she needed to focus on something that wasn't Will. He simply watched her stand there on the fire escape, her head wreathed in small acrid tendrils of drifting smoke. She watched him twitch his hands again, the same thing that he always did when his wrists started to itch. And she saw him resist the temptation to scratch at them, sticking his hands deep in his coat pockets. The red glow at the end of June's cigarette flared bright with each breath she took, a tiny sun in the darkness of the alley.

"Hey June?"

"Hm?"

"Give me a cig." June fished out her pack and passed it over to Will. He lit one and gave it back to her, smoking quietly while he stared out across the alley. "I'll go."

"Go where?"

"The support group. We talked about it the other day, right? If it makes you feel better, I'll give it a shot." Will took the cigarette from his mouth and tapped the ash down into the dark chasm below. "You're probably right. I probably need something. You're sure it's not group therapy though?"

June shook her head. "No, or at least I don't think so. I think it's just a place where people go to help each other, so they don't have to feel alone. Give it a shot, and if you don't like it, you can stop going." When Will had gone to see a therapist, he had refused to cooperate and open up. He had called the whole thing bullshit, and a total waste of his time. He wasn't confused, he had insisted, and he sure as hell wasn't broken. He was defective, that was the word he had used.

Will inhaled and let the smoke from the cigarette fill his throat, letting the breath linger until he exhaled. "That's the plan. If it sucks, I'm out."

***

That Thursday, Will arrived at a seminar room in a part of the hospital he had never been to before. The door had a window on it, and several people were sitting or standing around several rows of padded folding chairs. Will hesitated a moment before opening the door. It

would have been easy to turn back, to not have to deal with any of this and just tell June it hadn't worked out. But he had told her he would try, and that was as good as a promise as far as he was concerned. He stood at the back of the room for a moment, trying to find a seat at least two or three away from anyone else. A few people turned to look at him, and he hunched his shoulders to give the impression that he was smaller, that he wasn't someone they needed to notice. Most of the people turned away after studying his face for a moment.

"Hey," someone said, tapping his elbow. "Come sit with us." Will jumped and Clara held up a placating hand. "Jay and I are sitting over here. We have an extra seat." She led him to a row right in the middle of the room where Jay was already sitting.

Jay turned to him as he sat down and nodded. "Didn't think you were the type to come to these things."

"It's my first time."

"No shit. Clara and I have been coming every week." Jay shrugged. "It helps, you know?"

"I wouldn't. Never done anything like this before." Will thought he ought to say something else. "My friend thought it might be good for me." That didn't seem like enough. "She's a nurse here." Yeah, that sounded fine. "Does anyone else from work come?"

Clara sat with her hands in her lap and her ankles crossed. "Not really. Randall, sometimes, but only because he tries to pick up the girls. And the others aren't really like us." She shrugged.

"Or at least not like Clara and me," Jay said. "Don't want to assume anything about you. The thing is, Clara and I did this to ourselves. We were addicts, and it's nobody's fault but ours. But the others, it's all things people did *to* them.

“Right,” Clara said, speaking up again. “Alice wouldn’t have to come to this because she had stuff happen *to* her. For her, it was just an accident.”

Jay nodded. “She had an accident. Just one. We kept having more.”

Will decided he ought to smile at that, but a small smile. Just enough to show that he empathized and understood, not enough to make them think that he thought they were making a joke. The meeting started just after that, with a man in old business casual clothes taking the chair at the head of the room. Clara leaned over to Will to whisper in his ear. “That’s George. He runs this stuff. He’s kind of dopey, but he’s nice and he always brings us good coffee.”

George opened the meeting by welcoming them all and introducing himself for any new faces in the room. Will looked around to see if there was anyone who looked like he did. Apparently, new people joined and left the group all the time, but there were a few people who showed up religiously like Jay and Clara. Once that was done, he opened the floor for anyone who wanted to share.

Jay stood up. He seemed even taller now that Will was sitting so close to him. “Hi everyone. I’m Jay.” He was answered by a chorus of “Hello, Jay”. Jay cleared his throat and forced a smile. “I had… I had a pretty good week. Didn’t drink once, and I finally decided to call up my brother. I haven’t spoken to him since I got deployed, so it had been a few years. He lives upstate. I called him and we talked for a long time. I used up most of my minutes.” He smiled a little more broadly after that, and people felt like they were allowed to laugh a little. “We cleared the air a bit. It’s not like it was before, but it’s a start. We’re talking about me going up to visit. I can see my niece again.” He sat back down, and there was a scattering of applause.

A few more people shared their stories. An older woman in a threadbare coat said that she was making progress in rebuilding her relationship with her daughter. A man a few years

older than Will but younger than Jay said he was getting involved as a leader of his church's youth group to help kids not make the same mistakes he did. A woman with dark hair tucked under a blue knit hat and fingerless gloves stood up and said that she was exercising again and not taking painkillers. She also said that she was visiting her father in his nursing home now, and managed to get through an argument with her roommate without drinking afterwards.

"Who's that?" Will asked Clara.

"Oh, that's Maeve. She shows up every couple weeks. Why?"

"She just looked familiar," Will said. He was struck with the image of someone who had been in the hospital with him in the days after his suicide attempt, a terribly thin young woman with bandages just like his and coppery hair that hung lifelessly around her drawn face. He had seen her only a few times, in passing, as she was pushed down the hall past his room in a wheelchair. He always knew it was her. Her IV drip had a squeaky wheel.

After what appeared to be the regulars had shared what they wanted to, George took charge of the space again. "I see we have a few new faces tonight. Do any of you want to introduce yourselves to the group? You could say why you're here, or what you want to accomplish, or just say hi."

Jay and Clara both glanced at Will, and he sighed, pushing himself to his feet. "Hello everyone. I'm Will."

The obligatory chorus of "Hi Will."

Will bit his lip and dug his fingers into his palm. "This is my first time here. Obviously. You know that. I'm here because I…" Because I tried to bleed out in a bathtub and my roommate thinks I'm unhinged? That seemed a bit too heavy for a first impression. So he would go with the other thing, then. "Because I have a drinking problem. My friend, she works at the

hospital and she thought this would be good for me to try. I'm here because I guess I just wanted to prove to myself that it wasn't just me." Will kept himself from cringing, but *that* had come out wrong. "That I wasn't the only one who had a problem, and that there are other people who can help, or who know what it's like. I want to prove to her that I can be better than I am." To Will's surprise, he found that he did want that. "Um, thank you."

He sat down, and two more people introduced themselves. When the meeting ended, they all went to the back of the room where two boxes of coffee and some donuts sat on a folding table. Will got himself a decaf and went to stand by Clara and Jay. Clara ate her donut slowly while Jay drank a long swallow of hot coffee. "So," he said. "You going to come back?"

Will shrugged. "Probably. Not like I do much else on Thursday nights." He glanced over her shoulder at Maeve. He could feel her gaze on him, and it unsettled him. He wondered if that was how June felt sometimes. When Maeve saw him looking, she smirked and walked away.

Clara smiled. "Great! I should get going. See you both at work tomorrow."

As the meeting broke up, Will and Jay walked out towards the street. Jay reached into his pocket and swore. "I must have dropped my lighter. You got one?"

Will nodded and took his cheap red plastic one from his coat pocket. Jay lit a cigarette and passed it back. "I never thought I'd be a smoker. My dad was, and I hated the smell. But everyone else did it overseas, so I picked it up."

"I started in college. I just wanted a way to be able to duck outside at parties for a little while."

"And it just goes from there, right?" Jay sighed. "I knew it was going to be easier for me to quit drinking than smoking. I decided it was best to just pick one for now."

"I did that, just the other way around. I'm getting better at it." Will shrugged. "I'm trying to drink less too, but that's… well, it's a work in progress."

Jay smiled. "I feel that. You'll get there." He nodded towards the subway station they were walking by. "This is me. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you."

