

An abstract painting featuring a dense, textured surface. The composition is dominated by warm tones of red, orange, and yellow, interspersed with cooler shades of green and white. The brushwork is visible, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of organic complexity and vibrant energy.

PARADINS

JOSEPH MURPHY

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a novella

by Joseph Murphy

“If the Sun & Moon should doubt they’d immediately go out.”
– *Auguries of Innocence*, William Blake

1

Firsts

The night before Derek's parents' flight, they called him downstairs to say goodbye. His mother had been planning for months. For a while, it was all she talked about: the first chance for a get-away they'd had in years. It was long overdue, she said again and again, as though to justify it, as though she had to. "It's all right here," she explained and began a review of the itinerary once more while Derek's father stood by, looking already exhausted and silently assessing the mound of luggage by the door. "There's just as many of *your* bags as there are mine," she protested before continuing her litany of events for the next two weeks. With the way she had them scheduled, it was going to feel much longer. Her cousin Bill's wedding on Pūpūkea was three days away, but, before even that, she had them on a wine tour, jet skis and two not-so-short hikes. She wanted to tour a macadamia nut farm, but she wasn't sure where to squeeze it in. Afterward, they'd bounce around between the Big Island and Kauai, biking and snorkeling, luaus and shopping malls. "Though I'm not particularly looking forward to those little, bumpy flights." She had them signed up for surfing lessons. She was using stockpiled credit card points for most of the hotels, but it involved frequently moving rooms. "It's all right here," she said, once again, indicating the detailed list she'd made for him since Derek would be staying behind. "Dates, hotels, itineraries. Bill's address. Our flight information is here too, okay?"

"Sure. I got it." Derek obediently glanced over the list. "Have everything?"

His father grunted again.

"Stop it, Richard. Yes, I think so. We have a checklist."

"Don't forget to have fun," Derek said to his father.

"It's on the list," he said, grinning.

"Tell Bill congratulations, I guess." Derek wasn't sure he'd ever even met Bill; he wasn't sure his parents had either.

His mother hugged him longer than usual. "You'll be alright? If you need anything, you can call Aunt Shirl. She's only forty minutes away."

"I'll be fine."

"He'll be fine," his father put in. "He's not a child, Maura."

"I'm aware, thank you." She still looked worried. "I know, I know," she said, finally letting her son go. "Two weeks is a long time, that's all."

"It's only two weeks."

"I'll be fine, Mom. Nothing to worry about. Have a good trip."

“How could we not? We’re long overdue,” Rick said, shaking Derek’s hand and pulling him into a half embrace. “I’ll stay if you want to go instead.”

“Oh, stop it. I’ll relax on the plane,” she said, swatting at her boys.

Derek lingered in the kitchen a while longer and watched his parents pack some more. He made sure they had their boarding passes, their IDs, his mother’s inhaler. Finally, he said goodnight. He still had homework to finish, and it was getting late.

“Be good,” his mother said, giving him one last squeeze. Then she held him at arm’s length like she had to really look at him, like she might forget or like he might change so much in two weeks she wouldn’t recognize him. She was always saying he’d changed overnight, a boy one night and a handsome young man the next morning. She seemed to say it more and more, seemingly only to embarrass him.

“He will be.”

Upstairs, Derek finished his Psychology essay; as distracted as he was, he knew it wasn’t his best work. After fixing his essay’s header, giving it a title and submitting it, he shut his laptop finally and picked up his phone and texted Jazz. *My mom hugged me like they weren’t coming back.*

Aw, she just loves you.

He turned on his ringer. *She has to, haha. Besides, he added, I’m very lovable.*

It’s true. Did you finish your essay?

Yeah, just now. You?

Okay, good. Yeah. I’m going to bed. Sooner it’s tomorrow, sooner I see you. She appended a big red heart.

Night, Jazz.

By eleven, he heard his parents come upstairs and go to bed. He read for class for an hour before turning out the light.

He didn’t hear his phone buzz. *Can’t sleep. Thinking about you.* He’d see it a few hours later.

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Thinking about you, too.

He lay in the dark and listened as his parents prepared to leave. He convinced himself they never would, that something would stop them. But, around four-thirty, he heard the garage door trundle along its track, a car pull out the drive, and the garage door again. He expected them back a moment later, his mother needing one last thing, but the house was quiet and remained so until he got up. It wasn’t yet five, but he knew

he wasn't going to get back to sleep. Instead, he checked the garage: his father's car was missing. To be sure, he checked the basement, their bedroom, his father's office, turning on and off the lights as he went.

They were really gone.

He returned to his room and checked his parents' flight on his phone; it wasn't canceled. It was a little past five-thirty now; their flight was at seven-seventeen. *They left*, he thumbed.

Jazz quickly replied, *Actually?*

Ever since his parents had broached the idea of going, he and Jazz had known, *if* his parents went, she and Derek would find some way to spend the weekends together. They'd never had sex, but Jazz had asked, four months ago, soon after Bill's wedding invitation arrived, if they could someday. They'd been dating over a year, ever since the Sophomore Spring Formal. It hadn't felt real then, when Jazz brought it up, just some idea far off in the future, but he agreed. He'd certainly thought about it. And they'd talked a bit more: yes, they were ready; yes, it's what they wanted. So they waited, expecting the whole time for something to come up. It was their game, thinking of all the things that might preclude his parents' going: freak weather, a cousin's cold feet, zombie apocalypse, nuclear winter, a stubbed toe that later becomes infected and falls off, finding a stray dog that's too cute to leave behind, fungal infection, super flu, complete and total collapse of civilization, or military coup. *Something* was going to intercede upon their plans. But nothing happened – that is, nothing to stop Derek's parents from going. So, they went.

See you at my locker? I've gotta catch the bus.

Normally, he'd have picked her up, but this was all part of the plan. They'd considered lying about him going too, but that would unduly complicate things. They'd keep it simple. If her mother didn't see him pick Jazz up, it'd be like he didn't exist.

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Jazz didn't like lying and didn't do it very often but concluded her mother had done the same, surely, when she was her age (and her father, wherever he was now, had made a lifestyle out of lying). It was expected; it was tradition. It was a rite of passage. Besides, the lie was small, she thought, knowing her mother wouldn't see it that way. Plenty of her peers were doing worse: habitually lying, smoking, and sneaking out – *probably* doing drugs. Her mother was a middle school teacher and, over dinner, often relayed all the horrors her students committed that week: truancy, brawls, retaliatory defecations

and much worse. This was nothing like that; she wasn't a child, and she'd be safe. She and Derek were in love, and, though it might not last forever, it *was* real.

Two days before Derek's parents' flight, Jazz asked if it was okay to sleep over Lily's Friday night. She'd been sleeping over Lily's now and then for almost a decade. It was a relief to finally lie after having known she would for months beforehand.

She left the house with a duffle bag – and a bit of guilt – and boarded the bus she hadn't taken for what felt like forever. She texted Derek once she sat and tucked the bag under her seat. The bus was as loud as she remembered. The poor driver looked more haggard than her last, hunched at the wheel in an oversized hoodie. *I feel a little like Hester Prynne with this overnight bag.* She quickly added, *But that book's dated and sexist.* She put her phone away, only to take it out again a moment later. *Drive safe.* She put her headphones on and tried to ignore everything else. She was the first one off the bus when it pulled into the cul-de-sac at school.

She felt better once she'd stowed the bag in her locker and better still when Derek arrived. "Hey," she said, angling out of her jean jacket.

He leaned against the row beside her; he'd already been to his locker, carrying now only a few textbooks. "Hey, you survived the bus?"

"Only barely," she said. "Someone kept saying *penis* from the back row, a little louder each time. I missed it actually, the whole experience – everything about it."

Derek laughed. "Sounds fun," he said, handing over a white paper bag from Poor Annie's.

"Hash browns?" she asked, already knowing the answer. "Aw, thank you. I'm going to need these before the Chem test."

"Right, yeah. I studied a bit when I got up. This morning I went around the house for like an hour making sure they left. I checked everywhere. I've been up since, like, 4. I studied though."

"And were they there? Rick and Maura were hiding in the pantry, weren't they?"

He smiled. "They hardly fit. I felt bad."

"I bet."

"So, I was thinking, do you want to get pizza later? We could pick it up on the way."

"Sure," she said, glancing at the hallway clock. They only had a minute before the homeroom bell. "From Roma's?" Roma's was the brick oven place, a little more expensive than the spot Derek sometimes delivered for but much better.

“Yeah. My mom left me some money.”

The bell rang, and she slammed her locker shut – you had to slam it if you wanted it to catch. “See you later?”

“I love you,” he said and kissed her. They’d been shirking the no-kissing-in-the-hall rule for months now.

Jazz kissed him again, and no-one-who-mattered saw. “Love you, too.” And, while he was still close, she said, “I can’t wait for this day to be over.”

“Me neither,” he said. “See you in Lit.”

“Yeah.” She watched for a moment as he shuffled toward homeroom down the hall, then slid into her own desk in time for the second bell and announcements.

It was Friday.

The marking period would end the following week.

There was a pep rally at noon.

Everyone groaned. Even Mr. Fowler rolled his eyes.

The school store would no longer be selling balloons because someone was inhaling the helium again.

Everyone laughed.

“Have a good day. Go Ferns!”

“Yes, go Ferns or whatever,” Mr. Fowler added, shoos them out.

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This Friday felt more tedious than all those that had come before. Jazz turned in her Chem test quickly and tried to finish – ironically, she realized – *The Story of an Hour* before Lit, some twenty minutes from then, but couldn’t keep it straight. Lily kept grinning at her from across the Socratic Circle. The bell rang, and Jazz had barely read “...veiled hints that revealed in half concealing.” She folded the print-out and went out the backdoor. Fortunately, Ms. K spent all class reviewing the homework or chatting with the jocks. They still had assigned seats, and Derek’s was across the room from hers. She could hardly see him. But when she did, she realized her heart beat a little faster. It was like those early days of her crush. She wondered if she touched him if she’d break or some other cliché. In Gym, they watched a video about drunk driving again because there was a dance coming up – one neither Jazz nor Derek wanted to attend. But after that, the girls were allowed to run and play basketball, whatever, so long as they weren’t sitting. Jazz thought about Derek while she sweated through her calisthenics. She showered, letting the water run cold. As she dressed, she wondered what his bedroom

looked like; she'd seen pictures, but she'd never been allowed upstairs; Rick and Maura could be arbitrarily strict. She *was* allowed in the basement alone with Derek as long as they had a movie playing, even though that seemed almost worse. That small couch had been the stage for their first kiss and withstood their increasingly vigorous make-outs. Their chins felt raw sometimes. His parents *had* to have known, right? It was predictable teenage behavior.

He blushed, she noted, when he saw her come into class.

Was he thinking of the same thing? She could almost feel his hands on her stomach, her neck, between her legs... And now *she* was blushing. Mr. Abaddon was late as usual, so everyone deployed to their keyboards while they waited, Derek taking the one beside hers. They'd been working on melody for almost a month. Hers was getting nowhere.

"How was the Chem test?" he said, checking his headphones.

Jazz shrugged. "Pretty easy actually. You'll be fine."

"We'll see," he said. "Finding it a little difficult to focus." He played a C too loud in his ears and pulled down the fader.

Jazz watched his fingers as they stretched to play the octave and had to look away. "Yeah, me too," she whispered.

Derek grinned. "Lily keeps giggling whenever she sees me."

"Sorry about that."

He smiled, reached over and squeezed her hand.

"Did your parents land yet?"

"They're in LA for a few hours. My Mom texted. Apparently my Dad kept accidentally kneeling the person in the seat in front of him, and it turned into a thing." He laughed.

"Poor, tall Rick, too big for this world."

Mr. Abaddon finally came in, looking more disheveled and frazzled than ever. He'd want to see them working. As usual, he had "shit to unshittify in the band room" – his words.

All of what was left of class, she played the same thing over and over again, never straying from the melody she'd already notated, incapable of finding the next place it'd go. It was a melody for the past, she thought. Its future was unknown – repeating itself over and over and over. Still, somehow, the bell rang too soon.

After his lunch, an announcement called everyone to the gymnasium for the pep rally. He looked for Jazz in the crowd but had to keep moving up the bleachers, shepherded on without her. For a full hour, the Athletics Department subjected the student body to cheery cheers and insane promises of victory. Derek tried to read, much to nearby teachers' chagrin.

