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Where They Wander

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Where They Wander

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
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with an emphasis in Fiction

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Advisory Committee

John Dalton
Chairperson

Mary Troy

Steve Schreiner

Abstract

The stories contained within are all concerned in one way or another with our memory. More specifically, what it means to remember something. With a fictional drug, referred to only as “serum,” the characters in these stories all fall victim to what can be described as an overdose of experience. Our memories are what allow us to develop ideology, our concept of self, and intimacy with others. Each story in “Where They Wander” deals in some way with these basic human traits by exaggerating the characters’ abilities to confront their experiences.

There is another thread that pulls these stories together. The natural world, specifically plants and especially trees, has a constant presence. The ever watchful, ancient soul of the Earth is continually exerting its subtle influence on the characters and situations in this volume.

At no point are these characters faced with conflict beyond the weight of their own lives.

Where They Wander

Kevin Gleich

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The Pity of Trees

Towering pines lean curiously over the old man as he uses the remaining ink in his pen to write the words: *Through the rivers flow the lifeblood of the Earth, but its soul resides in the trees.* He suspects these are man's final words. He then realizes that when he dies on this sandy shore, the pen will stay with him, along with the variety of other belongings: the cast iron pan; the knife and hatchet; the leather drink pouch; the ragged copy of Melmoth the Wanderer, wrapped in plastic.

From his pack, he reveals a syringe, a third full with black liquid. On his knees, crawling toward the river, he fills another third with nearly frozen water. He pierces a vein and draws blood to fill the syringe. As he injects the mixture, he lays on the shore to await a creeping, icy coffin.

The Wooden Cage

Saplings of various ages and sizes already block the entrances of nearly every structure in the camp. Only Matthews' cabin is still open. He gathers a pile of pinecones, collects their seeds, and pours them into a small perimeter trench he's dug around the cabin. In several years, he imagines they will form the living, wooden bars of a cage. He places the final seeds in front of his door.

Inside, Matthews will remain with a series of fabricated memories, mementos of the imagined history of the campground. Matthews cannot bear the thought that the leaking wall could be discovered. The water seeps from the wall, incessant. Malicious, he thinks, otherworldly even. Wherever other plane the water may be leaking from, surely, he thinks, the cage will grow there too. The trees will contain it, the trees will not let it escape.

Synthesis

“And you’re saying this came from a tree, Izz?” says Mark, holding the vial of black liquid to the lamp hanging above the dinner table.

“Yep. An oak, that one. In the heartwood. Imagine it sort of like a distillery. We burn it, collect the smoke and eventually you get what we originally thought was just oils or residue from the wood. We ran it through a few filters, and there you go,” says Isabelle.

The liquid seems to have a life of its own. Its viscosity changes as Mark turns it over in his hand, and sticking to the glass walls wherever his fingers grip them. “Pretty strange, huh?” he says.

“I’ve never seen anything like that, Izzy. It looks like it wants you, Mark,” says Jennifer.

A purple wandering jew hangs near a grandfather clock in the corner of Isabelle’s dining room. The oven beeps in the next room.

“At least something does. Have some more wine, honey. Maybe you’ll want me too.”

“Cheers, baby,” she says as they clink their glasses.

“We think it’s reacting to the body heat,” says Izzy. “It does the same thing to the mice we did some tests with. Spread over their skin.”

“So, what’s it do, then?” says Jennifer.

“We weren’t sure at first,” says Izzy. “The mouse I fed it to was a control in that memory study from a couple months back. It had pretty much served its purpose, so no big deal. And soon after I dropped him in the maze. Top performer after just two tries.”

“Meaning...” says Mark.

The oven beeps a second time.

“Memory enhancement. Trouble is I’ve got no idea how it works. Or why,” says Isabelle., “We’re running bloodwork on all exposed mice this week.”

She closes a sliding door to the backyard. It’s getting a bit too cool, and it seems as if a storm is rolling in, brushing at the evergreen leaves of a nearby magnolia against the exterior of the house. Her heels clack against the hardwood floors as she walks to check the oven. “You guys ready to eat?”

“As long as I can drip some of this into the sauce. All natural right?” says Mark.

Jennifer snatches the vial from her husband. “How about we let Izzy see what’s actually happening to those mice first, okay?”

Monuments

When the truck driver falls asleep at the wheel after driving almost non-stop from Anchorage, he crushes Charlotte's mother against the highway median. Dead instantly. Her young brother, Isaac, doesn't make it through the night.

Not long after, her father loses his job. A structural engineer, he sits at home drawing, designing, and trashing whatever might hold promise. Eventually, a letter arrives explaining how sorry everyone at the firm is, but how an engineer can't be missing for so many months without even a call. They invite him back at any time.

After Charlotte's sixteenth birthday, they take off in the family van, due west, staying in motels.

"This can be my side of the car," she says, drawing an imaginary line down the middle of the van with a sweeping motion.

"Deal," he says, and Charlotte can't tell if he realizes she's joking.