***

June hastened down the off-white corridor, her shoes making barely audible squeaks on the linoleum. She stopped outside one of the hospital doors and took a breath to gather herself. She stepped in and smiled, squinting in the bright morning sunlight. The septuagenarian in this room always had the window blinds pulled back to let in as much light as he could. "Good morning Mr. Thompson," June said as she blinked to clear the bright spots out of her eyes. "How are we today?"

"Better now that you're here," the old man said as he tried to sit up in bed.

"Ah, careful there. No need to push yourself too hard yet. I'll just check your chart." She scanned over the Doctor Souza's scrawls and other nurses' observations and recorded her own. "No pains today?"

"None at all, I'm feeling just fine."

"Good to hear. You'll be back to dancing again in no time." She made sure Mr. Thompson's IV drip had enough fluid before making her final notations. June pointed to the button by his hand. "You know what to do if you need me, right? I'll be here all day, and Ruby will stop by when she comes to take over tonight."

Mr. Thompson nodded. “I’m in and out of here so often now, my dear, I’m starting to think I should be enrolled in a frequent flier program.”

“Oh, let’s hope not,” June laughed. “After you recover from this surgery, I should think you won’t need us anymore.”

“Trying to get rid of me, June?” Thompson winked, and June continued on her rotation through the ward. Mr. Thompson’s wife had died five years ago, and he had been in and out of the hospital with various health complications ever since. He was always nice to her and the other nurses, and June was sure he just liked the attention. It probably got lonely at his house out in the suburbs now that his wife was gone. Lately he had needed surgery on his right knee to deal with a weakening joint and loss of cartilage. Thompson was always talking about how he liked dancing at his senior center, so she hoped he could still do that after he got out. The prognosis was good for it, at least.

Doctor Anderson caught her arm in the hallway. He had started balding prematurely when he was barely on the far side of his thirties, and now at forty two, he had an almost perfectly round and shiny pate right on the top of his head. June was usually working under him whenever he was on, and the two of them did good work together. Their system was just like everyone else’s in the hospital, but they worked better together than they did paired with anything else. June could decipher Anderson’s vaguest hand gesture with only a split-second hesitation, and Anderson treated June like an equal, more than could be said for a few other doctors. They had established a good dynamic amongst their patients, with June acting as the more personable and visible figure while Anderson handled the more detached and clinical approach, which honestly suited him better and meant that June hardly ever had to be the bearer of bad news. “June, glad I caught you. I’ve got to go deal with that car crash victim they just

brought in. A broken arm, stitches, possible concussion, the works. The techs got him stabilized, and we have Lanette and Flora with him now, but I need to get going. Can you—"

"I've been briefed. I'm just about to go check on Ms. Hendricks and Mr. Cardozo."

"You're a lifesaver, June. And after that—"

"Mrs. DiNotta needs to be checked up on, yep, on that one too. And I'll be dropping in on Carty, Farias, and Truman." June smiled. "I got your back, doc." No one else called him that, it was always just Anderson, Doctor or among his colleagues, Bill. His grave demeanor and often brusque personality discouraged any kind of nickname, but June had been hastening through prepping an injection once about eighteen months ago and shortened the normal title, and since then it had become a little joke between them. Anderson nodded and hurried to the ER. June continued on her rounds, checking in with her patients and making adjustments as needed. She had just finished administering Caroline DiNotta's medication when Liz stopped her for a second.

Liz was a few years older than June, but still a bit younger than Mike. She had an intensity about her, something bright behind her eyes, and she radiated it out from her like heat from a bonfire. Liz never seemed to take shit from any of her patients, and June had seen several particularly quarrelsome people get silenced with just a hard look from her. She had the kind of presence that made everyone in pay attention and listen to what she had to say. And for all that she came off as kind of a hardass to adult patients, the kids in the hospital all seemed to love "Nurse Betty". Liz was really good at putting in IVs and doing blood work for kids, distracting them with chitchat while she put the needle in before the kid even had a chance to notice it was there and start freaking out. June thought she had a kid of her own, but she couldn't remember.

"Hey sweetie, you know where Anderson is?"

"Last I heard, he was in surgery with the car crash guy."

"Ooh, shit, I heard about that." Liz pursed her lips. "Nasty piece of work."

June shrugged. It was nothing different from what they saw every day. "We'll manage. I can pass something along if you need me to."

"Nah, just something Souza had wanted to run by him. Thought I could win a few brownie points if I could stay a few steps ahead of him. Not a big deal."

June glanced at the cart by Liz with an array of needles and vials. "For the kids?"

"Got a few in my wards that are behind on their shots," Liz replied. "Don't want them getting the others sick, so I'm taking care of it. Did I tell you about that mom I had the other day?"

"No, don't think so."

Liz scoffed. "So this lady's telling me that I can't give her kid the shots he needs because of some stupid reason. So I took her aside and I said that if *she* wanted to contract whooping cough or polio or some shit, that was her call. I can't legally make her kid take his shots, so I had to go and put this poor kid in a quarantine room because we had a bunch of kids too young to get their shots. And then the mother comes at me *again* because apparently I'm segregating her kid, and that's morally wrong."

June sighed. Nothing upset Liz more than people who wouldn't vaccinate, and she had been adamant in her position ever since she had lost a six year old to a virulent strain of influenza that could have been treated if the parents had assented. Liz burned hot and bright, and while June could admire that, she saw Liz burn out a lot too. Sometimes, it was probably best to just do the work that had to be done and save the people who could be saved rather than dwelling on the ones who couldn't be. "At least it all worked out in the end?"

“I guess,” Liz sighed. “Kid got released and I got to see that mother walk out the door. I don’t know how Gomez did it. She could usually talk people around or at least get them to stop being such a pain in the ass.” Doctor Gomez, the pediatric surgeon who Liz was normally partnered with, was spending that year doing a residency at a university hospital out of state. They had been working together for years now, and Liz had been having a hard time adjusting to working primarily under other doctors since Gomez had left. While June supposed she would have a little trouble settling into a rhythm with someone else if she and Anderson got split up, she doubted it would take her as long as Liz had. By the time she got used to working with other doctors, Gomez would be back. For all that the two of them did good work together, June sometimes felt that Liz’s inflexibility got in the way sometimes, and her combativeness didn’t really help her build bridges. For all that Liz was a crusader, there were times when you just had to take a deep breath and work with the tools and partners you had for the greater good. “Better get back to work. Souza’s going to need me to prep someone in a few. God, he’s such a pain in the ass. It’s like he’s afraid to get his hands dirty.” June couldn’t help but laugh. Souza was infamous around the hospital for his parsimonious manners and his tendency to pass off work to the nurses. His pinched face was always screwed up in an expression of distaste. “But I gotta say,” Liz continued, “even Souza’s better than Pichard. Like, what, you think that just because your degree comes from Stanford you’re God’s gift to the hospital. Give me a break.”

“Ugh, I know,” June said, rolling her eyes. At least that was one thing almost everyone agreed on, even Anderson: Prichard was a stuck-up hardass. “It’s always ‘Well, back when I was at Stanford, my professor, who was obviously a world-renowned surgeon, of course’ and ‘When I was getting my doctorate, at *Stanford*, you know, my advisor would always say’.”

Liz laughed. “Exactly! Like, okay, so I didn’t go to some top accredited school to be a nurse. But damn it, I’m still good at what I do. I don’t need to pay a few extra grand just to have some fancy name on a diploma.” She checked over the equipment on her cart. “But I do need to get going. See you around.”

June waved and continued on her rounds. She liked Liz, and despite her misgivings she found that she even *respected* Liz. She didn’t think she had it in her to stand up to the doctors the way Liz could, or confront a zealous parent who refused to vaccinate their kid or tell someone who was reluctant to take their medication that they had to do it *right now*. Liz had become a nurse to *save* people. But June wasn’t like that.