“Hey, Palak,” Mr. Fowler said. “Where’s your pep?”

Derek grinned and shrugged. “Where’s yours, Mr. Fowler?”

Fowler laughed.

One of the new teachers donned the Fern costume and shimmied around the bleachers now, its fronds sad and bent.

Three-fourteen couldn’t come soon enough.

But eventually it did.

As soon as the door was shut and the pizzas countered, Jazz kissed him so hard they nearly fell over. She pulled him by his hoodie and pinned him against the counter's edge. She felt a little out of control, but it felt good – like she was teetering on the precipice of something profound. Her heart raced again. “Is this okay?” She was asking for herself, too, she realized, because she suddenly didn't feel much like herself, like the empty house was a void, a pocket far from themselves even – certainly from everything else.

“Yeah,” Derek said, pulling her back to him. He bent low to kiss her neck.

Jazz laughed. “Derek,” she whispered. “Let's go upstairs.” She kissed him again, unzipping his hoodie and putting one hand inside his t-shirt. “Are you nervous?” He was shaking a little. With the other, she held his neck so he couldn't move away.

He nodded.

“It's okay. Come here. It's okay.”

He pulled back when she let him, feeling ordinary beside her. But he followed her upstairs when she led him. He realized that a part of him wanted to live right there in that moment with her – before, capital b – that a part of him was afraid. The world felt electric around him, and he worried it'd fizzle or wash out... Later, he knew, he wouldn't recall why probably. And by the time they were upstairs, that worry was already starting to fade.

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It was their first time, but they made up for clumsiness with desire, for nerves with laughter. Jazz held on so tightly at first, like she was scared he'd pull away and it'd end. Derek huffed and rolled over so she could get on top of him. He kept thinking about how she was naked – completely so – and that he was too. She would lean down to kiss him, and he'd go cross-eyed looking at her, like he couldn't believe it was real. He found new places to hold her, rolled her over with him, nearly falling off the bed. She'd come before, on her own and a few times with Derek, his hand barely fitting down her shorts. This was better; it was painful too. Derek came soon after. She liked that. They collapsed beside each other. Derek reached for her hand and clutched it tightly.

“Sorry, I kept leaning on your hair or –”

“Shh, it's fine.” She turned on her side and put a hand on his chest. “I love you,” she said, almost out of breath. “I know we're young and I know what people say about high school relationships. But this is special – to me, I mean.”

“It's special to me too,” he said.

“I mean it, Derek. I’ll always love you, no matter what happens.”

“Me too,” he said. “Forever.”

Who was she now? she wondered. Was it possible to be the same and different all at once? Was that stupid? Probably. That it was still light out made her laugh.

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Jazz wore her panties and nothing else and stood admiring the books and records on his shelves. She recognized novels they’d both read in class, some others she’d recommended; there were a lot of science-fiction novels and graphic novels – or manga maybe. He’d had Bowie’s *The Man who Sold the World* on last, the empty sleeve and liner atop the turntable.

“Come here,” Derek said, pulling back the comforter for her. He’d dozed off for a while.

“I will,” she said. “I’m kinda hungry though. Are you? Should we eat?”

“Okay, sure, yeah,” he said, angling out of bed and pulling on some shorts. “I’ll bring it up.”

When he was gone, she opened his closet door and almost laughed. It was twice the size of her closet, which she shared with her sister, and oddly organized, though she wasn’t sure what she’d expected. She pulled a gray pocket t-shirt from the shelf and put it on.

“Do you want something to drink, Jazz?” Derek called from the stairs.

She padded out into the hall. “What do you have?”

“There’s iced tea or lemonade or... uh, Coke?”

“Coke,” she decided. She heard the refrigerator close and, in a moment, Derek on the stairs.

“Do you want to watch something?” He handed her a plate with two slices and, from the crook of one arm, a glass of Coke, still fizzing. “We’re sharing. I only had room for one.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, so there’s this documentary I’ve been wanting to watch.”

“What’s it about?” She sat on one of the two bean bags on the floor and took a bite. The pizza was still warm.

Derek grinned. “The mole people of Las Vegas.”

Jazz shrugged. “I’d watch it. They, like, live in the sewers beneath the city?”

“Yeah. I guess a lot of them gambled away their savings above. I watched the trailer.” He sat beside her and took a long pull of soda, watching her above the glass. “You okay?”

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine. The pizza’s good.” She looked at the empty bed nearby; she could almost see what they’d looked like: a tangle of angled flesh. Were they still those people?

“Hey,” he said between bites, “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me too. Maybe your parents will stay in Hawaii.”

“Maybe. *Hawaii secedes from the Union; all borders closed.*”

“Good for them.”

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Derek’s neighborhood was always so quiet. He said it was because his neighbors were all old. Jazz clung to his arm as they walked down the drive and toward the park. It was late enough that everyone else was probably asleep. All the windows they passed were blank.

“This is really nice,” she said. A part of her knew they might not make it, but, at that moment, she thought they could: Derek was a good guy; he made her laugh; he was smart. Maybe this was it. She wondered if it could be and how she would know. The idea of being with the same person all your life seemed antiquated, but she didn’t want to ignore it simply to buck the notion.

Derek kissed the top of her head. “Any chance you could sleep over Lily’s again tomorrow?”

“We have all night,” Jazz promised. “And I don’t have to rush home tomorrow. I can stay all day. Why? Do you want to do *that* again?”

“*That?* What’s *that?*” he teased

“Have sex,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Sex,” she said more loudly now, “with me?”

“Yes, I do!” he announced. “Let’s have sex again – together!”

She laughed. “Shhh, stop stop.”

“Fine,” he said, pulling her close to him.

Lily texted again, but she ignored it. “What were you reading during the pep rally?”

Derek laughed. “I’m still reading *Cat’s Cradle*.”

“Is it good?” They’d both been reading a lot of Vonnegut lately, and she might have guessed the answer.

“Yeah, very – I think so. Where were you? I looked for you.”

“I was in the other bleachers, the other side. The whole class had to stay together.”

“Nothing like forced camaraderie to make you feel more alone than ever.”

“Aw, poor Derek,” she teased, “so alone.”

“Look,” he said, pointing up to the night sky. “We’re all just floating in nothing, alone. You, me, everyone.” He was kidding mostly, she could tell. When they’d first met, Derek had been playing in a band that only had sad songs. She’d liked that sadness in a way. “Pep rallies or dancing Ferns, they’re meaningless.”

She caught his smirk in the dark. “Well, I’m glad I’ve got you then, even if you’re a sad, existential shit.”

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Derek and Jazz brushed their teeth together. They’d never done that before either. Jazz watched him in the mirror. She kept smiling around her brushing, especially when he put one arm around her, his hand sinking slightly into her waistband. She spat, turned to him. “You’re very handsome, I think,” she said, kissing his neck. He grinned, frothing. She let him finish up alone and got into his bed. This was what he saw each night when he’d text her, and this was *his* pillow, *his* bed, *his* books on the shelves. She thumbed through one of the books on the bedside – *Catch-22* – then put it aside. She took off her borrowed shirt and threw it toward his desk chair. She left the light on, arranging the comforter so it hardly covered her. She closed her eyes. The bathroom light went out down the hall and Derek returned, his t-shirt over one shoulder.

“Which side do you sleep on?” she asked. “This side?”

“Huh. I never thought about my bed having sides. Which side do you want?”

“It doesn’t matter, just come here,” she said. She lifted the covers and pulled him in, hiding him down there. He kissed her stomach. She guided his shoulders until his head was between her legs. “Right there,” she said, but he’d already known what to do so she let him do it. Then she wanted him again. She reached for the light, to turn it out, but, before she could, the lamp fell to the carpet, flickered and went out. “Shit. Sorry.” He ignored it all. Her whole body trembled, and it felt as though the whole room shook around her. Only when things began falling from the shelves, did she realize it was. Then

all the lights in the house came on at once – the TV too – then off, then on again.
“Derek?”

“What is that?” he asked.

“The lights, they’re all –”

He saw now, pulling the covers away. “What’s that sound?”

There was a low rumbling too; she heard it now. “Earthquake? We don’t get –”
She clung to him, feeling ridiculous for being naked now.

The rumbling increased, then a higher pitched sound joined it, like metal scraping against metal, and it got louder and louder, so loud that, though they were but inches apart, they couldn’t hear what the other was saying. And they were both yelling by now and crying uncontrollably. It felt like the grinding noise was coming from inside their heads. Silently, everything fell from his shelves and doors slammed opened all around the house. The bed shook so violently beneath them that they were nearly thrown from it. The TV tipped over and hit the carpet. Picture frames slid down the walls, and some of them broke – all of it muted beneath whatever was happening. It hurt somewhere deep within them.

Then it all stopped. Their ears rang. Car alarms – unheard ’til now – were going off in the distance. Someone was yelling out there.

Jazz spoke first, wiping tears away. “Derek, what the *fuck* was that?”

Derek couldn’t answer. He was shaking.

“Derek? Breathe, okay?” She held onto him, and, after a moment, she felt him hold onto her. She needed her ears to pop. “We’re okay.” She closed her eyes and tried to only feel her boyfriend’s arms around her. She’d stay there as long as she could, knowing the world outside of that was not the same one in which they’d met and fallen in love. She didn’t know how yet, but she knew it; the world had changed.

3

On the sixth try, Derek got a connection, and, eventually, his mother collected herself. He assured her he was okay – whatever that meant. “I’m fine, Mom, yeah.”

“Are you sure?” She kept asking, again and again. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Are you? Where’s Dad?”

“Yes, we’re fine, yes.” They’d been at the hotel pool; his father had gone to get them drinks. She’d been in a cabana dozing in the shade. That’s when it happened – all out of nowhere. She was so calm now; so soft, hardly above a whisper, Derek hardly recognized her voice. “What was it? People are saying it was an earthquake, but...” They were in their room now; people were panicking everywhere. The bewildered hotel staff was preparing for a tsunami. The hotel’s faith center was packed when they passed it.

Derek realized it’d been childish to think his mother would know what had happened. He could hear his father nearby saying it wasn’t an earthquake, that he’d been in earthquakes, and this wasn’t that. “That sound, that sound...,” he kept saying.

“Lock the doors and stay inside until we know what’s happening, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Derek, I love you very much. We both do. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“I love you too.”

Maura hung up.

Jazz was in the hall when he came out of his bedroom. “Are they all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Look,” she said, pushing her phone toward him. “It happened everywhere – all over the world. The same thing everywhere. What’s that mean?”

Derek didn’t know. “Did you get Melody or your –?”

“My Mom answered. They’re both fine – scared but fine. There’s a curfew in place, she said.”

Derek had seen the notice.

She tried to smile, but it didn’t feel right. “I’m glad to be here with you. I don’t know what I’d have done knowing you were here by yourself.”

He put his arms around her and held her. “Your ear’s still bleeding. Let me clean it.”

She touched it instinctively and pulled her fingers back to see. “It is?”

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They put off cleaning for hours, as though they might forget it’d happened without it.

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That night, they stayed up, hoping for some news of what happened. Downstairs, they lay on the couch, both of them thumbing through website after website on their phones. Theories ranged. Social media was glutted with videos that happened to capture the event. It was horrifying actually, watching people as they were reduced to their most primal state of fear. Inevitably, American media picked up the religious angle: God and his angels giving ultimatum to a world turned wicked. Instead of scientists, pastors gave their takes on it. Before they realized, it was past two in the morning.

“Do you want to go to bed?” Jazz asked, uncertain if she did, unsure if she’d even sleep.

Derek tossed his phone aside and rubbed his eyes. “Probably should.”

“Do you think the roads will be open?” She felt him shrug. “Yeah.” She got up and stretched. She looked at him as he was looking up at her. She felt guilty thinking it, but she realized she was almost happy to be stuck with him. They’d always have this – whatever it was. “Come on then,” she said, offering him a hand.

They turned out the lights, made sure the doors were all locked, and went upstairs.

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It was almost ten by the time Jazz woke up; Derek was already making them breakfast. She could hear him in the kitchen from the stairs. “Morning,” he said. He had the news on the small television on the counter. At least now they were interviewing actual scientists and government officials. One of them theorized tectonic plates grinding together could produce a similar sound. He didn’t sound like he’d even convinced himself.

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Did you already shower?” He smelled clean.

“Yeah,” he said, cracking another egg on the bowl’s lip.

“French toast?” she asked, taking in the wreckage of Derek’s preparations.