Their conversations, when they happen, continue this way. Minimal, matter of fact. Her father has taken up stacking stones. Loose piles at first, becoming more elegant over time. Two or three stones balanced into a miniature tower whenever they stay in a park, slowly increasing in size. Camping in the Mojave, under the shadow of the Sierra Nevada range, he starts to build basic scaffolding. Some of the new tower reach over their heads. They abandon the van. Her father explains that it's holding them back, that continuing on foot will let them best leave their mark. Though they hardly speak, Charlotte marvels at her father's work, the focus. The focus that seems to replace the grief.

He gathers twenty boulders and stacks them ten-feet high, the most massive tower to date. It's strong, never wobbling, despite the lack of support of smaller stones in its cracks. By a campfire, they stare at the monolithic creation and he says that it could stand for generations, but that with just a little push it would crash, probably killing the pusher in the process.

The towers, large and small, take on a unique style. He uses as few stones as possible to create the tallest towers. After a while, she and her father abandon established trails, and leave their markers in their path. As they approach the Rocky Mountains, they turn north.

The towers, now numbering in the hundreds, form their own trail. From the first piles near their home in southern Missouri, to the desert of the southwest where they abandoned the van, and now as far north as Colorado. Whenever Charlotte asks where they're headed, he explains over and over that they need to stick together.

An old man in a visitor center asks what brings them to Colorado. Charlotte describes the towers. The man calls them cairns and says they've been used as trail markers for thousands of years, and sometimes even in religious rituals. Her father says he's never heard the term.

They pass through a campground with several cabins. Mature pine trees stand in front of each of the doors. One cabin is situated away from the others, they nearly miss it. A series of trees are growing around the perimeter, though they are cut down in front of its open door.

"We'll camp here tonight," he says.

Charlotte explores the grounds. She finds a man standing on a dock across the camp. He's carrying a flashlight and a small backpack.

"Are you following the cairns too?" he says. Charlotte struggles to make out his features, illuminated only by the glow of the flashlight off the dock. He's thin, perhaps even emaciated under his winter coat, with hair and beard that reached down past his collar bones.

"No. We're camping."

"Would *you* like to join me? They're quite beautiful. I've been following them for miles. Hundreds of miles."

"I'm sorry. No. Stay warm."

"Are you sure?" He shambles toward Charlotte and opens his hand, revealing a syringe. "Let me just show you. I'll share them with you, what I've seen."

Charlotte steps back. "Not interested." She reaches for the knife in her pocket. "I'm going back to my camp now."

And with that, he shuffles past her into the dark.

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They camp through the winter, through the spring, travelling slowly. After walking for nearly two years, they arrive in Anchorage, and camp just north of the city.

"We'll stay here a while I think. I need a rest," says the father.

But he doesn't rest. He spends the summer months constructing his largest tower to date. Charlotte doesn't complain. It's the longest they've stayed in one place since the accident. Soon, small gatherings appear around their campsite. No more than five or so at a

time, and none so ravaged as the man in Colorado. They watch the father build with a sort of reverence usually reserved for holy sites.

The locals begin to write about the structure, reporting on a small community of enthusiasts that have followed the five-thousand-mile trail. The final design consists of two towers, each over twenty feet tall and weighing nearly half a ton. He hoists a long stone to connect the towers. Charlotte, for the first time since the accident, sees her father content.

“It’s cold, Dad. It’s too cold here,” says Charlotte one night in September.

“I think I’ll stay a bit longer,” he says. He hands her a check, already written. Forty-thousand dollars. “That should be enough to get you home, keep you safe. I think I’ll keep going north. Fairbanks maybe.”

She doesn’t fight him. There’s nothing she can think to say that will convince him. She hitchhikes east, then south. There’s no trail, not really, not for Charlotte.

She returns to the site of the first cairn and is disappointed not to find one of her father’s followers waiting for her. Charlotte visits the field every few weeks. Her father’s first monument is slowly picked apart: by kids, by animals, the weather, she can’t be sure, until eventually she cannot place exactly where it stood. She wonders if her father made it to Fairbanks, if he left at all. Without a distraction from her grief, without a monument of her own, she is confronted with it. She is finally alone.

The Amnesiac

“Alright, six minutes on this one,” says the MRI tech. And the incessant tapping starts before Tyler has even a chance to say, ‘no problem.’ He could squeeze the stress ball and stop the scan, but they never really explained what would happen. Would the imaging have to be restarted from the beginning? Getting an MRI is like jumping into a portal where time doesn’t really exist. Six minutes feels simultaneously like hours and seconds. An allegory, Tyler imagines, for life itself: indefinite and seemingly unceasing, yet over before you even realize what happened.

He wonders what the images might show this time. Progress? Hard to say, the therapy seems to be working, but nothing feels permanent. The first year was a rollercoaster. Who am I? Injection. I’m Tyler McInnes, climber, plays the mandolin for girls at parties, reads Bradbury but pretends to like Hemingway. Then an hour later, a blank slate.

The tapping stops. Shit, that was fast. “Just another two minutes,” says the tech, and it starts again, this time with a whirring sound in between each series of taps. The injections weren’t sustainable. Two hours with memories at a time wasn’t going to work. So now there’s something like an insulin pump. A steady drip of memories. The room is quiet.