June had become a nurse to *help* people.

She loved watching people get stronger after surgery, to see color come back to their faces as they recovered. She liked watching people have hope again. She made sure she was smiling as she came up to Mr. Truman’s room, eyes already squinted so she wasn’t blinded by the sun again. “Hi Kevin, how’s that arm feeling today?”

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The fluorescent lights of the boxlike office hummed over Will’s head as he glanced back and forth between a file and his computer screen, trying to make sure he got the spelling of the prescription medicine right. “There are way too many consonants in there,” he muttered. “How do you even pronounce that?” He started on the next line and typed in an equally long and complicated drug and whistled through his teeth. “Marvin Stepenolos is not a lucky guy.” Something changed in his peripheral vision and he turned in his chair to stop Randall from taking

his stapler again before stopping and making himself smile. “Oh, hey Clara.” Will pulled out his headphones. “You need something?”

Clara shrugged. “Jay and I are going to take lunch. You want to come?” They had a pretty flexible lunch schedule, and people could leave any time they wanted, so long as they were back in half an hour and there was at least one person left in the office. Will usually just sat at one of the plastic tables out in the commissary and read a book or skimmed news headlines on his phone. He liked having that peace and quiet to pull himself out of the work routine and think about other stuff for a little while. No one had ever asked him to eat with them before, and that arrangement had suited him just fine. Why should he sit with them? They weren’t friends. They just went to the same support group, and he was finally getting to a good part in the novel he had been trying to get through.

“Sure, sounds nice. Let me just finish this file, and I’ll be with you in a sec.” It was what June would have wanted him to do.

Jay nodded to him as they walked into the commissary. It was brighter in here, with more lights set into the off-white ceiling. Will took his bag out of the fridge and put a Tupperware container with a chicken casserole in the microwave for two minutes. While he waited by the counter, he watched Jay slowly eat an apple, taking one bite every minute or so while Clara pulled a sandwich out of her paper bag. A little sticky note tumbled out with it, and she blushed as she stuck it into her pocket. Jay caught her eye and smiled.

The microwave beeped and Will took out his lunch and sat down next to Clara. “What was that about before?”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Mom being Mom. After I got out of rehab, I moved back home. It was Mom who suggested it. I know it was to keep an eye on me and I kind of resented it at first,

but it's probably for the best. She puts little notes in my lunch every day, like I'm still in second grade or something. It's kind of stupid."

"It's nice," Will said, blowing on a bit of casserole. "I didn't know parents actually did that kind of thing. I thought it only happened on TV shows."

"Really?"

"If my friends got them, they kept it a secret from me. My little sister and I made our own lunches from when we were little kids. My parents weren't around much." He glanced at Jay's apple. "You not hungry?"

"Not really. Back when I was deployed we only ate twice a day, really. I'm still on that cycle. I load up on some carbs in the morning and have some meat for dinner. I'm good." He ate around the core and stood up. "I'm going out for a smoke. See you back in there."

Will let Clara talk, she was the kind of person who felt uncomfortable when things were too quiet. He replied when it seemed appropriate or called for. He tried to be careful, he wasn't sure how much he wanted to engage with Clara. She and Jay were nice, sure. But they were also just people that happened to be in the same support group. In a few months, when their contracts were up, they would probably all go their separate ways. It wasn't worth trying to get close.

They returned to their desks just as Jay got back in from smoking. Will put his headphones back in and chipped away at the box of files next to his desk. He had gotten into a rhythm that allowed him to put in all the details of a patient's medical file into the computer system in anywhere between five and ten minutes. Each box held about two hundred files, so he tried to do two and half boxes a day. Sometimes he got through three, other times he got boxes full of long and complicated files like poor Marvin Stepenolos and got a bit behind. It wasn't like

he had quotas to meet, but keeping busy was better than the alternative. And anyway, Karen got on their case if she thought they were slacking off. She was usually on Randall's case.

The archive room where all the file boxes were kept was full of them, and more kept being dredged up from basements around the hospital, moved around for renovations or expansions. Several thousand boxes full of files and data that needed to be input. Will figured he would chip away a couple hundred of them before his contract ran out, but even looking six months out, that would barely make a dent. Still, a lot of these files didn't matter much anymore. A fair amount of the patient files Will came across were for people who had died, some as many as twenty five or thirty years ago. But the hospital was trying to compile a database of cases and treatments so that if something rare came up, it could be cross-referenced to see if they had dealt with anything like it before. Apparently there were several other big hospitals doing something like it all over the country, and eventually the goal was to have all of the databases connected. It seemed like pointless busy work now, but eventually it might actually mean something and do some good.

Some days, he felt like Sisyphus, pushing a boulder up a hillside only to have it roll back down as soon as he reached the top. But Camus said that Sisyphus was happy. He had never understood that when he was back in college. How could someone trapped in such a cycle ever be happy? It wasn't until after Will woke up in the hospital that he began to understand. Nothing was making Sisyphus keep pushing the boulder up.

He did it because it gave him something to do.

When the day ended, he walked out of the office with Clara. "You going to the meeting tonight?" she asked.

“Yeah. See you there.” Will made his way over to the parking structure and found where June had parked his car. She had come into work later this morning, and Will had taken the train in. She was going to be getting off work around the same time his support group ended, so they would go home together. He put his book in the back seat and locked the car again. Support group wasn’t for another few hours, and he had time to drive home, eat and then come back, but there were a few errands he needed to take care of, and he could do them just as easily around the hospital. As he walked back out into the late autumn sunlight, he scrolled through a few messages on his phone. Mostly they were emails from stores he had bought clothes from a while ago, a few promotions for services and concerts, nothing that interested him. He also had a text message from Erik gently chiding him for never getting back in touch with him about a day for dinner plans, and that Carlisle was starting to get on his case about it.

Will swore under his breath. He didn’t usually forget about things like that, but he had other things on his mind lately. He opened up the calendar on his phone and selected a few weekend nights at random. It wasn’t like he had anything to do. Mostly he just wound up drinking. Sometimes he and June would go to a bar, or go along to one of the parties Mike always seemed to know about, the parties that were always at different apartments in different parts of the city but always seemed the same. But mostly he just sat alone on the couch and drank straight from a bottle. Maybe going to dinner would be good for him, or at least give him a chance to drink alcohol he wasn’t paying for.

He had time to kill, so he walked to the subway station. He stood on the platform wondering which one he ought to take, to go home or uptown. A large black rat clawed its way up from the downtown tracks and scampered across to the uptown side before jumping down to the side of the rails and vanishing into some unseen haunt. A woman had shrieked, probably

someone from out of town, but Will barely registered her, tracking the path of the rat. Not that he was the kind of person who believed in omens, but if he did, that was certainly an inauspicious one. He turned towards the downtown tracks to head home before stopping himself. The universe didn't get to push him around.

Will caught the outbound subway, then rode it for three stops uptown until it stopped at a station where there was a little grocery shop he knew about. There was probably one closer to the hospital, for the families of patients who were staying at the cheap chain hotels nearby. Still, riding the subway back was going to give him a way to kill time. The owner sort of knew him and sometimes gave him free vegetables that were a day or two past the sell-by date.

They were still fine to cook with, but no one would buy them. Will would have paid if the guy asked, but he never did. The owner always said that Will was doing him a favor.

The bell above the door rang as Will stepped inside. The owner was sitting behind the register and scanning a Spanish newspaper. He looked up as Will walked along the aisles and smiled. Will found himself smiling back. He realized he didn't even know the man's name, but it would be weird to ask. It didn't matter, anyway. Will filled the basket with a loaf of bread, a half-gallon of soy milk, a few apples and oranges, and a box of pasta. He considered picking up some chicken, but decided it wasn't worth it. It would just sit in the car for a few hours, and he was probably just going to do leftovers tonight anyway. He could pick up more food tomorrow.