“And bacon and potatoes.”

She found the crisped bacon beneath a paper towel. “So, what’re they saying now?”

“Nothing solid unless you take the Book of Revelation as a reliable source.”

She snuck another strip of bacon. “Hmm. Maybe we just missed being raptured.”

Derek laughed. “How so?”

“I mean, a few hours earlier, and we might have been sucked up into Heaven or whatever – little virginal lambs.” She honestly didn’t know what people believed would happen.

“So, you think us having sex saved us from being raptured.”

“Yeah. God’s a petty jerk.” She dropped onto a stool by the kitchen’s island.

“So what happens now, according to the Bible you hold in such reverence?” He turned on the skillet to get it warm. “Also, how many pieces of toast?”

“Years of anguish. Three, please.”

“Sounds terrible.” He pulled diced potatoes from the oven and set them out to cool.

“It will be. Us tossed-off heathens get the run of the place.”

“Do we know anyone who’d have been taken?”

“Hopefully Kristen Lowe.” Kristen was in their Literature class.

Derek guffawed as he flipped their french toasts.

“Sorry, that was mean.”

“There are worse people in the world,” Derek reminded her. “Or used to be.”

“Okay, so, for real though, no one got raptured.”

“A bunch of people committed suicide though.”

“How horrible.”

“Do you want any tea or coffee?”

“I should drink some water,” she said, realizing she had a throbbing headache.

“There’s orange juice in the fridge.”

“That actually sounds good. Do you want some?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Derek plated their breakfast. He set hers before her and climbed onto the stool beside her. “I didn’t sleep much at all,” he admitted. “I kept thinking it would happen again, and I was feeling for or *listening* for some hint it was coming.”

“I can still hear it ringing in my head.”

“Me, too,” he said. “How’s your ear?”

“Fine, I think.” She ate a bit more. “This is really good. Thank you for cooking.”

“I’ve been planning it for weeks,” he admitted, grinning like an idiot.

“Oh, and what else did you have planned for today?”

“We’re under lockdown,” he said. “We can’t leave the house.”

“Convenient,” she said. For a moment, she could see how it’d be, the two of them together for the rest of their lives. They’d grow up a bit, of course, but, more or less,

they'd be the same people as they were now. And then she remembered that *now* was very much all they had for certain. She really liked having breakfast together.

—

Sunday morning, an alert hit their phones, and Jazz crawled from bed to see what it was. It wasn't even nine yet. She squinted to read the notification. "Holy fucking shit," she said. "Derek, get up." She climbed over to him, trying to show him what it said. She wasn't sure what she was feeling exactly, but it felt like panic, like excitement maybe. More than anything she wanted to be sure she wasn't dreaming.

"What's it say?" He tried to read it, but Jazz kept shaking the phone. He grabbed her wrist and read. "Is this for real?"

"The Secretary General is making an address." She pulled the phone away and tried to pull it up.

"It was aliens?" He actually laughed.

Jazz had the stream up now and her phone balanced on the comforter beside them. She lay across his belly to watch.

"Who's that?" Derek asked. "He looks scared."

"Leonard Milloux, the UN Secretary General," she read from the caption, then shushed him.

Milloux cleared his throat and began. "Citizens of the world, I appear before you now on the precipice of a new world. Gather your children, your loved ones, and hold them close." He described what they all had experienced. He'd been sleeping at home in Paris; his two young sons were in the room down the hall, his wife beside him. "...not knowing what was happening, if Clara and Jules and Alain would..." Milloux trailed off. "Well, we are here now," he said, "and that is what matters.

"As you must know by now, I humbly stand as a messenger. Simply put, we are not alone in the universe." He paused there. Then he said it again, "We aren't alone."

Jazz sat straight up now.

"We never were." Milloux was keeping it together, but you could see his hands gripping the podium at which he stood. "I admit I was afraid at first. It's okay to be afraid. There are a lot of questions we do not have answers to yet. But the important one is answered: they come in peace." He smirked at the familiar phrase. "What we experienced here was their arrival, and I assure you that any pain or fear it caused was unintentional. Our new friends in the sky were merely saying hello." He cleared his

throat now. “These beings are unlike anything we’ve seen. In fact, they are so different, we cannot.”

“Uhh,” Derek began.

“Shh, shh.”

“Likewise, their vessel is hidden from the human eye by its very nature – so far outside the realm of our experience.”

“What-the-fuck.”

“Is he saying they’re invisible?” Jazz asked.

“The Paradins are here,” Milloux said, “and they need humanity’s help.”

“Paradins?”

“Refugees from another world, they arrived on our shores pleading for sanctuary. For generations, they’ve been traveling to one day deliver their children to a better world: ours, Earth. I can only imagine how they’re feeling now.

“How lucky we are to be alive at this time, to witness this momentous moment. I invite you all to look to the skies now, wherever you are, and, though you cannot see them, know the Paradins are there. Together, as a planet, we lift our hands in welcome.” Milloux looked up now and waved.

Jazz looked over at Derek. “This is so corny.”

Derek looked out the window nearby.

“Don’t even think about waving.”

“In time, we will help them. It is our duty.”

Milloux received a standing ovation.

“This is bullshit,” Jazz decided.

“Really? Which part?”

She closed the video and put her phone on the bedside table. “Dude, invisible aliens make the world rumble? You believe that?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he admitted. But neither did Jazz. “They must be releasing proof or evidence or, like, communications if –”

“And that it’s our *duty* to help them? Since when has the United Nations cared about its moral duty to serve?”

“I don’t think we can turn them away.”

“We?”

“The – the collective we,” he said, making some vague circular gestures.

“I don’t buy it. It’s smoke and mirrors, distracting us from any number of heinous atrocities, and stupid wars or genocides, or like orchestrated poverty and...” At that, she broke into tears and curled up against his chest. “I don’t want there to be aliens.”

—

“Flights are still grounded.” Maura sounded tired.

“Are you still in your hotel room or –?”

“No, everyone’s calmed down a bit. We’re out by the pool. They’ve got a telescope set up for us to look. Not that we could see it, but – well, it’s the thought, I guess.”

“Sorry, you’re off-schedule.”

She managed to laugh.

“You think they’re real?”

“Well, that’s what they said so, yes, of course.”

“When do you think you’ll be back?”

“I don’t know yet, dear.”

“There are worse places to be stuck,” his father said in the background. He actually sounded happy.

“Your father misses you,” Maura said. “Despite his good humor now. The sun’s good for him.”

“Miss you, too,” Derek said. He promised to call them again tomorrow and hung up.

“I told my Mom I’m here,” Jazz said. “I told her I felt safer with you.”

“Okay.” He waited a moment before asking, “Is she mad?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

“Oh.”

“She likes you and trusts me. I didn’t like lying to begin with. I think the roads will open again soon.”

“I saw a car earlier, when I was outside,” Derek said.

“I feel different,” Jazz said, dropping onto the couch. “Like, I can’t breathe right or like there’s something sitting on my chest. I – I don’t know what to do, if I can catch –” She took a few ragged, shallow breaths, panicking with each.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he said, holding her shoulders. “I’m here. Breathe with me, okay?”

She tried. “Goddamnit,” she said when she could. “This is so messed up.”

—

Days passed. There were interviews with people claiming to have seen one of them “Pardingers,” as one woman called them. Actually, she said she was standing there right now with one beside her. When she introduced the alien by name, she made some horrible clicking sound. Another said he’d caught an alien in his barn. No, he couldn’t see it, but he knew it was there because his horses were all upset and his cats had scurried off into the fields. Jazz and Derek took turns reading stories from the multitude of messageboards that’d cropped up: lots of abduction stories, lots of people claiming they’d seen the arrival of the Paradins in a dream months or years before, some people saying they were Paradins themselves, sent ahead in a smaller – and, therefore, faster (because of “science”) – vessel to scout and prepare the human race in subtle ways. They wore disguises obviously. The abduction stories varied in that some were about Paradins taking humans and others were about humans taking Paradins; each party had nefarious intentions. An alarming number of people signed-off on the idea that Paradins had been here for generations, having sent secret ambassadors to hide among humanity, breeding to create hybrids, that everyone knew someone who was probably at least part Paradin. Someone said there was a “special fractal lens” you could use to see them (but only the babies); there was a link included to buy the lens for 29.95 USD.

“Barn guy says they’re thin and humanoid. Gray skin.”

“Boring,” Jazz said, rolling onto her stomach. “*The Paradins*,” she said in her most officious voice, “*are gaseous and can take a more solid form but choose to remain intangible because of humanity’s long history of violence.*”

“It says that? Who is this person?”

“Oh, that was me. I just posted it.” She laughed.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” she said, showing him her phone.

“Okay, so then why’d they come here? I mean, I don’t disagree with you, but why here then?”

“Assuming they’re real,” she added.

“Sure.”

“Well, *assuming they’re real*, maybe we’re the only other ones? Like, in all the universe, it’s just us and them and the void of space.”

“Or maybe no other planet is inhabitable.”

“Same thing.” Jazz shrugged. “Assuming they’re real.”

“Yes, assuming they’re real,” Derek added, playing along. He returned to his phone, reading the next post he saw aloud. They were all starting to sound the same. “I don’t think I can look at these anymore. Not tonight.”

—

Derek had the fire going outback. He sat with his back to the house so that, beyond the fire pit, you couldn’t see a thing, like the whole world dropped off a few feet away – if only. Somewhere in that dark, Jazz stood, a blanket wrapped around her. When she called to him, it seemed her voice came from nowhere.

“All the stars are fire pits.”

“What?”

She appeared, the blanket up over her ears now. “What time is it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe eleven?”

She sat on his lap, careful to pull the blanket off the ground. “This okay?”

“Yes.”

“I know I can go home tomorrow, but I’ll stay if you want me to stay.”

He nodded, watching the fire over her shoulder. Sometimes he’d felt like he could see all his life in the flames if was looking for it. He couldn’t say what he saw in them now.

2

Break

Jazz's roommates had gone home already. They'd left a mess in the kitchen and their beds unmade, which was typical. Instead of studying, she'd spent most of her time cleaning up their mess. She knew now that scheduling her last exam on the last possible day was a mistake – one she and only a few others had made. Campus was deserted. Even the food trucks and coffee carts had departed for better quarries. Near tears, she bit her lip and took her seat, one of three students in a too-big auditorium. But she kept it together mostly and finished the test, immediately feeling sick about it; there was no way she passed. As soon as she could, she went out and cut across campus to her dorm. She ran the water in their in-suite bathroom and sobbed. "I don't want to do this anymore, I don't want to do this anymore, I don't want to –" But she calmed herself, taking long inhalations. She didn't *want* to do this anymore, but she knew she would. Though her whole semester had been a nightmare, her roommates were awful, and she'd never struggled in class as she had these last three months, she would do it. The helplessness passed, and, after a frustratingly restless nap, she took the bag she'd packed earlier that week and finally left for winter break, a much needed caesura in her first year of college.

It was a few cold blocks until she saw her car up ahead – no smashed windows this time. She tossed her bag in the trunk and ran the heat inside, pressing her hands against the vents. When the chill was gone, she texted her mother to tell her she was on her way. She used the last of her cash to buy an ersatz coffee at the corner store and put gas in her tank, hopefully enough to make it home.

As much as she hated to admit it, she missed where she'd grown up. She could have cried (again) when she saw her out front. Jazz knew not to say a word when she approached, her mother's arms spread out for an embrace. It hit her all over again now; she'd been miserable for weeks. When they let go, Jazz shook her head. "It's so lonely," she said. "I don't think I can do it." She kept shaking her head and looking at the ground.

"Come inside, okay? We'll talk about it once you've eaten."

"My bag's in the trunk," she mumbled, already leaving it behind.

"We'll get it later."

She followed Ruby up to the house, happy, if for no other reason, than to simply be led.

Melody had grown up too much for only three months away. She was taller than Jazz now – and prettier, Jazz thought, even in her work blouse and slacks. It was infuriating actually.

“I thought you were coming home tomorrow!” she said, wrapping her arms around her sister.

“No, today.”

“Do you want to eat? Sit,” Ruby said, standing to offer her youngest daughter a seat.

“I can’t, Mom,” she said, “I have to go to Deanna’s. We have a science project due tomorrow.” She opened all the cabinets and most of the drawers, it seemed.

“What are you looking for?”

“I found it,” she said, grabbing a handful of granola bars. “I’ve got to go.” She started out but stopped. “Oh, Jazz, I saw Derek. He came in for lunch with his parents. I didn’t wait on them, but he saw me and waved.”