He paid for his things, and the owner gave him two cucumbers and a bruised tomato for free. While Will sat on the subway back to the hospital, he ate one of the apples and then left his shopping bags in the car. There was still time, more than he thought he was going to have. He let his feet carry him again until he found himself outside one of the small parks near the hospital. Will bought a newspaper from one of the stands just to have something to do. When he had been

released from the hospital after his suicide attempt but before he had gone back to work, he had forced himself out of the apartment so that he wouldn't feel so lonely or lost. June would take the car in the mornings, and he would ride the subway until he felt like transferring or getting off. The rattling of the train cars through the subterranean tunnels had become like a drumbeat, the pulse of the city's heart that rumbled up through his bones. It grounded him and tied him to the city in an intimate way, let Will lose himself in the shifting currents of people and the ebb and flow of the crowds. He knew some people got overwhelmed by that, got lost in the press of population density and for a while he had struggled to stand out and stand apart. But after his suicide attempt, he saw things a little bit more clearly. For so long, he had been fighting against the currents, trying to stand against the tides, and all it did was exhaust him. Now he moved with them, adrift on the tides that dictated the routines of the entire urban sprawl. No one was really free from it. It didn't matter how high you climbed in the ugly high rises that chewed up the skyline or how low you sank into the murk of the subway tunnels. When the tide came, everyone got swept along.

He walked from the subway station through the hospital complex and then out again on the other side, moving from the blocky concrete and glass brutalism of the hospital to the more inviting brownstones with tree-lined sidewalks just beyond. Most of the buildings had fallen victim to the so-called urban renewal last century, and their old quaint fronts had been cannibalized and replaced with sheets of dull panes of glass to entice boutiques and shop fronts. As far as Will was concerned, no pretty dress was ever going to be half as visually appealing as Gothic reliefs from the nineteenth century, but then, no one had asked his opinion.

When he had spent his days wandering around trying to come to terms with his second chance, he had found a lot of the small out of the way parks around the city, most of them little

better than vacant lots where the city had planted grass and put in a few benches. The bigger parks were always crowded with joggers, picnickers and tourists, but the smaller ones were usually empty. Sure, they tended to be pretty close to the urban noise, what with most of them being on street corners and the like, but Will was good at blocking all that out.

He sat on the bench under a street light as the sun sank to just a bloody smear in the western sky. He held the paper open in front of him, scanning the city desk section. His old section. He was trying to read Erik's column, but the prospect of a new commercial district getting started on the east end didn't interest him. He found his gaze kept going back to his hand holding the edge of the paper, to prevent it from blowing too much. The cold air had made his skin go pale, and the blue veins at the base of his palm stood out. His sleeve had ridden up a bit, revealing the paler vertical lines just beneath.

His hands fascinated him now, the way his fingers moved and the way the skin tightened or slackened when he tensed the muscles. It was hard not to look at his scars, the ragged imperfections on his otherwise smooth skin. He had taken to wearing long sleeves and the like to prevent him from doing that, to focus on other things. June thought he was embarrassed by the scars and didn't want other people to see them, but that wasn't right. He didn't care if other people saw, he just needed to make sure he stopped looking.

Every time he did, he was back to lying in the bathtub with the water turning red all around him, one hand gripping the edge as his vision narrowed. The shards of the broken mirror sparkled on the floor. The prismatic edges of the glass made glittering rainbows on the tile. The sensation of exhilaration felt like a bird jumping from the nest for the first time, realizing too late that its wings weren't strong enough to carry it and finding the hard earth rushing closer with

each racing heartbeat. For that brief eternity of instants he had been like Icarus, or perhaps Bellerophon, cast down just before he had reached the halls of the gods.

And of course, June was throwing the door open, slamming it against the wall with a crack as loud as Zeus's thunderbolt. Her expression had changed from surprise to anger before settling on raw panic. That had been the last thing he had seen before he blacked out and woke up in a sterile white hospital room, not too far from where he now sat.

He forced himself to go back to reading the paper. He probably looked like a crazy person.

It wasn't long before the last of the sunlight started to fade, and it got too hard to read. Will folded up the paper and left it in the first trash bin he found before walking two blocks back to the hospital. He walked into the building where the support group was and descended to the basement conference room with its cracked tile and dirty ceiling, an unfortunate by-blow of the need to make buildings riot-proof. Clara looked up as the door opened and waved him over to their usual spot. He sat down on her right and waited for Jay to come in and take the one on her left. Jay wasn't long behind him, and they took their usual places.

Will had decided he wasn't going to share that week. Nothing had happened. Nothing had changed. If he had gotten up, all he would have said was that he was still working on the drinking problem but he wasn't really making headway. Sometimes people did that and the other people in the group would let them know that they supported them, or that it was okay or whatever. Will didn't want their sympathy. He knew he had a drinking problem, and he knew that if he tried it would get better.

But mostly, he just didn't care if it got better. Drinking helped with the other stuff.

Maeve walked in and sat down in the row across the aisle from Will. She saw him glance over at her and winked before drawing her legs up underneath her, sitting so that no one else could be on either side of her. George walked up to the front of the room and called the meeting to order. The same people who always shared stood up and said what was happening in their lives. Will tried hard to be polite, to pay attention. But it was hard sometimes, it bothered him that these people could be so open about their lives and their struggles and yet every time he got up to share his story, he was only ever telling a half truth. Talking to June about his suicide attempt was one thing. She had been there. He wasn't sure he was ready to talk about it with anyone else yet. At least, certainly not to people who were barely one step up from strangers. Clara stood up and smoothed out a wrinkle in her sweater. Will raised an eyebrow. Clara didn't share often. When she looked down, Jay tapped the back of her hand with his finger and smiled.

Clara took a deep breath. "Hi everyone. I just wanted to say that I'm doing good. A lot better than I was when I started coming to these things. I work, you know, here. In the hospital." She took another deep breath and squared her shoulders. Will noted that she had clasped her hands in front of her to hide that they were shaking. "I like being busy. It keeps me from thinking about where I've come from. I can think about where I want to go next. If I were just sitting around and only focusing on getting better, all those little thoughts would come back, and who knows if I'd relapse? I mean, like, I still know where I could get all that stuff that screwed me up in the first place but I don't want that anymore. And I like being able to be around people. I like feeling like I have friends again, and I wanted to thank you for helping me get to that point." Her face had grown progressively more flushed and so she abruptly sat down, and people politely applauded.

Will couldn't help feeling a little surprised. The reason he didn't share terribly often was that he was afraid people wouldn't understand why he did what he did, thought about the world after his attempt like he did. Or worse, they would think he was wrong. But if Clara felt the same way, if not in so many words, then maybe there was something to it…

The meeting continued, stories were shared, and Will made all the proper gestures. When they adjourned, Clara quickly said goodbye and hurried out before anyone could stop to talk to her. Jay shrugged. "She gets anxious. I'm going to go catch up with her and make sure she's okay. See you at work, Will."

Will nodded. "See you both tomorrow." He walked over to the table where a box of coffee was set out and poured himself a cup as he watched them leave.

"So the little mouse decided to speak up today?" Will turned and saw Maeve pouring herself a cup. It smelled like she was wearing just a little too much of a subtle perfume. There was something like an implicit taunt in the way her lips curled into a smile. "I thought she was going to collapse, she was getting so red."

"Are you talking about Clara?" Will replied, rather pointedly.

"Who else could I mean?"

"Watch it."

Maeve widened her eyes and backed up a pace. "Ooh, no. What will you do, sic Sarge on me?"

"Sorry, Sarge?"

"The big guy in your row."

"You mean Jay."

"Yeah. He's ex-military, right?"

"He is."

"He looks it." Maeve dumped three packages of sugar into her coffee and stirred. "You three seem pretty close."

"We work together."