“Did you talk to him?”

Melody shook her head. “He saw me and wave, Jazz. I’d have said so,” she said, already gnawing on one of the bars.

“Not at all?”

“No. Look, I gotta go.” And she did then, a moment later peeling out of the driveway.

“Is it always like that?”

Her mother laughed.

“Was I like that?”

“No, not really.”

—

That night, she lay in her old bed for the first time in months. Nothing had really changed – at least not on her side of the room. It was long past eleven, and her sister was still out, something Jazz knew she’d have caught hell for if it’d been her. She scrolled the headlines on her phone; she knew it was a bad habit, especially late at night, but it was comforting too, seeing all the bad shit in the world and keeping her own in check. College sucked, and she was broke. Classes were kicking her ass, and she didn’t really know anyone in the city. Meanwhile, wildfires raged in the West, a teenager shot three teachers and one of his classmates in Sacramento, the police kept on murdering people without recourse, and the planet was warming over while the oceans got taller.

The meat industry was still unsustainable, and people kept eating meat. A handful of men retained their enormous wealths, wealths that, if properly distributed, could fix any number of issues. Yet the poor remain poor. The housing market was untenable for the working class. Unions organized strikes but nothing changed. The Earth spins around and around and around: people fall in and out of love there, and babies are born; people die all the time. And then there was the fucking Paradins haunting our failures. They'd promised to assist scientists in developing cures for human diseases, in advancing space travel capabilities, in creating sustainable energy. As far as Jazz could tell, nothing happened – well, save that China had now joined the long list of countries accepting Paradin refugees while pledging another 1.6 billion USD to their care. The United States government remained uncommitted, though it was looking like Paradins would soon be here too. Seeing all this didn't make her feel better exactly, but it justified how bad she felt. She could feel small and, if she was small, then her troubles were small too. By the time she put her phone away, it was almost midnight. She closed her eyes, and, as she was drifting off, her phone vibrated on the bedside table. For a moment, she was transported right back to another time. She almost expected to see Derek's name when she looked. Instead, she saw it was Greg, a boring sophomore she'd had dinner with twice; she didn't plan to do so again. She ignored him and silenced her phone.

—

The next morning she went to the garage and uncovered the road bike she'd bought for campus. She'd never managed to get it there and, having seen the campus now, realized it'd been a misguided idea – a sort of romantic notion of a long-lost college existence. Most bikes ended up mangled wherever they were locked up, picked clean for parts in broad daylight. Besides that, despite tuition being higher than ever, student walks were in unbelievable disrepair. So she'd left it behind. And she was glad now that she had; she wanted nothing more than to feel slightly out of control as she sped downhill, to work her legs hard, to push herself, to... just go. She borrowed her sister's helmet and scooted out even before the sun was up. She biked along her road, almost giddy to see her breath in front of her. She had no destination – up and down, sometimes following the same route again and again. Eventually, she coasted into town, realizing her legs were sore and she should have worn gloves. She walked her bike through the park and leaned it against the pole outside the only coffee shop they'd ever had nearby.

“Jazz?” Lily was coming out of the shop, a coffee and a bag of bagels in hand. “Oh my God. When'd you get back?” She already had Jazz in an awkward hug.

“Just yesterday.”

“You didn’t call?”

Jazz shrugged. “It was a long day. I was going to call you today actually,” she lied. “You know, to see how you were.” They hadn’t talked as much that last year of high school and not at all since Jazz had left. “And, listen, I’m sorry I’ve been a shitty friend.”

“No, no! It’s nothing. I’m just happy to see you.”

“Thanks,” she said, unable to fight a smile. Lily had grown up quite a bit; she even dressed grown up, Jazz realized. “That’s really nice of you.”

“So, how’s school?”

“Honestly, it’s terrible.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Kinda. How about you? You’re, uh –”

“Community college,” she said. “I’m a teller at the fireman bank. Hence the get-up,” she said, looking down at herself. “I feel like my aunt or something. I have to run,” she said, “but we should go get dinner or you can come over. I have an apartment over there.” She pointed in a general direction. “Or, Sunday, if you’re free, I go to Trinity, you could come maybe?”

“Okay, yeah. I’ll let you know,” she said, knowing she wouldn’t.

Lily strode off toward the bank.

Outside the cafe, there was a little stand of free books beneath a small roof. She’d always liked looking, though she couldn’t recall ever finding anything of interest. She wasn’t hungry yet, so walked her bike back toward the park. At the first bench she saw, she sat. She took her phone from the waistband of her leggings and, her fingers a little numb now, dialed Derek’s number. It rang twice.

“Hello?”

“Hey. It’s Jazz.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s early. Are you okay?”

She could hear he’d been sleeping. “You were sleeping, weren’t you?”

“Uh, no, no, it’s okay. What’s up?” He’d definitely been sleeping.

“Are you back home?”

“Home? Yeah. I’m here. I got back a few days ago.”

“Do you still have your bike here?”

“Uh, no. It’s in Boston.”

“Oh. Okay. Nevermind then, I was – I’m out riding now, and I just wanted to –”

“My Dad’s got a mountain bike. Let me check. Where are you?”

“The park. Derek, you don’t have –”

“I’ll be there in a bit.” He hung up.

—

They’d broken up mid-August, the moment Derek had gotten on the train to Boston for freshman induction. She’d been there to say goodbye. His parents were there too. They’d known it was happening, but it was strange to have their last moment as a couple chaperoned and public. Their intentions had been from the start to remain friends, but it didn’t always feel plausible. They’d talked a few times since then, mostly early on as they both adjusted to their schedules, dorms, and classes – the bittersweet freedom. Yet when she saw him riding toward her, it felt as it always had: she’d missed him.

“Sorry, I’m a mess,” she said, realizing now she was in leggings and a hoodie, that her hair was probably flat from the helmet.

Derek leaned his bike beside hers. “Please. It’s good to see you.” He gave her a hug.

Other than the occasional jogger, no one was fool enough to linger in the park in that weather. On a warm day, the playground would be crowded and loud and open benches would be hard to find. They made a few laps and caught up. He seemed okay, like he was doing well in school – better than she was. He liked being in a new place. His roommate, Jonah, wasn’t a bad guy – pretty quiet. Jazz presented a good face. College was challenging, but that was fine. Her roommates weren’t around all that much. She was in the honors dorms and had access to the honors lounge. There was a good taco truck by the humanities building. Sure, she missed home sometimes, but that was normal, you know? Like that, it was *almost* like before. Three months wasn’t all that long to be apart, even if it felt much longer.

“I switched majors,” Derek said as they approached the playground for the third time.

“Already?”

“My advisor’s pushing the hard sciences.” Derek had started in the International Studies Department. “She says the Paradins changed everything.”

Jazz scoffed without entirely meaning to. “I got a similar speech from mine. So, what’re you studying then? Physics?” He’d always been a lot better at science than she’d been.

“Astrophysics, yeah. You didn’t switch?”

“No, never crossed my mind. I’m not letting –” She stopped herself. “I don’t want to switch.”

“You still don’t think they’re real?”

“I’m surprised you do. You’ve been an atheist since you were eight.”

“Agnostic.” He laughed. They’d had the same bit forever it seemed. “You know it’s different though. You were there – with me, actually. *That* was very real.”

“We were real,” Jazz said, immediately regretting it.

They lapped the partly-frozen pond again in silence.

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching to stop him. “I can’t shake the feeling that it’s an incredibly dangerous farce. Like, that it’s meant to distract us from... whatever else is going on, to derail our lives. Paradin news always seems to come at *very* convenient times. You’ve noticed that, right?”

“I try to ignore it.”

“And worst of all, I think there’s a world in which the Paradins never arrived.”

“You mean this one.”

“I really don’t know.”

“Until they’re here, I –”

“You think that’s going to happen?” The US wasn’t yet accepting Paradin refugees – and had been slow even to send aid.

“Most of my professors say it’s inevitable.”

Jazz looked up at the sky. Blindly, she reached for Derek’s hand. “It’d be different if we could see them.” She looked now at Derek who maybe looked a little frightened. Still, she went on, unable to stop herself. “Instead we get photos with presidents or, like, ambassadors with nothing beside them. Or satellite images of Chinese camps – all empty. You’ve seen those? It’s seriously insane. What are they doing here really?”

“Assuming they’re real, remember?” He squeezed her hand, probably trying to make light of it, then let go.

“Right.”

“Have you tried asking them?”

“What? Like on the app?” She laughed. “Have you?”

“Me? No. Jonah’s into it though.”

“It’s so weird,” Jazz concluded.

Derek grinned. “You know I missed you, right?”

“I missed you, too.”

“I’m getting cold though. We should probably go.”

She knew he was right but knew that as soon as they parted she’d feel the nothing beside her a bit too much. She didn’t enjoy being right, having that feeling creep up in her as she watched Derek bike away.

There were several applications you could use to chat with a Paradin. Some were better than others. The only official app was *Paradings*, that particular misnomer having gone viral early on. Reluctantly, Jazz downloaded and installed *Paradings*. “Stupid fucking name,” she said and tapped to open it. She used her school email to login and accepted the generic password she was prompted to use. She scrolled through various *rooms* before finding the *one-on-one* chat option. In a moment, she was connected with a Paradin – no name, just a string of numbers of no importance. Immediately, three dots danced at the bottom of her screen; the Paradin was typing.

Hello, it said.

Her heart was racing, she realized. She didn’t like this at all.

Hello, are you there? it tried again.

Are you?

Yes. Hello.

In a panic, Jazz closed the app, deleted it and turned off her phone. She got under her bed’s covers and closed her eyes.

—

Melody arrived late from work again. “Mind if I turn on the lights?” she asked, already turning them on.

Jazz sat up, wrapping herself in the covers still. “Are you really working this late?”

Melody shrugged. “Most of the time, yeah. Sometimes, the kitchen staff jumps the fence at the club next door and goes swimming.”

“Really?”

“What? It’s an indoor pool.”

Jazz laughed. “Not what I was *really*-ing.”

“Mom doesn’t care.”

“I doubt that.”

“Bigger things to worry about than me.” Melody hung her apron and bag on the rack by their bedroom door. “I think she worries about you more.” Growing up, they’d both mastered getting changed in front of one another, but Melody didn’t seem to care anymore. She put on a big Nine Inch Nails tour shirt and sat on the bed across from her. “So what’d you do today? See Derek?”

Jazz groaned.

“Oh shit. Well, that’s a *yes*.”

“I did see Derek, and he’s fine.”

“That’s the issue though, right? That he’s okay.”

“No,” Jazz insisted. No, she didn’t think so. “I think I talked too much. I – I told him I thought there was a world where there were no aliens – and that maybe in that world we were still together.” Fortunately, she’d only thought that last part, but that she’d had the thought at all was enough.

“I don’t get it. How are they related?”

“I’m not sure they are. But it feels that way sometimes. Like it’s all *their* fault.”

“I thought you didn’t think they were even real, which, by the way, you should probably drop before they start letting them in. Not a good look. I mean, maybe you’re right, but, you know, until you’re right *right*, maybe don’t, okay?”

“I should never have texted him.”

Melody’s eyes went big. “Oh, *you* texted *him*?”

“Don’t,” Jazz said.

And, for once, her sister didn’t.

—

Ruby had the TV on. There was no evidence of a Paradin virus. Still, people *were* getting sick after traveling from or coming into contact with someone who had traveled from a sanctuary country. Symptoms included a runny nose, headaches, fever, chills...

“Symptoms include being an idiot,” Jazz riffed, and her mother laughed.

“Want to sit?” she asked, making room on the couch.

Jazz sat, pulling a corner of the blanket over. “Did you see footage of the protests?”

“It was just on. Looked intense.” Protesters and counter-protesters had clashed over the weekend – both with police too. “Everyone is fighting over nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

“I know, I know.”

“That’s just it,” Jazz said, “most of the time we’ll never see the thing – even when it’s right there in front of us.”

“And yet we fight, don’t we?”

“We try.”

“Or don’t, but somehow we’re still casualties to it.”

It snowed but never stuck. The planet was a lot warmer than it'd been even ten years ago. Jazz went shopping with her mother. Alone and on most afternoons, she rode her bike – not far, but she always arrived home flushed in the cheeks and a little short of breath; it felt good. She helped cook and clean. She and Melody walked to town sometimes, when Melody wasn't working or in school. Her sister was only two years younger than her, but it seemed they'd grown up in completely different times, completely different households. Jazz had had more rules, and, though she'd disliked them at the time, she wished her mother had maintained them; it seemed to her that Melody needed them more than she had – and that was only based on what Melody willingly showed her. Sometimes Melody came home from work late and snuck out again, lowering herself out the bedroom window, not returning until five or six. When Jazz asked what she was doing, her sister said she was hanging with friends and didn't elaborate further. Their bedroom had never felt so lonely, she realized: the empty bed beside her, and the sister she knew turned into someone else really. When Derek texted her one afternoon, Jazz put her phone away without reading it; she was trying to *feel* whatever it was she was feeling, which was something she'd read online was helpful. Therapy was what she needed, but therapy was unduly expensive – doctors too.

Hey, it said, when she did look, there's a party tonight at Caleb's. Do you want to go?

What she felt was surprise, then jealousy, then excitement. *You're friends with Caleb now?* Caleb had been in a few of her classes; he'd been kind of the worst.

Derek responded quickly. *Haha, not really.*

Okay. What time?

8? Do you want a ride?

Yes, that was excitement she was feeling again. *Where is it?*

Derek sent her the address. It wasn't far. *I'll meet you there.*

What are you doing today?

My mom and I are making cookies later. I'm at home reading.

What kind of cookies?

Not sure.

What are you reading?

Something I should have read last semester... And for her own good, she added, *I'll see you later.* She knew she could have texted with him for hours.

Jazz skidded to a stop in front Caleb's house and stashed her bike by the trash cans. With a chain lock, she lashed the frame to the fence post. By then, it was almost nine. She hadn't expected such a climb over only a few miles. She unzipped her coat and tried to fix her hair before heading in. The front door was open when she tried it. But no one was there. The living room on the left, the dining room on the right, and out back, where the kitchen extended into a den: there was no one. Jazz slid back the sliding door and checked the porch. There was an above-ground pool tarped over below.

Are you here? she asked. She opened what she thought would be the basement door, and heard no one. It was dark down there.

Yeah, are you? Then a moment later, he called.

"Derek?"

"Jazz, I'm so sorry, I got the address wrong. It's forty-eight not forty-three."

She walked quickly through the front door then and shut it quietly behind her. "Jesus Christ," she said, more to herself, though she held the phone to her ear still.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I'll be over in a minute." She hung up. "Fuck," she said, standing beside her bike now. But as she gathered her lock, she laughed, looking back up at the house, all its lights on but no one inside. She wheeled her bike the short distance to forty-eight. She should've known; even from the street, she could hear music from the basement. So she locked her bike again, walked up the drive and inside.

Derek was right there, putting on his coat. "Oh, hey, you made it. I was going to come out and look, but –"

"Here I am," she said.

He shrugged off his coat and took hers. He hugged her perhaps too long.

"Are you drinking?"

He blushed. "Only one beer. Do you want one?"

"No, thanks. Biking home."

"Oh, I'll drive you back, if you want."

"Maybe." She heard others in the house. "Who all's here?"

Derek led her in, waving to the people sprawled in the living room first. In the kitchen, people were sitting on the counter. "Everyone else is in the basement. Caleb's band is playing in a bit – again."

"Caleb has a band?"

Derek laughed. "Kinda. It's just him and Danny Mop. Do you remember Danny?"

She thought so. She said her *hellos* to people she vaguely recognized. “Hey, do you know these people?”

Derek shook his head. “I’m sorry about the wrong address. I was, like, reading it off a –”

“It’s okay, it’s fine. No big deal.” She smiled. “I will take that beer now though.”

“Yeah? Okay.”

“But just one.”

Derek nudged some kid away from the refrigerator and searched around until he produced something he thought was decent and handed it back to Jazz.

“Do you drink – like, at school, I mean?”

He leaned against the counter beside her. “Not really. Do you?”

“Never.”

“*Never* never?”

“I think about my Dad sometimes. My Mom says he drank a lot. I don’t remember,” she said, cracking the can and taking a sip. She pulled it away like it’d offended her.

Derek laughed. “Definitely kinda gross.”

A peal of feedback from the basement signaled Caleb was getting ready to play.

“He played earlier apparently,” Derek said. “He was drunk then, so it seems like we’re in for a real show this time. He hasn’t stopped drinking.”

“What’s he play?”

“Well, that you have to see.”

“Danny?”

“Danny plays drums. He’s actually really good.”

—

Caleb paced in front of Danny’s kit and screamed into the bullhorn he had duct taped to his face. He wielded what looked like a metal folding chair and waved it threateningly at his friends who’d descended to see. The chair was mic’d somehow and run through a pedal board. Jazz stood on the stairs’ landing so she could see. Danny counted in, and Caleb went wild – or wilder – slamming the chair against the floor or his forehead. The effect was cacophonous, the dry clatter of a chair being brutally broken and wet pinging and warbling out of a pair of way-too-big amplifiers that flanked them. Danny did his part, beating the shit out of his drums and, occasionally, wild-man yelping as he did. Derek raised his eyebrows at her and grinned. He’d always kind of enjoyed stuff like

this: raw, ugly, abrasive; he liked the challenge or, at least, the look others had if you challenged them with it. And, if she closed her eyes, a weird sort of order did emerge out of the chaos. Still, after a few minutes, Derek tapped her to see if she wanted to listen from upstairs. She nodded. Last she saw, Caleb was prone, using the concrete floor as a mute for his deranged mumbling.

—

Upstairs, Caleb's family's photos crowded the walls, and Jazz tried to hold the buck-toothed kid she saw in them beside the lunatic yelling in the basement. There was something in the way he smiled, even as a kid, that hinted, maybe.

"Danny's a good drummer," Derek said from the couch. "I guess he has a band in Philly now."

"Cool," Jazz said and looked a bit more at the photos, then the shelves, which held many DVDs and a few books, three outdated books on parenting and *The Book of Mormon*.

Everyone else was in the basement except Caleb's older sister Ann. She was the one who'd bought the beer. She waved as she passed by. "What? You're not a Filet of Flesh fan?" she asked and smiled as she returned to the second floor.

"Where's the bathroom?" Jazz asked Derek.

"There's one through the den, by the kitchen."

"I'll be right back."

"Sure, yeah. I might go downstairs for a bit more." He stood to head in that direction, touching her back gently as he passed.

Jazz locked the bathroom door behind her and sat on the edge of the tub. She took out her phone and excused the notifications. She needed to text her sister. *I'm at a party*, she tapped out.

Surprisingly, her sister immediately replied. *Where? I want to come!*

I need some advice.

Is Derek there?

Yeah. She didn't wait for a reply. *And I want to pretend like it's 6 months ago*, she wrote, knowing she likely wanted it to be a year or a year-and-a-half ago more likely – college hardly a thought then.

So do that. You're both adults, Melody wrote.

And though that was true, Jazz didn't quite feel like an adult.

So... going to tell me where?

Jazz laughed and sent the address, double-checking that she'd sent the right one. She heard Caleb announce it was their last song.

—

Danny was breaking the kit down, and Derek was sitting on the stout bass amp beside. Now that he'd ripped the tape off, Caleb was puking in the Pittsburgh toilet in the corner.

"Is he okay?" Jazz asked as she joined them.

Danny looked over at Caleb. "Oh, yeah, he does this after every show." He looked back to Derek now. "Yeah, so they pay him, and he just, like... fucks off. Tells them whatever."

"Danny's uncle is a Paradin Hunter, quote-unquote."

"That's a thing?" Jazz asked.

"Yeah? No? Hard to say," Danny said and laughed.

"People actually pay?"

"Fuck-tons. It's absolutely insane."

"Uncky Darren?" Caleb asked, grinning as he tried to hug everyone. No one even let him get close. "Dude is loaded," he confirmed. "I'm going to have him adopt me."

"He was a literature major," Danny said, noisily putting his cymbals in a bag. "Archetypes are universal. He just tells them a nice story." He hefted the snare and its stand all in one go, disappeared out the cellar door and didn't come back.

"Bye, Danny," Caleb yelled after him, then curled up on the ratty couch nearby, pulling a pillow over his head.

"Hey, will you drive me home?" Jazz asked, reaching for Derek's hand.

"Yeah, of course. You ready now?"

"Whenever." But she wanted to go right then.

—

Derek drove the same car he'd always driven: the locks all broken, one of the windows stuck midway, and the gray hood rusted to brown. There was a time before, when, if you locked the car, you had to crawl through the trunk to get in. Derek popped off the front wheel of Jazz's bike and loaded everything into the back. He went around to the passenger side, reached through the window and pulled open Jazz's door. She got in, leaning across to open Derek's. He started the car and turned up the heat, putting one hand over the vent to make sure it was working. She remembered where she'd picked that up. "Okay?" he said, drawing his belt across his lap.

“Yeah. It was fun. Thanks for getting me out of the house.”

He pulled the car around the roundabout and slowly through the quiet development.

Jazz had had a middle-school friend who’d lived there too – somewhere farther back, more in the woods. “There’s a neighborhood trail back there, I think. I had an old friend who lived in one of the houses by it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I think it’s this street,” she said, pointing as they approached another intersection.

Derek made a quick right. “Let’s see it then.”

Jazz smiled. “It’s a few blocks, I think. The neighborhood gets a little more woodsy – maybe, I don’t know. It’s been years,” she said, looking at the houses as they passed them. “Maybe it’s not – wait, I remember that house.”

Derek leaned forward to look at it. “Hard to forget.”

This particular house was smothered in holiday lights, two inflatable snowmen standing guard and a fleet of toy soldiers and gift boxes strewn at their feet.

“Keep going a bit. Wait, there,” she said, pointing to a trailhead sign that had appeared in his headlights.

Derek pulled over and parked near it. “Well, shall we?”

“What? In the dark?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’ll be fun. Besides, it’s, like, nearly a full moon.” It wasn’t, but it was a clear night.

“It gets dark in the woods.”

Derek clicked on a tiny flashlight he had stashed in the door. “Come on,” he said, holding the light under his chin. “Come on.”

Jazz hustled after him – and the light – and up the paved trail into the woods.

They walked a while without saying anything. At some point, Jazz reached for his free hand and held it, both of them silent, listening to the dark. She felt his fingers close around hers. At the top of the trail, they found a water tower. It was empty. You could knock on it and hear the nothing inside. Still silent, Derek turned to face her. He clicked off the light and, in that shock of darkness, kissed her.

Jazz felt like neither of them really existed.

3

Lost

The Quik

Derek started another episode of the podcast he'd been listening to for months. He scanned through the introduction and let it play in his headphones. He pulled on his gloves and finessed the lift and palette out and onto the floor, past the deli gates and frozen sections. He waved to Bill who was already out facing the shelves in aisle 4. Bill nodded and scooted his milk crate down to the next section to work. For the next hour, he arranged an end-cap display, showcasing patriotic barbecue gear. He listened to a semi-creepy woman's tale of camping in the Pine Barrens. He grabbed a soda from the break room vending machine and started another episode but stopped it, seeing the back warehouse door propped open. Pocketing his headphones, he went to see. He hadn't noticed Bill come through. Out back, there was no one. The security lights had long blown, so it was dark. Derek pulled the door shut behind him and went to make sure Bill was still there. He found him in aisle 6.

"You good, dude?" Bill said too loudly.

Derek flashed a thumbs up.

"Cool."

He went back for another display palette, then another.

A little before six, the opening shift started to show, sliding through the automatic doors Bill had unlocked but didn't turn on for them. Derek clocked out as the loudspeaker music started and the bright overheads came on. The automatic doors slid open as he went out, the first shoppers of the day already pulling up. He could walk home from there, cutting through the developments and up through the backyard of the middle school baseball diamond. That early, he rarely saw anyone else. Sometimes there was a mist on the playing field like a veil. He took out his phone and got a picture of the sunrise breaking through. He sent it to Ida.

—

Sitting on the floor beside his bed, Derek checked his school and personal emails. He'd been applying to labs for most of the last year. It was all junk. He might work at the Quik forever.

His mother knocked at his open door. "I'm heading out. Good shift?"

Derek shrugged. "Same shift, different day."

Maura smiled. "Any good news?" She saw he had his email open on his phone.

"No news at all."

“Something will come through.” Lately, even his mother’s optimist had worn down a bit. *Something* was now the thing for which she hoped. She’d lost her job of twenty years the year before, and she’d had to essentially start again at another medical office.