"Oh, you're part of that work rehab too? That's rough."

"Rough?" Will scowled. "There's nothing wrong with what we do."

"Easy there. I'm not trying to pick a fight. Just saying that it must get boring."

"Yeah? And what do you do all day?"

"I'm a florist." That explained the perfume smell at least. Maeve shrugged. "It's a little place on the west side. We do okay. Mostly I'm in the back making arrangements, so I don't see too many people. So yeah, you made your point," she said, taking a drink of her sweetened coffee. "My job's kind of boring too. Capitalism, right? It's a bitch."

"You're being awfully familiar with me," Will replied. He could feel himself reflexively putting up his barriers. "We don't know each other."

Maeve scoffed. "Well, we're hardly strangers, Will. We *were* on the same floor after all."

Will nodded, thinking back to the haunted and empty girl in the wheelchair. He remembered her thin hair draped around her gaunt, drawn features as she was pushed through the hallway, the too-bright lights casting deep shadows on the planes of her face. And he remembered her eyes, vacant but deep. "I thought that might have been you. You changed your hair color."

Maeve tugged at an errant lock. "Decided darker was probably the way to go, yeah. Now that I'm the only one mourning me." She glanced at Will's wrist, where the top of one of his scars showed over the edge of his cuff. "You're not talking about it here?"

Will shook his head. “No. Maybe someday, but not yet. Drinking problems are easier to talk about. It’s easier for people to understand. They ask fewer questions when you’re just an alcoholic. What about you?”

Maeve set her coffee down on the folding table and tugged at her light blue fingerless gloves. “Same. These people are mostly addicts who fucked up. I blend in easier if I’m just an addict who fucked up too.” She shrugged. “Kind of hard to explain what we did with a hand wave. I’ve had to tell my boss, naturally. She’s sympathetic, but she doesn’t *understand*. It’s nice to talk to someone who gets it, you know?

“Gets it?” Will replied. “What’s to *get*? I don’t know you, and you don’t know a damned thing about me. Don’t pretend that just because we tried to kill ourselves around the same time means we’re connected. You probably had your reasons for it, and I know I had mine. I doubt they’re the same, so don’t act like you know what’s going on. You don’t get to speak for me.”

“Hey, take it easy, man.” Maeve brushed some hair out of her face. “I’m just saying, there aren’t too many people who know what it’s like to wake up in a hospital bed with no idea how you got there and heavy bandages on your wrists. I’m not saying we’re kindred spirits or any spiritual hippie bullshit. But you know what it’s like to have to hide your hands from people because it’s easier to do that than to explain things. You know what it’s like around people who know, always with those damn pitying glances and forced sympathy.”

Will looked over at her. “All right, fine. I know what that’s like.”

Maeve drank down her coffee. “You haven’t shared in a few weeks.”

“Neither have you.”

“Well, my drinking problem hasn’t really improved.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? Mine either.”

“Maybe we should work on that together sometime.”

“Are you asking me out for a drink?”

Maeve shrugged. “Maybe I am.” She took a napkin and scrawled a phone number on it. “Let me know when you’re free.”

Will took the napkin as Maeve pulled on her coat and left with a nonchalant wave. When Will went to enter the number into his phone he saw that Erik had replied to his text asking if he could come for dinner next Saturday. It wasn’t like he had anything else going on, so he fired back a quick affirmative got his things together and walked out of the basement conference room and over to the parking structure. June leaned against the hood of the car, a cigarette glowing between her lips. She glanced up as he walked over towards her, and she tossed him the keys. “How’d the meeting go?”

Will popped the locks on the doors and held out his fingers. June smiled and passed him the cigarette so he could take a drag. He inhaled and let the smoke fill his throat before letting it out in a long, slow exhalation. “It was fine.” He decided not to tell her about Maeve, because if he was honest he didn’t know what to say. The whole conversation had left him feel off balance. He never felt that way. No one had pushed him the way Maeve had, or been able to so easily dance circles around his words and back him into a corner. It left him unsettled, but oddly drawn to her. Despite how much he hated the feeling of being around her, he wanted to experience it again. “What about you?”

“Long day. Anderson and I had to get two bullets out of a guy’s leg.”

Will whistled through his teeth. “Gang stuff?”

“Nah, just a drug deal gone sour, or so the police report says.”

“And you believe it?”

“Might as well. The only tat this guy had was his daughter’s name. Usually there’re more.” She dropped her cigarette and ground it out. “It’s easier if you just choose to believe the easiest thing. Ready to go home?”

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The thrum of the bass was enough to make the floor beneath her feet shake. June closed her eyes, letting the waves of sound crash over her as she swayed back and forth. Having Saturdays and Sundays off made her feel like a normal person, and she appreciated being able to make weekend plans with Mike. It always felt a little weird when her days off were, like, Monday and Wednesday. Sure, she could get shopping done and not worry about lines and crowded subways, but it wasn’t like she could do anything fun at night.

Last night she and Mike had gone to a concert with a few of his friends, people he knew from work. She had fun, sure, but she always felt a little out of place around those people. It wasn’t like the age gap bothered her, but she couldn’t help but feel like she was too separate from them. She could be around them, but she wasn’t really part of the tribe. They had customs and language all their own, things June didn’t understand. They were all nice people, but she wasn’t one of them.

Tonight though, was just her and Mike. They had gone to dinner and then out dancing. Sometimes Mike could get them into one of the higher end clubs, but June had told him she wasn’t in the mood for that tonight. They found one with a modest sized line and joined the crowd of entwined bodies shifting back and forth beneath flashing neon lights. June liked being out in a crowd of people, feeling anonymous and unnoticed. She felt Mike’s hand on her waist,

keeping her close. The lights changed from green to pink to orange, flashing from different rigs and making the shadows on his face play in strange ways. She tilted her head back and he kissed her, only to pull away when someone stepped on his foot.

June laughed and led him over to the bar. She had a hard time gauging how much alcohol other people could take. Will could outdrink just about anyone else she knew, except for maybe Erik Torsson, so using him as a point of comparison was not generally a good idea. She and Mike had already had a few cocktails, but she couldn't tell how much it was affecting him. She had nothing resembling Will's tolerance, but years of friendship and countless drinks had helped her to hold her own.

The music was effectively too loud to talk, so she couldn't judge if Mike's speaking was impaired, and pushing through the crowd made looking for a slight stumbling hard. She was feeling a little buzzed though, and figured that this might the last one before they called it a night. Mike ordered a beer for himself and an appletini for her, and they managed to snag two stools next to each other to sit down for a moment. She sipped her vibrant green cocktail and pressed her lips together. She and Will had made these before, and the homemade kind had been a lot better. Then again, they had put in extra apple schnapps to bring out the taste and make it a little bit stronger.

June leaned in towards Mike. "How are you doing?" She had to shout just to be heard over the music.

Mike smiled. "Two nights in a row can be kind of rough, you know?"

"Not really something I'm used to," June replied. It was rare to even go out two nights in a week, let alone in a row. Normally a day off on Monday meant a quiet night at home listening to the rhythmic tapping of Will's keyboard or lounging on Mike's bed watching TV. Sometimes

in the middle of the week she could coax Will out to some dive bar to get drunk with the other lost souls. Sometimes the made a bad pick and wound up with a bunch of underage college kids with fake ids, all of them throwing back cheap beers and being entirely too loud, exactly the kind of morons she often saw on her night shifts after totaling the cars they inherited from her parents or with a head wound from a broken bottle.

Mike glanced down at his phone. “Almost one. You want to call it a night soon?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

They finished their drinks and then went back out to the dance floor for what seemed like one more song. June thought it was hard to tell with this EDM stuff. Mike got their coats and they stumbled out into the cold autumn air, a welcome relief from the hot press of bodies in the club. June let the air play over her bare arms for a moment while Mike flagged down a cab. They slid into the backseat, and Mike gave the driver his address before leaning his head against the cool glass of the window. She wrapped a hand around his arm and leaned close, taking in the old leathery scent of the taxi and the odd smell of the air freshener that never seemed to smell like anything in particular except for other air fresheners. Mike’s scent was there too, the faint smell of sweat and the subtle cologne he pretended that he didn’t use and something else too, something clean like a generic variety of soap.