“Have a good day, Mom.”

For a while, he tried to sleep or read, but, even with the curtains drawn, his body knew it was daytime, that his rhythms were all wrong. So he got up, hoping he might doze off on the couch if he put on the news. He checked his phone, but it was still early on the West Coast and Ida liked to sleep in.

His father shook him awake.

“At least take off your boots if you’re going to sleep on the couch.”

“Sorry, yeah.”

He checked his email again.

—

Danny passed a loaded bong and exhaled a long banner of smoke.

“I’m good,” Derek said, landing heavily on the couch beside him.

“You’ll say *yes* one of these days.”

“It freaks me out too much.”

Danny raised his eyebrows at that, like it was the first he’d been told, then he laughed uproariously. “You’ve got too much to freak out about.” He set the bong on the side table and pulled on a shirt. Danny’d been living in his mother’s garage for almost three years now. He didn’t have much, just the couch and computer arranged around a small rug, a mini fridge in the corner, a too-big TV and his kit. He had a few amps friends had left behind over the years. All of it was crammed in beside the usual garage storage: mowers and tarps and holiday storage bins. Danny kept his clothes in a hamper, clean and dirty all in there together and sort of balancing it out, according to him. “You bring your guitar?”

“No.”

“Okay. Well, I’ve got some keyboards or, uh... there’s a bass somewhere.”

“I just needed somewhere to go, I think.”

“That’s cool,” Danny said, returning to the couch. “Wanna watch something? Or, uh... What time is it?”

“Like seven, I think.”

“You hungry? Let’s order a pizza or something.”

“Sure, man.”

Danny searched his pockets then the couch for his phone. “So, is it work then that’s the bummer or did things get weird with Ida again?”

Derek shrugged. “Both probably,” he said, instinctively checking his phone. Ida had still not replied.

“Shit, man. I’m sorry.”

“Do you remember being in high school and actually being excited to be where we are now? Like adults?”

“Sure. I couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

“And now we’re back where we started.”

“Stuck.” Danny looked spooked for a second. “Dude, you were smart, too.”

“So were you. Still are.”

“Yeah, I mean, you’re *still* smart, but, back then, it meant something... like it was currency, being a *smart kid*. Cherished and, uh... Huh. Yeah.” He spaced.

“So what happened?”

“Naivety wore off. Eroded away by the chuffing of the world.” He laughed at that somehow. “I mean, that and our invisible big cousins arrived. Hard to feel all that bright, you know? Beating us to spacefaring and all.”

“Yet they’re the ones asking for help.”

“Maybe,” Danny said, shrugging. “Maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

Danny lost the thought and sat down behind his drums. “I don’t really know.” He bashed through a 7/8 beat, losing it then picking it up again with a grin. He stopped. “I told you that long distance wasn’t gonna work though.” He had many times. “When you don’t see someone, it’s, like, difficult for the brain to integrate that they’re, like, there. I had a girlfriend at Penn for a bit, so I’d bike over and see her most nights. But I swear it was like she forgot I existed if I wasn’t around for a few days.”

“It’s not like that.”

“You’re right,” Danny said, winding a drumstick in his hands. “It’s not days, it’s months. How long’s it been?”

“Since February.”

“Shit. And you’d been dating for, like, a year before that?”

“Seven months.”

“Oh, dude. I mean, no offense, but you work overnights at the Quik. She’s in San Fran raking in silicon sprawl cash or whatever. She wants you to come visit?”

“We haven’t talked about it. And I can’t afford it.”

“She still calls?”

“Video, yeah. Every few days. She seems happy.”

“*Seems*. You’ll break up in a month. She’s not around and neither are you. Even if she likes to do sexy video chats or whatever.” He let out a peal of laughter and nailed some blast beats. “Oh shit. I was supposed to order food. Oh, and you know the Paradins aren’t real, man. Stop playing. You still veg, right? Or are you back to bowing to our masters?”

One of millions, Jazz graduated in June, and the economy absolutely withered. For months, she'd noticed less drivers on the road and more windshields smashed or cars up on blocks. Restaurants in the neighborhood shuttered. Gas stations didn't always have gas. For the past two years, Jazz had rented the top-floor room in a house she shared with two other people. Both of them had already fled to the suburbs, moving in with their parents. Jazz wasn't far behind them, she knew. The coffee shop wasn't hiring; neither was the bookstore. She had her application out to any number of facilities where her fresh Psychology degree might be put to use, but she wasn't hopeful. Then the US government announced they'd be taking in fifteen thousand Paradin refugees; at first, they'd occupy designated preserves, but, in time, they'd be assigned adequate housing. Photos of the future camps showed a lot of empty space; in a few months, it'd look precisely the same. Jazz was at the corner bar where she was hoping they'd give her a break on the tab since they knew her. She and her housemates had certainly spent enough time shooting the shit there. She raised the last of her beer to the TV. "Sure, why not?" she said. "Take it away." The anchors were riffing on the Paradin Parks now. She drained her pint.

Jimmy was behind the bar. He laughed. "What's there to take? Another round?"

"No. I have to go. What do I owe you?" She stood and steadied herself on the stool beside.

Jimmy shrugged. "Go on, have a good night."

Jazz tapped the bar in thanks. "See ya then. I'm going home for a bit."

"*Home* home?"

She nodded. "No work."

"Well then," he said, coming round the bar to give her a hug. "Good luck."

"Thanks. You too."

"Please," he said, letting her go, "I'm in the right business for a depression. Can't hire help or take a break, but I'll survive."

She waved and ducked out, pulling her hood up as she crossed beneath the El.

—

She'd already packed the little she had, so, in the morning, she loaded her car and used the last of her cash to fill it with gas. Well, she didn't *fill* it – just put fifteen on pump 3; it'd be enough to get her to her Mom's. For almost a year now, the westbound highway was down to one lane, so she took the road along the river and through the suburbs

awhile. Only a few miles away, she pulled aside and got out to stretch her legs. She could take a coffee too, so she walked from there to the cafe, grabbed a drip coffee on credit, and sat in the park up the block. She hadn't been there in years; the weekends she spent at home were usually brief, and, after that first year, she only really came back for the holiday breaks. She wasn't sure it was home anymore – or, if it was, if that mattered. It was just where she'd grown up, and she'd been lucky to do that all in one place. She texted her mother and let her know she'd be there soon. It all felt so normal, so familiar.

Are you hungry?

Yeah, a little, Jazz replied, realizing she hadn't eaten dinner the night before – or breakfast that morning.

—

Jazz's mother had clipped several job postings from the local paper and presented them one after the next over dinner that night. "Now, this one I thought sounded interesting," she said, adding the newspaper square to the pile. "Security at the storage park."

"Mom, I'm not qualified for that."

"Honey, you have a college degree."

"There must be training involved – certifications."

"It says, *No experience necessary*, right here," she said, pointing to where it, indeed, said that.

"Okay, what else you got?" Jazz said, taking their dishes to the sink.

"Hmm, well," she said, shuffling through the rest. "Secretary at the salon."

"No."

"Pet groomer."

"Okay. We've never even had a dog."

"Diesel technician."

"I definitely need clearances for that, Mom."

"Well, the Quik is hiring cashiers. I was thinking of applying." She'd been threatening to quit teaching since the mandates started scripting precisely what she could and couldn't say. "We could work together. That could be fun."

"I'll take the security and pet groomer jobs. Thanks," she said. "I'll call them in the morning."

"You sure you don't want to drive a school bus?"

"I'd rather strip for webcam nerds."

"Jesus Christ, Jazz." Then, seriously, she said, "You wouldn't do that, right?"

Jazz laughed and found some ice cream in the freezer. “Want some?”

—

The next day, she talked to Buzz down at the storage park; he offered to hire her on the spot. She could start the day after next if she wanted. He was pissed off after a string of robberies the past month; he blamed the Paradins, which completely ignored the fact that they weren’t here yet – maybe; who really knew anything? It sounded like kids to Jazz, but she kept that to herself. If he wanted to pay her sixteen an hour to sit in a booth or drive a golf cart around, she’d do it. Over the years, Jazz saw plenty of anti-Paradin protests and talked to enough backwards folks to find herself on the other side, if only to separate herself from the gun- and cross-toting nuts that had quickly taken up the fight. She didn’t have to like the idea of aliens taking resources that might have changed *human* lives to know it was also *right*. She was still furious about the rest: migrant encampments on the Texas/Mexico border, the mass deportations, institutional poverty, racist police – or just the police in general – the carceral system, guns, the Neanderthals in government returning women to the Stone Age while men play in moon landers. Honestly, everyone she knew was mad about the same things just for different reasons. And the Paradin problem was no different.

—

Jazz shadowed Lou for a week. Lou looked like a kid playing dress-up in his father’s uniform, but he smiled and politely shook Jazz’s hand. As soon as they were out of the office, Lou slumped a bit and lit a cigarette. “So, we’ll be doing the cart thing today,” he said, turning his chin toward the golf cart still chained to the rail.

“Okay. Do I get to drive it?”

“Not yet,” he said, blowing smoke over his shoulder.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Five years too many,” he said.

Every twenty minutes, Lou took a smoke break. He never had to look at a watch or clock, just got this tingly feeling in his right hand, he claimed. And, looking at the time, Jazz saw it’d been exactly twenty minutes. He’d look at his pack and count what was left. When they hit twelve, they took a lunch break. “Twelve more, and shift’s over,” he said every time, “unless you want one.”

She didn’t. “They kill you.” Though she did wonder if he’d end his shift twenty minutes sooner if she’d agreed.

Otherwise, the job was checking boxes. You look here, you look there, and then later you look elsewhere: check the box; you looked.

“Ever caught anyone?”

Lou shook his head. “No.”

“But things went missing or –?”

“Little things, yeah. A broken lock or, like, sometimes the cart’s parked a few feet one way or another than where it was when I left it. You want one?” he said, tilting his pack toward her again.

It was their third day together, and, by now, he knew her line.

“Who cares if they kill you? We’re infested with murderous bugs anyway. I’m surprised they haven’t killed us all off already.” He was joking, mimicking some of their co-workers’ idiotic hatred.

“How would they do it?”

He shrugged. “Moral degradation probably. Slow. Ask Buzz.” Puff. “Or death ray. Which would be merciful, if you ask me.”

—

On her fourth day, Jazz followed Lou into the small breakroom. There were three understocked vending machines, a refrigerator in dire need of a clean, a noisy coffee machine, and several folding tables with mismatched chairs. She grabbed her lunch from the refrigerator and took a seat near the back of the room. Lou said hello to the two others, pointed toward Jazz as a way of introduction. The two men waved. Buzz came in and left without a word.

—

By the following week, she had her shifts and duties – early morning to mid-afternoon mostly, a few second-shifts. She showed up on time and made her rounds. If she was lucky, she’d get the booth and read or watch something on her phone. She got paid, so she kept coming back.

With all the talk about Paradins at work, Jazz read up on developments she’d largely ignored throughout college; there were oddly few. She caught the big headlines, of course, but she’d missed the nuances of it all. Purportedly, Paradins came from a densely populated planet and did not, themselves, represent the majority race of Omo, their home planet. In fact, the Paradins were in danger of completely dying off within a few generations if they hadn’t left (or been forced out; there were conflicting reports and no citations or references, which made it all feel cooked up in a writers’ room). Still, if

there were universal truths, Jazz supposed oppression, prejudice and hatred were better candidates than most. She wagered Omo had a slew of their own sycophantic idiots in power, all rich on whatever they used for currency – because money was likely another universal truth, if only as another tool for oppression. She swiped through the news a bit more before opening her email. There was a pending notice on her student loans account. She had been granted a deferment for six months, though interest would continue to accrue (because fuck-you-too). There was yet another constant, Jazz thought: nothing is easy.

—

The break room joke was that you got one, one of those Paradin assholes. The corpse was right there, couldn't you see it? You smashed its domed head in with this flashlight here. Or fucked it to death with its own stinger. She didn't like it, but, with a good pantomime, even Jazz laughed once.

—

Jazz didn't mind taking the golf cart out. Those things could go pretty fast, and, on the straightaways through the storage units, she almost felt happy, zipping along at an even thirteen miles per hour with the local college radio station too loud as it played the same songs it was playing five years before.

...

“What’s Hokum’s?” Jazz asked, looking over the invitation. She folded it again and put it back in the envelope it’d come in.