The taxi cut through the streets to Mike’s high rise, and they quietly rode the elevator up to Mike’s floor. Mike let them both into the apartment and June sank down on the leather couch to take off her heels. Mike’s walls were lined with pictures in what June assumed was modern art, splashes of color or geometric shapes on canvas. She had asked Mike why he’d gotten them, why he hadn’t gone for something more visually appealing, like flowers or lighthouses or beaches or whatever. Mike had admitted he had hired an interior decorator and she had picked it

all out, assuring him that it was all very tasteful and in. He didn't know a Rembrandt from a retiree's watercolor in a consignment shop, so he had trusted the decorator's judgment.

June had taken pictures of a few of paintings and showed them to Will. Will had just scoffed.

"Do you want some water?" Mike asked as he unbuttoned his blazer and draped it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. June nodded, and he got two highball glasses out from one of the cupboards and used the icemaker on the front of the refrigerator. He came and sat down beside her and she smiled. "Tired?"

She sank back on the couch. "Uh huh."

"Time for bed?"

"I think so."

A little while later, June lay on her side, staring at the soft blue light of the electronic clock face on Mike's bedside table. Mike was lying behind her, his hand resting on her hip. It should have felt right, to be lying in her boyfriend's bed after a night out, but it just didn't. Mike's bed was larger than hers, with softer sheets and warmer blankets and Mike was there, but more than anything at that moment, she just wanted to be back in her own bed across the city.

She extricated herself from Mike's embrace and slid off the bed, rousing Mike. "What's wrong?" he muttered.

"I'm just thirsty." June wasn't sure why she had lied to him.

The floor was cold against her bare feet, and she quickly gathered her clothes and slipped out the bedroom door. She did make a detour into Mike's kitchen, taking her cup from the sink and filling it up again. She leaned against the marble countertop and sipped from it, her bare hip against the cold stone, waiting to see if the impulse to leave subsided.

June put her glass down in the sink and slowly walked over to the large windows that led out onto Mike's balcony. She stood there with one hand pressed against the glass staring out over the city, completely exposed but so high up that no one could see. She curled her toes against the material of Mike's imported rug. She glanced over at the side table Mike used to hold his alcohol bottles. There was a half-bottle of brandy sitting on top, and June plucked it up to take a swig. She opened one of the doors on the cabinet and took out the spare Mike kept in there and put it in place of the one she had taken. Mike would never know it had gone missing. He hardly ever drank brandy anyway, he only kept it around for when he had parties.

June stared out the window at the sleeping city with the neck of the bottle held between her index finger and thumb. It was nearly three in the morning, but the subway was still running. She felt okay about walking the block and a half to the nearest station in Mike's neighborhood. There were always police around, and the street level was pretty well lit. June glanced back at the dark hallway that led to Mike's room. There was still time to go back and stay warm.

She sighed again and started to put on her clothes, checking her reflection in the darkened windows to make sure nothing was put on lopsided. The last thing she needed was someone thinking she was an addled drunk. June picked up her coat, crossed the apartment and stood by the door, one hand on the handle. There was still time to go back to bed, to pretend that she had just gone out for some water. June shook her head and left.

The elevator opened with a ding on the empty lobby of the building, with even the doorman absent from his desk. Probably on a bathroom break or something. June stepped outside and knew that she had gone past the point where she could turn back. She slipped her house key between her index and middle finger just in case and lit a cigarette while she walked. The smoke from her cigarette mixed with the vapor from her breath. A few cars rumbled past her, people

returning from other late night parties, no doubt. She descended into the subway and waited on the vacant platform.

It was strange being out in the city at this hour. The streets that normally teemed with people and energy were silent and deserted, and June could almost convince herself that she was one of the few survivors of some catastrophic incident, eking out a solitary existence in the shadow of what once had been. Her hand moved down to her purse, ready to extract another cigarette, but she stopped herself. Smoking on the subway platform was a *faux pas* even if no one was here to see her do it. She could wait.

The subway arrived with a rush of wind, blazing with internal light. June selected a car that only contained two other women, probably a little older than herself. She tried to hold to a rule that she would never get in a subway car alone. The other women were obviously intoxicated, one of them asleep with her head on her friend's shoulder. Their hair was all in disarray, but to be fair, hers wasn't much better. June sat a little ways down from them, and the cognizant one gave her a little wave. June smiled back and sank down in her seat. Now that she was in the stale, recycled air of the subway car, she could smell the smoke on her clothes and skin. She took out her pack and counted how many she had left before cursing under her breath. She had smoked more than she meant to.

The subway rattled and banged its way through several stops before reaching the one for June's transfer. She nodded to the woman down the car as she stepped out onto the empty platform. June descended to the lower platform and waited for the next train to come through. She slouched down on one of the chipped and worn wooden benches that lined the platform, skimming the years of graffiti that had been scratched into it. She took the bottle of brandy out of her purse and took another sip.

She wasn't sure why she had left Mike's place, and it was starting to bug her. She was too close to home to bother turning back now, and even if she wanted to, she wouldn't have been able to get into the building anyway. She would have to come up with something to tell him tomorrow. Just saying that she wanted to be home wasn't a good enough reason, even if that's all it boiled down to. If she could explain it to herself, then she would probably have an easier time explaining it to Mike.

The next train came, and June got on it. This time, it was completely empty, but she was too tired to really care about her rule now. She rode it three stops uptown to her stop and then got out, ascending from the stinking pit of the subway station into the quiet night air. Her key was back between her fingers. Her neighborhood wasn't as dangerous as some of the others just a couple blocks away, but it never hurt to be prepared for the worst. She saw a few TVs flickering in windows, but for the most part the buildings were dark. Streetlights flickered and music drifted from somewhere.

She was at the door of her building in minutes and barely perceived walking up to the fifth floor. She slouched against the door while she turned the lock and kicked off her shoes into the pile by the door. A blue light flickered in the living room, and she turned the corner to see Will on the couch, one foot propped up on the coffee table and a mug held lazily in one hand, watching some kind of documentary about ocean life on mute.

He glanced up when he heard her and raised his eyebrows. "What are you doing here?"

June flopped down next to him. "I wanted to come home. What's up with you?"

Will gestured with his chin to the TV. "Learning about fish."

"With the sound off?"

"The guy's accent was pissing me off."

June watched a school of silvery fish dart around in synchronized motions to confuse a tiger shark. She opened her purse and put the brandy bottle on the table. “Little present from Mike.”

Will picked it up and examined the label before whistling through his teeth. “Top shelf.”

“Mike won’t miss it. Let’s get hammered.”

“I’ll never pass up drinking booze I didn’t pay for.” Will swung off the couch with a groan and massaged a cramp out of his leg before ambling off to the kitchen to wash out his mug and get June one of her own. They clinked their cups together, and June loved the irony of them drinking Mike’s expensive brandy from their chipped coffee mugs. After they both took a sip, June nodded at the TV. “So. Fish.”

“Yep.” A long, ugly gray and brown one drifted by on the screen. Will’s eyes lit up. “Look at that one. It’s a coelacanth. They’re so cool.”

“That’s see-la-canth,” June said. “Not col-le-canth.”

“Huh? How do you know that?”

“I remember hearing about it in a class in college once. It’s some Greco-Roman pronunciation thing.”

“See-la-canth,” Will said, trying the word out. “Huh. I’ve only ever seen it in writing. Guess I’m not up on my word roots like you are.”

“Maybe if you had the narration on—”

“His accent was annoying.”

June laughed and poured them both more brandy. They watched shots of fish flitting around the screen for another few minutes before June stood up. “I’m going for a smoke. You want to come?” They pulled on their coats and shoes and stepped out onto the fire escape. Will

took the brandy bottle from the table before he came out through the window. June's phone buzzed while she took out her pack, and she glanced down at the screen. Mike had woken up and was wondering where she was. She sighed and quickly replied that she had felt ill and decided to go home rather than risk getting him sick too. It was the kindest lie that she could think of.

Will must have read something in her facial expression because he raised an eyebrow. "What's going on with you and Mike?"

"Nothing. I mean, nothing bad. I just wanted to come home." Will just shrugged and turned downwind to exhale a cloud of smoke. June leaned against the brick wall of their building and trailed the end of her cigarette through the air. "I'm serious. Mike is a nice guy, and he's good to me. There's nothing wrong with us."

Will shrugged again. "Okay." He took another drag. "Just worried about you, June. You stumble through the door at half past three in the morning after you tell me you're spending the night with Mike, and of course I'm going to be concerned. Gave me a bit of a shock."

"I thought you would be asleep."

"Who the hell knows when I'm going to be asleep? My whole inner clock is a piece of shit nowadays." He leaned against the wall on the other side of the window. "But hey, if you want me to stop worrying about you, I will."

June ground out the last of her cigarette against the bricks and let the spent butt fall down to the alley below. "I didn't say that. I'm glad you do, but look after yourself first, okay? I'd rather have you make sure that you're doing all right before you start fretting about me. I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself."

"Sure thing, June."

"Did you kill the brandy?"

"Nope."

"Can I?"

"All yours."

He handed over the bottle and June tossed her head back, draining the last finger or so in two swallows before forcing it down. "Jesus, that's strong."

"Well yeah, you're supposed to sip it."

June rolled her eyes and walked to the railing, fidgeting with her pack and lighter. It was tempting to light another, but it was getting late and she'd already had several in the last few hours. Will was smoking slower than she was, and he held out what was left of his. She took it gratefully and continued to smoke. "Will, why was it never us?"

Will's brows knit together. "I don't understand."

"You and me. Together. Like, a couple."

"Oh." Will sighed. "Shit, I don't know. Back when we were in school, the timing never worked out, did it? You were always with someone until I was, and then something would happen and yours would end, and but by the time my relationships went to hell, because they always did, you'd moved on to some other guy. Rinse and repeat, you know?"

"But there's more to it than that. There's got to be. We've been single at the same time, and still we've never…"

Will moved over to the railing, still keeping his distance. "Why are you doing this, June? Why do we have to do this now?"

"I'm sorry, I was just wonder—"

"It never would have worked, June." There was steel in his voice now, something that had an edge. He was trying to cut, and cut deep. "You know damn well it never would have

worked. You fix things, fix people. But me, I just break shit." Will pushed up his sleeve and June forced herself not to look away. "I was born defective, and now I have to go and break everything I touch. I'm the one goddamn thing you can't fix."

"That's a load of bullshit."

Will took a step back. "What?"

"If you think it wouldn't have worked, fine. If you said you just knew in your gut that it all would have gone to hell, fine. But don't try to pull that self-pity crap on me. I'm *tired* Will. I've done everything I could for you, everyone around you has, and yet after all this time you're determined to just stay despondent about everything! How the hell am I supposed to try and help you if you don't want to be helped? Do you *like* being miserable?"

"I never asked for your help," Will said softly. "I just wanted you to be happy. And I don't think you ever would have been happy with me. I liked what we had. I didn't want to make it complicated. Besides, I haven't been in any sort of position to let someone get that close to me for a while now."

"Will, it's natural for someone in your position to feel broken, but that doesn't mean it's true!"

"I'm not broken," Will snapped. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "Broken means that you were whole at one point. But I can't remember a time when I was. I'm not broken. I'm *defective*. I'm defective and I always have been. I'm better off alone."

"Will…" He wasn't trying to cut her, she realized. If he hurt her, it was only an afterthought. He was trying to cut something out of himself.

He held up a hand. "Don't worry about it. I'm okay with it. With all of it." Will bit his lower lip. "Well, I'm working on it, and I'm doing better. This isn't about me, anyway."

"What?"

"You brought it up." Will lit himself another cigarette. "I've been doing okay. You can see that, right? I've got a long way to go, but it's something. But now that I don't have my head so far up my ass, I can see that you're not doing so well. You spent so long worrying about me, maybe it's time I did the same thing for you. June, you need to tell me what's going on."

"I don't know!"

"How do you feel? Right now, this very minute?"

"Trapped? Unfulfilled? I guess I just feel lost." June threw up her hands. "I had this clear vision of what I wanted my life to be. And I held on to that for *years*. I knew I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to help people. I wanted to be happy and well-adjusted and... I don't know. Normal."

"Maybe that's not what you really wanted."

"Maybe not. What do you think?"

Will stepped back from the railing and tapped ash from his cigarette. The silence between them grew longer to the point where June was starting to get uncomfortable. But just as she opened her mouth to say something, Will held up a hand to forestall her. "I think," he said slowly, "that what you thought was going to make you happy didn't and now—"

"No shit? Look, if all you're going to do is turn it back on me, you could just say you don't know."

Will slouched against the building wall. "This is something you've got to do yourself, June. I don't have the answers for you, and I'm in no position to. I'm just getting through this soul-searching bullshit myself. Find what makes you happy. Find the people who make you happy." Had Will stressed that one a little? June couldn't tell. "You like being a nurse?"

"Yes, I do," June replied. "But lately I feel like I could be doing more. I don't know how I could, but the feeling's still there."

"You've done more good for people in the past few years than most people do in their entire lives. Your day job is saving people. I just push a rock up a mountain."

June blinked. "What?"

"It keeps me occupied."

"Do you really feel that way? Is that all you want out of life? To not be bored?"

"For right now? Yeah." He exhaled a plume of smoke. "I don't take joy in what I'm doing like you do. I never have. But right now I'm as happy as I'm going to be." He smirked. "I *am* allowed to be happy, you know."

June took a step closer. Will passed her his cigarette and she took a drag. Will stared down at the alley. June reached out and put her hand over his. She saw Will resist the urge to pull away, but in the end he stayed. "You're going to have to deal with this in the morning," he finally said. "Leaving Mike and all that."

"Don't be so dramatic," June said with a laugh. "Sure, I left Mike's apartment, but it's not like I *left* him. He'll understand."

"Okay." Will slid his hand out from under hers and motioned for his cigarette back. He took the last drag before grinding it out on the railing and flicking it out into the darkness. "It's late. You should get some sleep."

"Thanks for staying up with me."

"Yeah. Well, you needed somebody."

They stepped back inside and Will dropped the empty brandy bottle into the recycling bin. When he turned back, June wrapped her arms around his chest and pulled him close. “I mean it Will. I don’t say it nearly often enough, but I’m glad I have you in my life.”

She felt Will’s hands on her shoulders gently but firmly pushing her back. “What the hell are you doing, June? Go to bed.” June pulled away. Will’s hand was still on her shoulder, but she felt a pressure like a fist in her gut, a visceral, physical sensation. She walked through the dark hallway to her own room and fell into bed, pulling the blankets around her. She heard the clink of glass on something and the faint sound of liquor being poured, and then finally the sound of the couch sagging beneath Will’s weight as he dropped down onto it. It was followed by the dull thud of a glass bottle being set down on the floor, the promise of more drinking to come.

Charles Dickens: The City and Human Experience

Humans are social creatures, linked by various webs tying one individual to another. These webs form unconsciously, through conversation, through action, through mere presence. Without meaning to, an individual spins a vast web around themselves throughout the course of their lives, linking and at times ensnaring others in a growing chain of connections. In no better place can one see the interplay of these webs than in the urban landscape. When so many people are packed so closely together, these webs overlap and intersect with each other even as they branch out and spread. There is a base human impulse to seek out companionship, to feel less alone, to spin their web.