Lou coughed into his elbow. “Hokum’s is the sort of place people have funeral luncheons.” He spat beside his boot. “Or, like, redneck weddings. My cousin got married there actually.”

“So, what’s the deal? It’s a work party? For what? It’s August.”

“End of Summer?” Lou shrugged and climbed into the golf cart’s driver seat. “Buzz rents the backroom and patio every year around this time. I don’t know... It’s probably some sort of tax write-off.”

Jazz scoffed. “Wish I could take a bunch of people out to lunch and write it off.”

Lou grinned and put the cart in reverse. “It’s an open bar at least. And you can bring a date.”

She shuddered. “Are *you*?”

“Nah,” Lou said. “I wouldn’t put her through that.” He’d been seeing someone named Max for almost two months now. “Anyway, have a good shift,” Lou said, speeding out of the lot and around the first bank of storage cubes.

Jazz waved after him though he was well gone. She took her time getting out to the gate. This was the best part of the day, before it got so hot.

“About time,” Burt said when he saw her coming.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He trundled his roller bag of snacks back toward the office.

In the small booth, she sat for a few hours, not seeing anyone come or go, save Lou ripping by on the cart sometimes. When her relief arrived, she ate her lunch alone and bought a bag of chips from the vending machine. She sat outside for a few minutes before going back. It was hot, but it felt like a gift by then, to have anything but the booth’s musk.

—

Straightaway, Lily had baby photos to show Jazz. Esme was one, just last month. “I’d have had you over if I’d known you were back,” Lily said, swiping through a few more photos that all looked the same.

“Who’s the, uh —?”

“My husband, Bill, of course.”

“Right.” She’d missed that somehow, too.

“So, what’s new with you?”

“Honestly? Nothing.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure that’s not true. You’re back here, aren’t you?”

“Tell me about Philly. You must have had all sorts of interesting experiences.”

Jazz almost laughed. “Not really, no.” She apologized. “I’m not trying to be difficult here, but it’s all a blur really. Besides, you’ve done a lot more than me it seems. When did you and Bill get married?”

“Oh, almost two years ago. We met at work. He’s a realtor, too.”

Jazz nodded. “Cool.”

“You should come over the house sometime. It’s a fixer-upper, but it’s nice. Bill’s handy.”

“Cool.” Jazz watched cars pass outside the cafe window. “Do you still go to church?”

“Worship service, yeah. Why, you want to come?”

“No, I was only wondering what happened to you?”

Lily scoffed. “Happened? I don’t understand. Nothing happened.”

“Something must have. The Lily I knew didn’t have a church-appropriate outfit in her closet.”

“Gosh, Jazz. I mean, I grew up, I guess.”

—

Jazz showed up at Hokum’s a half-hour late and went right to the bar. From there, she could scan the crowded room for faces she knew. Lou was right there at her elbow.

“You look nice,” he said.

“Shut up.” She’d come straight from her shift. The most she’d done was make sure she’d left her nametag in the car. “You know no one’s watching the place right now, right?”

He laughed. “Get you a beer or something?”

“It’s free, right?”

Lou nodded.

“Glass of cabernet then.”

“You got it. You know, Pip?” he said, leaning back so Jazz could see Pip who was perched on the stool beside him.

“I’m Pip.”

“Jazz.”

"I'm the nighttime secretary." Pip wore a distractingly large pink bow in her hair.

"Oh."

"What do you do?"

"Security."

"Oh. Do you know DJ?"

Lou chuckled.

Jazz elbowed him. "Sort of." She'd stupidly slept with him once after a shift; it was a mistake. "So, you, like, answer calls past ten or –?"

"Basically, yeah."

"Cool."

Lou slid her wine over, and Jazz gratefully drank.

"Who're all these people?" There were a lot of people there she'd never seen before.

Lou turned to look around the room. "Well, that's Doug. Doug's in accounting – works from home." He pointed to Doug; Doug waved. "That's Lilianna, Buzz's wife." Lilianna looked drunk already, teetering beside Buzz as he held court. "Peg and Deb there. They're twins."

"Okay, yeah, but why haven't I seen any of them around?"

"They're around," Lou insisted.

Pip hopped off her stool and went to hug someone at the door.

"That's Vince," Lou said, "by the bathroom. And –"

Pip bounced in front of them again, pulling her date along. "This is Lou and – I'm sorry, what was it again?"

"Jazz," Jazz said, smiling bleakly.

"Jazz?"

She looked up now. "Derek?"

"Oh, you know each other?" Pip said, sounding deflated a bit.

Lou made his eyes wide, sensing trouble.

Jazz stood and nearly fell into a hug.

"What are you doing here?" Derek said when she pulled away.

"Oh, I work here – or, well. I work with, uh, Pip," she said, finally looking toward Pip, who didn't seem all that happy now. "We just met."

"Beer?" Lou asked.

"Sure, yeah. Whatever looks good," Derek said. "Thanks."

“How do you know Derek?” Pip asked, reaching for her own beer from the bar.

Jazz felt herself blush and looked away. “We, uh –”

“High school,” Derek said.

“I don’t remember you,” Pip said, obviously try hard to do so.

“You didn’t remember me either,” Derek reminded her.

“Wait, are you Piper Haines?”

Lou handed Derek a beer. “Cheers.”

“Guilty,” Pip said. “See?” she slapped Derek’s arm.

“You were the lead cheerleader.”

“Guilty, again,” she said, laughing.

Lou cleared his throat and excused himself.

DJ walked in then, and Jazz could’ve died. “I’ll see you around, okay? I’m going to the, uh – yeah.”

—

After dinner, Jazz returned to the bar and sat with her back to everyone else. No matter where she looked, she’d felt like she was looking at Derek – or worse, DJ. And if not them, then Lou, perpetually snickering to himself.

“Bad time to graduate, huh?” Derek landed heavily upon the stool beside her.

“Could’ve been better.” Jazz couldn’t even bring herself to laugh. “I’m sorry about earlier. I just – I didn’t expect... well, you, and then. Okay. Nevermind.” She tried again. “Are you working?”

“Overnight stock jock at the Quik.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep,” he said, emptying his beer and signaling for another. “It’s not so bad really. Lots of podcasts.”

“They don’t really call it stock jock anymore, do they?”

“No. No, they don’t.”

“What’s your degree in? Astrophysics?”

“Yep.”

“I thought they said that was the one.”

“Flooded market,” Derek said. “Everyone had the same idea. On top of that, people thought we’d have more information by now, that the Paradins would – I don’t know...”

“Reveal themselves?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck the Paradins,” Jazz said. “I swear.”

Derek looked away then back.

“Sorry. Pip seems nice.”

He looked away again. “We’ve been on three dates – *four* if this counts.”

“Ah. Sounds serious.” She’d drunk too much, she realized, and wasn’t feeling all that hot. “Hey, why’d we break up? Remind me.”

“Well,” Derek began, “you moved to Philly, and I moved to Boston.”

“And now we’re back here?”

“Yes,” Derek confirmed. “I think so.”

“And you’re *not* in Boston.”

“And you’re not in Philadelphia, yes.”

“So?” she said, making some gesture with her hand between them.

Derek smiled, same as ever. “Let’s get you some water. Or a coffee, maybe.”

“You idiot, I’m asking you out.”

“I know you are, but you’re also a little tipsy.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I wasn’t expecting to –”

“I know, I know. Look, I’ll drive you home.”

“What about Pip?”

“She’ll be jealous, but what are old high school friends for?”

“About that...”

“I know, I’m sorry. I panicked.”

Jazz felt a warmth rising up within her, then a dizziness. She gripped the bar and held on. “Okay, yeah, drive me home, please. My bike’s out –”

“I’ve got you.”

—

Whatever she was going to say to Derek she deleted before she could bring herself to do it. She’d written it so many different ways already, and she didn’t want to think about it anymore. She turned off her ringer and stuffed her phone in her bag. She had the day off, and she didn’t want to do anything, so she took her laptop down to the living room and lay on the floor to watch something stupid.

...

A small thrill, Jazz felt, but it was there as she solved a sudoku puzzle in her tattered *500+ Sudoku* and looked for Lou. At the edge of the golf cart's headlights, he puffed on a cigarette and looked out into the dark beyond the lights' reach. He never looked happy doing it, but he kept smoking and looking pained and unhappy as he did. Anymore, Jazz found it funny, and Lou didn't mind her laughing. "Time?"

He glanced at his watch. "Eleven minutes," he said. "That's your record."

Both had agreed to cover a few night shifts after a lot of third-shifters quit, especially once Buzz put time-and-a-half on the table. You worked in pairs at night, so it was like training all over except, this time, Lou let her drive – that and it was hours Jazz hadn't seen in a long while (and longer still to having seen them sober). It was odd how things she knew well in daylight were transformed by only a few hours' difference, the change in lighting: nothing frightening, just dramatic. Lou didn't seem to notice. He'd worked the first shift too and was sustaining himself on energy drinks and protein bars now.

"I'll be back, taking a leak," he said, disappearing into the dark again.

"Dude, seriously? Those energy drinks are killing you."

"Worse ways to go," he said, shrugging her off.

She heard him go not so far off.

"Don't you get bored?" he said, still zipping up. He collected his cigarette he'd left burning on a rock.

"Of what?" Jazz asked without looking up.

"All those puzzles are the same, aren't they? Just, like, different configurations."

She shrugged. "Eventually, yeah. Is your piss still radioactive?"

"It burnt a hole in the gravel."

"Jesus Christ," she said and laughed. "You want to learn?"

"I never really liked math."

"It's not math," she protested, "not really."

Then he said his line: "It's numbers; it's math." He took a long drag now and let smoke spill out his nose. "So, you heard from that guy?"

"*What* guy?" she said, knowing exactly who he meant.

"The guy from the party. Dean?"

"Derek."

He nodded and squashed his cigarette under his boot.

It'd been over a week since the party at Hokum's. She'd done a good job of avoiding almost everyone the whole time since. "We used to date –"

"Yeah, I got that," Lou said.

"– in high school. It was a long time ago."

"Not that long, bud."

Jazz snorted and ignored him.

Lou cracked another energy drink and offered her one. He had a little cooler in back. "I've got cherry or rainbow too."

"What does rainbow taste like?"

"Cherry. You want it?"

"No, thanks."

"So, this high school boyfriend," Lou started, expecting to be shut down immediately. He even paused, giving her time to stop him. Instead, she let him go on. "Have you talked with *Derek*?"

"Maybe," she said, finally closing her book.

"That's a *yes*."

"We've texted," Jazz admitted. "*He* texted me, and I texted him back."

"But you haven't seen him?"

Jazz made a sound she didn't even know the meaning of.

"Ah," Lou said, climbing into the cart beside her. "So, you're –"

"No, because it feels weird. Like bad-weird," Jazz said. "Or silly. Like I'm sliding backward."

"Okay, but –"

"It feels safe or, like, simple."

"According to what standard?"

"Society. The world. Me. I don't know. Everyone. Lou, I live with my Mom – again. The only definite thing in my future is student debt repayment and therapy every Monday."

Lou winced and loudly gulped at his can.

"Derek is wonderful; he really is – or was. I don't know – *is* wonderful."

"You forgot handsome."

Jazz smirked. "I'm worried that loneliness or, like, twisted nostalgia, is the thing driving now."

“Societal norms are fucked, Jazz. And you’ve got it all wrong anyway. You’re supposed to marry your high school sweetheart and, like, pop out kids before thirty in a too big house you’ve somehow afforded, all while ignoring the global atrocities committed by your government in impoverished – by design, mind you – countries.”

“Jesus. Is that what I sound like?”

“It doesn’t matter, man. Bigger fish than judging who Jazz loves and for how long. If it’s good, it’s good. Don’t run from it; you only get one short bumper car ride, and you definitely want to be bumping you –”

The walkie screeched, and they both jumped. “Hey, idiots. There are some kids by the North fence. Go scare them off.”

Lou picked up the walkie. “Fuck off, Burt,” he said.

“I’m serious.”

“Me, too.”

“Is that an *aye-aye*?”

Jazz started the cart and eased them out.

“Yeah, Burt. We’re going.” And to Jazz he added, “To be continued.”

“Buckle up,” Jazz said, though there were no belts to buckle.

—

By the time they skidded to a stop, Jazz saw only a few empty beer bottles and spray cans left behind. And across three units’ doors it now said GO HOME GLEEPS in black block letters. She swore and swung her flashlight around in case they were hiding in the woods nearby. “They’re gone, Burt,” Jazz said into the walkie.

“Roger that,” Burt said.

Jazz rolled her eyes.

“Burt’s a tool,” Lou offered and slammed back into the cart. “You still want to drive?”

“Yeah.” The kids had tagged the road too, red KILL US ALREADY illuminated now in the headlights. “Oh, that’s nice.” She pulled up and along the aisle and down the next. They’d tagged there too: PARAFUCKZ again and again, orange and pink and green. “Mixed messages here.”

Lou got on the walkie. “Burt, you idiot. How long were you asleep?”

Something struck the cart from above making a loud bang and Jazz swerved. “What the fuck was that?”

Lou hung out the side and looked up. “They’re on the roofs.” He almost sounded happy.

“Who are?”

“Dirtbag kids.” Lou ducked back in as something else hit them. “Throwing rocks. Stop here, and let me out.” He definitely sounded happy.

Jazz skidded to a stop, and, before she could say anything, Lou was out and running.

A lanky teenager – all in black – ran in front of the cart, and Jazz pulled out after him. “Hey, stop!” But the kid was gone by the time she rounded the corner. Lou was there though, his flashlight waving at her.

He hopped in as she approached. He had blood on his forehead. “One of them clocked me.”

“Fuck, are you okay?”

“Yeah, just floor it.”

“Where?”

“Parking lot, go.”

So Jazz made them go.

—

“Hang on, I’ve got to clear off the seat,” Lou said, coming around and taking an armful of stuff and tossing it in the back. Papers, half-empty bottles, plastic bags of garbage...

“Jesus, man, what is all that?”

“Don’t worry about it. Get in.”

Jazz brushed off the seat and got in. “You’ve got to clean this car out. It’s gross.”

Lou shrugged and started her up.

It was a little past eleven now, the moon a thin waxing crescent. It was dark.

“Wait, where are we going? And don’t say *following a hunch* again.”

“You’re buckled up?” he said, reversing too fast out of the lot. He gave Burt the finger as they careened past. “We’ll be back!”

Jazz buckled up. “Lou, what the fuck?”

“We’re going to find those kids.”

“Okay. Where? Then what?”

“Remember that abandoned house?”

“Yes, where Buzz thinks Paradins are living?”

“Yes, catch up.”

“I am, I am. So, you think they’re – what? – hanging out there or –?”

“That’s what I’d have done.” Lou took a bend a bit fast. “Between here and there, it’s mostly woods, not even a mile to that house.”

“Dude, how hard did that kid hit you?”

Lou wiped blood from his forehead and observed it smeared on his hand and arm. “Is it bad?”

“Pull over, Lou. I’m serious.”

“When we get there,” he insisted, blowing through a stop sign. “When we get there, I’ll go in first, and you –”

“Lou, if –”

“They’re just kids,” he argued. “I’ll be fine.” By then, he was pulling off and parking. “I’m going in,” he announced.

“Hold on, just a minute, okay?” But he was gone, and she was left struggling with her belt. He’d climbed the backyard’s fence and dropped over it when she finally got out.

—

“Lou,” Jazz whispered. “Lou?” She was on the far side of the fence now, close to the house. She heard a door open and close, and, through the gaps between fence boards, she saw someone and then someone else, both of them making for the alleyway at the backend of the yard. “Oh, come on,” she said and sprinted along the perimeter to try to cut them off. “Hey, stop!” But there was no one there when she got there. She turned on her flashlight and swung it around. “Goddamnit. Goddamnit.” She pushed open the back gate, switched off her flashlight, and approached the dark porch. When she was nearly there, a light on the second floor came on, and she saw Lou framed in the window. But then the lights on the first floor came on, too, and Jazz froze. She crouched down, fumbled for her phone in her pocket and texted Lou. *First floor*, she wrote and watched him check it, still in the window above.

I’m going to flush them out, he replied.

“Okay,” Jazz said to herself, unsure what she was supposed to do, so she stayed low and waited for whatever Lou was going to do.

But in a moment, Lou came onto the porch alone. “Jazz?”

“Yeah,” she said, standing.

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.”

“Fuck,” he said and turned back to the house.

“They’re not hiding inside?”

“No,” he said.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. They got away.”

Jazz stood, a little disappointed now too. “Who turned on the lights?”

Lou looked back through the door, then at her again, and shrugged. “Whole house is empty – nowhere to hide. No furniture, nothing. Just a weird smell everywhere. Or I’ve got a concussion.”

“Oh, fuck.” Even at the door she could smell it. “Let’s just get out of here.”

—

Lou spit in his hand and rubbed at his head. He used his handkerchief to clean himself up as much as possible. He kept angling the rearview mirror down to see, even as Jazz drove. Burt waved them in, wanting to know what the fuck was happening, but they ignored him. Jazz parked and threw her head back against the seat. “That was nuts, man.”

Lou grinned.

“I’m serious,” she said, punching Lou in the arm. But she was smiling now too.

4

Night Out

Jazz stood with Danny's girlfriend Kiki while the band packed up. Caleb was at the bar already.

Kiki bounced up and down when Danny passed with his breakables. "Babe! You were great."

"You sounded really good," Jazz said.

"Hey, thanks, Jazz."

"Baby! So, so good," Kiki reiterated.

"Okay, okay," Danny said as she followed him out.

Derek was still wrangling cables and packing his pedals.

"Sounded good," she said standing over him. "How're you feeling?"

He looked up from where he was crouched. "Oh, thanks, Jazz. I'd give you a hug, but I'm pretty gross. Thanks for coming."

"I mean, it's no Filet of Flesh, but..."

He laughed, finally bagging his bass and hoisting it to his shoulder. "How was the drive in?"

"It wasn't bad."

Caleb appeared and handed Derek a beer before disappearing again.

"Hey, listen, I know things haven't been easy the last few months," Jazz said, "but would you want to maybe talk?"

"Right now? Jazz, I have to load-out and –"

"No, no. Not right now – gosh, no. Sorry, bad timing. I'm working on that."

"You're fine. Let me throw this in the van, okay? I'll be right back. Do you want a beer? There's a drink ticket in my pocket if you – here," he said, angling his shirt pocket toward her.

"Okay, yeah. Thanks."

"I'll be right back."

She got a beer and stood around. The bar was narrow and crowded, if only because it was small. She made her way to front, thinking maybe she'd just duck out.

Caleb was perched on the stool by their merch and luring people in to look at the mess of spray painted shirts he'd stuffed into an old suitcase. Demo tapes were free. "Want a tape, Jazz?"

"Thanks," she said, stuffing it into her purse.

"Did Derek tell you I tried to kill myself?"

"Oh my God."

“Fortunately, I wasn’t successful. I mean, or whatever.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Do you want to know how?”

Jazz took a long sip of her beer, knowing he would tell her anyway.

“I drove off a bridge. I thought that would do it. I was out of my mind.” He smiled now.

“Hey, sorry,” Derek said. “Danny and Kiki split.”

“That’s okay,” she said.

“Caleb, man. You good here?”

“Always, dude,” Caleb assured him. “Go on,” he waved them off.

Jazz followed Derek to a booth up front. “Did he really try to kill himself?”

“Did he tell you that?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Did he tell you Paradins saved him too?”

“What?”

Derek shrugged, raising his hands between them like he wanted nothing to do with the whole thing.

“What the fuck? How?”

“He won’t say. Danny thinks it’s bullshit.”

“I think it’s bullshit.”

“Yeah.” He leaned back now, then forward again. “Hey, I’m glad you came. And, like you said, it’s been weird, but I totally get it.”

“Thanks for inviting me.” The bar didn’t do glassware, so they tapped cans. “My Mom keeps asking if you still work at the Quik.”

“Fuck that place, but yeah.”

“She says she needs a second job, since all the school funding got pulled. No raises in five years now.”

“Shit.”

The bar owner came over and handed Derek some cash. “Hey, this is half the door. It’s something, man. But if you want another beer or whatever, just, you know, ask.”

“Thanks, Jae.”

“Good night?” Jazz asked, watching Derek count the cash.

“Forty-five bucks,” Derek said.

“Is that good?”

“Better than most places we’ve played.”

“Cool.”

“Sorry,” he said, tucking the bills into his pocket. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yeah, but maybe not here?”

“Okay. Want to go for a walk? The neighborhood’s okay if –”

“Sure, yeah.” She finished her beer. “Will Caleb be okay?”

“Is he ever okay? He’ll be fine.”

Jazz looked for him now, finding Caleb standing upon the stool on which he’d been sitting. Jae was coaxing him down.

—

In the end, they broke up for good. They probably should never have gotten back together. She would always love him, she knew, but refrained from telling him that; instead, she hoped he knew already.

“Do you think we can be friends then?” Derek asked.

“I hope so.”

Derek climbed onto a stout cinder block wall as they passed it and walked along it. “So, you drove all this way just for that?”

Jazz shrugged. “I guess so. Sorry.”

“No, it’s nice – I mean, in a weird way.” He jumped down beside her and picked her up in a big hug, holding her tightly and spinning around.

“No, no! I’m going to be sick, stop!” When he put her down, she shoved him away and straightened her jacket. “By the way, you *were* really good tonight.”

“Thank you.” He kicked a stone into the street.

“You *have* changed,” she noted.

“I tried. So have you.”

“Therapy,” she said.

He laughed. “Yoga. Music. I don’t know. Microdosing.”

“Really?”

“No, not really.” He looked at the street sign they’d passed then. “Oh, shit, we gotta go.”

By the time they got back, Jae was locking up, and Caleb was nowhere to be found.

“Dude, he split,” Jae confirmed. “Actually, a while ago.” He scooted off on his bike into the dark with a wave.

“I’ll drive you home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. You’ve got no other choice really. On one condition though,” Jazz said. “We’re making one stop. Oh, and give me five bucks for gas.”

—

Jazz parked her car at the upper lot and got out. From way up there, you could see for miles. The place they’d grown up was below them, small and dark. It was the same place they’d met and fallen in love years before. Their grade school was a few miles away. Where they first kissed was there. Derek’s parents’ house, her mother’s home: it was all there. Everything they’d known for years was below. Now, In the distance, there was a Paradin preserve. It looked like everywhere else, quiet beneath the expanse of stars above.

“I haven’t been up here in forever,” Derek admitted, taking in the view. It was windier this high up, so much so the door slammed shut behind him. “Shit, sorry.”

She climbed onto the bumper and sat on the warm hood. All down the ridge, they’d seen couples doing the same thing, their cars tucked neatly off the road. The view was free, as long as you had a way up there. “Hey, mind grabbing the blanket on the back seat?”

Derek did – careful with the door this time – and climbed up after her, spreading the blanket around their shoulders.

She found and held his hand, unsure if it was the right thing to do. And, for a moment, it seemed Derek was going to pull away.

“Jazz, I –”

“It’s lonely being back here. Feeling like –”

Derek kissed the top of her head.

And she relented. “So, it’s fate? And I have no choice?”

Derek rested his cheek against her head. “I really don’t know anymore.”

Jazz adjusted, suddenly uncomfortable. “I don’t believe in fate.” She looked up at the sky again. “And neither do you.”

“I don’t know what I believe,” Derek decided. “Maybe nothing.”

“One last time, then?”

Derek didn’t reply, but he didn’t pull away as she kissed him.

“I love you, you know?”

Derek nodded. “I remember.”

Jazz slipped away and went to stand near the lot’s edge. She turned to him now.

“I try not to think about them anymore.”

“Them?” Derek asked, sliding down to join her.

“Out there,” she said, lifting her eyes toward the preserve.

“I think about them every time I see the Paradin tax on my paycheck.”

“I’m serious. They mean nothing to me.”

“*If* they’re real.”

“No, they’re real,” Jazz said. “Or real enough.”

Derek put his arms around her, lowering his head so it was beside hers, so he could see whatever she was seeing now.

“They’re laughing at us, I think.” She lifted her head to look where their ship might be now.

He looked too.

She pointed it out, where she imagined it to be. “Right there,” she said. “Do you see it?”

“Yeah,” Derek said, though he couldn’t; no one could. “It’s sort of beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Almost, yeah.” Jazz held the void between her thumb and forefinger now.

“Look.” She slowly brought her fingers together and snapped.

Soundlessly, a frothy, white explosion bloomed, beginning where her two fingers had met. It rippled across the night sky.

This novella is dedicated to nothing, what somethings need to become sometimes.

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