Few writers understand the interplay of human interactions like Charles Dickens. When one thinks of novels about the City, especially people in the City, one invariably finds themselves circling back to his body of work. In Dickens' stories, characters find themselves dropped into large and often intimidating worlds and are forced to make sense of the various challenges they come to face by relying on the web of people they draw to themselves. Each character exists in a vivid and deep inner world while at the same time being a part of a rich and tangible outer world as well. The world of Dickens's stories is entirely set in the city of London and its surrounding locales, and through the eyes of his characters we become intimately familiar with this sprawling metropolis, even if we have never personally set foot in it, much less wandered down twisting cobbled streets lit by gas light. It is the way his characters interact with this city that brings it to life for the reader and makes it such a visceral thing. Each of his characters interacts with London in a very different way, because they all come from vastly different backgrounds. Oliver Twist, the desperate orphan, sees the city as a place of fear and confusion. The old moneylender Ebenezer Scrooge sees it instead as an unfortunately necessary

but unpleasant backdrop for business. Inspector Bucket, the stalwart detective, sees it as a place of mystery but also where there is an order of things that must be kept. They are viewing the same city, the same streets, the same people, but each time through a very different lens. Virginia Woolf would comment that Dickens crafted "characters who exist not in detail, not accurately or exactly, but abundantly in a cluster of wild yet extraordinarily revealing remarks." Many of his characters have become the basis of literary clichés and tropes, and have subsequently introduced words into our popular lexicon, giving a shorthand for characters quixotic or hypocritical, degenerate or miserly. But for all that his characters appear to be stereotypes and saturated in tropes, they also have hidden depths, preventing them from being pigeonholed quite so easily and defying the notion that details can compose them, instead existing, much like real living people, in a strange and sometimes contradictory web of appearances.

Dickens's London is a vibrant place, and oftentimes his characters find themselves diving and ascending through the various social strata of the city, to the dark alleys where illicit dealings take place to the brightly lit drawing rooms of the city's upper crust, sometimes within the space of a few pages. All of these characters take to these shifts in very different ways, some acclimating quickly while others are overwhelmed. However, it allows Dickens to create a varied picture of the society he lived in, and to provide a broad commentary on the people he surrounded himself with. His work has a certain timeless quality to it, and despite the specific situations being utterly foreign to us in the early decades of the twenty-first century, there remains a certain essential human aspect to it that resonates with us a century and a half later. We are quite unlikely to find ourselves scheming and politicking behind the carved doors of opulent drawing rooms, nor are we likely to find ourselves in a dark alley hiding from a roving band of criminals. And yet the way Dickens's characters respond to these scenes and interact

with the rest of their cast resonates with us because it is so human. They fully inhabit the world that has been constructed for them, and they interact and react to it much like they would any other character. In Dickens's crafted London, the city itself becomes more than just a stage for the characters to perform on; it becomes a character in its own right. Dickensian London pulses with life, shaping its denizens and opening new windows to the experiences they go through. A large part of Dickens's literary success came from the social commentary his work provided, allowing his largely middle class readership to see the plight of the poor workers and the banality of the upper classes. The city itself allows the webs of human interaction to be spun through it, weaving people together in a tapestry of urban life. There is not really a sense of evil in Dickens. Certainly there are the likes of Miss Havisham, conniving and strange and Scrooge, consumed by greed, and even Fagin and Bill Sikes, for all that they are ruthless criminals who think little of murder and violent crime, have moments of sympathy, like Bill's genuine care of Nancy. Even Fagin, a twisted caricature of Jewish stereotypes and by far the most scheming and opportunistic character in his story looks out for the children he has taken charge of. Though Dickens's novels have plenty of external conflict and politicking, the greatest struggles are against more abstract evils, things like pride and avarice, ignorance and want. The true conflicts of Dickens' novels comes when the protagonists must evaluate themselves and are forced to develop. Pip must contend with his mixed feelings about Magwitch, his mysterious benefactor, and later make the choice as to whether or not he goes to comfort the man on his deathbed in prison, Scrooge must become more magnanimous lest he die alone and unmourned, Esther is forced to accept that she can never acknowledge who her mother was.

Though the unnamed city of my thesis does not have the characteristics of Dickens's London, it too serves as both stage and catalyst for the characters who find themselves within it.

Their lives play out in apartments overlooking streets and alleys, in the corridors of hospitals and in the dark subway tunnels that link the city together. The way the characters see the city informs who they are, and their world is shaped by their worldview. Will sees the world in broad brush strokes, taking in all of the squalor in an attempt to make sense of the absurdity of his existence while June sees the beauty in the small details and finds a kind of peace in that. While Will would see a building as a product of its era and the façade as an attempt to recapture the glory of an era long gone by, June would see the bars on the windows and the flowers dying in the window boxes. Their problems come from their skewed perspectives, meaning that Will struggles to find the small joys in life, or at least must make a concerted effort to do so, while June becomes so fixated on the small details of what she wants her life to be that the big picture is spiraling out of her grasp. As in many Dickens novels, one of the central struggles both Will and June deal with is that they feel themselves to be social outcasts. Will is the more clear cut of the two, as he feels that his suicide attempt marks him as different and unable to relate to people in the way that everyone else can. Even Maeve sees her brush with death in a very different light despite the similarity of circumstance, but because she is the closest Will has to a confidant on the matter, he feels drawn to her. June's sense of alienation is slightly more complicated because to all appearances she is a well-adjusted and gainfully employed woman who seems to have her life on track, but internally she feels that it's all an act, that her life is rapidly eroding beneath her and she has no one to confide in. She only allows her boyfriend to see the carefully curated version of her life, and Will is far too wrapped up in his own problems to be able to help her with hers. And so June is left feeling just as alone as Will, in a city surrounded by other people, even when she and Will share the same space.

Another theme of Dickens I tried to pick up was the sense of enclosure and sometimes even outright imprisonment in the city. Neither character can bring themselves to leave, even when it would be in their best interests to do so. June briefly considers the idea of leaving the city for the suburbs but quickly dismisses it, and Will never sees it as an option. The only time Will entertains the idea is when he tells June he will leave when he finally decides it is time for him to die again. In the crowded city, both characters are driven deeper into isolation, disenchantment and anxiety. Will finds the community of addicts in the support group, people like him that are confined to the city and unable to leave due to the opportunities for help it affords them that they would be unlikely to find elsewhere. However, despite Will and June being able to develop relationships within their respective circles, they find themselves unable to find solace in community or in other people and wind up even more guarded. The boundaries of the city are effectively the boundaries of their world. There is more beyond the urban sprawl, but it could not be more inconsequential to Will and June's lives. Even if the answers to their problems could be found out there, they are answers Will and June have no interest in. The city is their prison, but it is the prison they chose.

The Dickensian nature of my thesis evolved slowly and over a long span of time. When I began writing, I knew the story I wanted to tell. As Will and June developed their inner lives and crafted their interpersonal webs, I began to see them in the larger context of the city they inhabited and the people they drew close. I began to examine other novels of people living amidst the urban landscape, and each time I went down that rabbit hole, I found myself arriving at a profoundly Dickensian influence. Charles Dickens was hardly the first to write about the many modes of urban living, but he is by far one of the most prolific, and the English canon owes him a debt for that much at least. While Will and June explored the city that tormented and

enchanted them, I began to see the ways they would be seen by young Oliver crouching terrified in the darkened alleys, by Scrooge stalking the streets, by Pip looking down from his room and bemoaning his misfortune, or by Esther seeking her own truth. They inhabited their London without conscious thought, treaded the boards of the city because they were born to do so. For them, there was no other place to be but London, and the same is true of Will and June in their more abstract City.