“Pulling you out now, Mr. McInnes.”

“Anything interesting?” says Tyler.

“Your doctor will—”

“Will have a report for you. Yeah, yeah.”

|||||

“Good news and bad news,” says Dr. Ramsay.

“Go for it. If it’s that bad I’ll just forget it,” says Tyler.

“So, the good news is that you’re still excelling at memory tests. Izzy and I are still working out the details, but it appears as if the serum is actually boosting your brain function. Or rather, we think the serum is acting somehow to offload some brain function. It’s basically doing some of the work for you, so to speak.”

“Okay, so this is what, extra storage?”

“When we were giving you those injections, not much lasted after it left your system. But with the pump you’re functioning normally. Better than normal even, as you know. It’s essentially augmenting your ability to recall. In other words, the serum is running your limbic system like a well-oiled machine.”

“But it only stays that way while I’m on the drugs.”

“Yes, exactly. Your imaging shows other areas lighting up recently too. Your occipital lobe, parietal lobe. Have you noticed your vision improving? Spatial awareness?”

“It’s hard to say. It’s been a long process. I haven’t tripped in a while, at least.”

“I’ll order some tests.”

There’s a pause while Dr. Ramsay wakes his computer and pulls up the MRIs. Everything looks the same as he scrolls through the images.

“As you know,” says Dr. Ramsay, “this is just a case study, so we can’t directly compare you to anyone else, and there isn’t much to say about *why* something is happening. Whether it’s your body naturally, or because of the serum.”

“What’s the problem?”

He points at brighter parts of the image. “But here. You’re looking at further deterioration, and at a faster rate than we’ve observed in the past. The areas I mentioned before: Here, here, and here. My theory is that it’s accelerating.”

“So, what, do we modify my dose? How do we slow it down?”

“Anything is on the table really. It’s all a trade-off.”

“What the fuck does that mean? It’s killing me, right?”

“We can ween you off, but it doesn’t look like you’ll keep your ability to retain memories as well. You won’t know any different, but you’ll have to return to full-service care. Eventually. Hard to say, you might lose some vision and spatial awareness as well.”

Tyler remembers a video Dr. Ramsay recorded when he found him in the care center. A series of clips, alternating between basic human functions at best, and a catatonic state at worst. With no memory of this time in his life, it was as if it never really happened. Terrifying nonetheless. Worse than death. Every new experience written on a blank slate. A life defined by impermanence.

“We could lower your dose, keep you functional. You’ll keep deteriorating but we can maybe slow it down. Hard to say what function loss we’d see.”

“*We*. That’s funny.”

“Your dose could stay the same of course. Or... or we can see what happens when we increase it.”

“*Increase?* Why would I want that?”

“You’ll have less time, yes. But we don’t know what other benefits you might receive. You’re already excelling with recall. And it’s spreading to other areas of your brain. We don’t know what’s possible. What there is to learn.”

An opportunity to secure more funding. That’s all this is. Just a lab rat.

“I’m gonna need to think about it.”

“Tyler, you’re a priority. Whenever you’re ready, just call and we’ll set it up. Nothing is going to happen in the short term. You’re going to be fine.”

Fine. It’d be better if Dr. Ramsay would stop using the word. They both know it’s a lie. But it’s nothing worth being angry about.

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“So, you’re basically Professor Xavier then,” says Jacob. He twists open a cheap IPA and offers it to Tyler. They became roommates when Tyler was sent to school in St. Louis, all paid for on research dollars from Dr. Ramsay. Tyler was told to “live as normal a life as possible.” But normal is relative, and there’s little normalcy to compare your life to when your only source of humanity is a vial of black liquid. The apartment’s a mess, and Jacob throws the cap near the trash can across the room.

He takes the beer. “I’ve got a good memory. I’m not telepathic,” says Tyler.

“Look, man, in all seriousness, no one wants to lose you.”

“That’s a shame. I think I’m done for either way.”

They sit quietly, cars on the street outside providing a dim background noise. He looks out the window at the oak tree growing in its designated square of sidewalk. The tree will never have a chance to grow to its full potential, and is regularly pruned by the city to

prevent overhang. But it has, over the years, extended a branch toward their window, close enough to grab and perhaps even climb out of the apartment.

“Think anyone good is playing at Gateway tonight?” asks Tyler.

“You want to go to a concert?”

“Why not? It’s gonna be a nice night. Maybe we can get you a girl for once,” he laughs.

“Yeah and then they run away when they see... *this*,” says Jacob, sweeping his hand in front of the mess of a living room. “I mean... I’m down to go out, but are you sure?”

“We’ve only got so much time left, man. Hey, I’ll even give you some of the serum.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’ve still got some clean syringes I never used. You can see what it’s like.”

“Tyler, you got your life back with the stuff. I get it. But I haven’t used anything in years. I got my life back by *stopping* that shit.”

“This isn’t Percocet. It’s not heroin.” Tyler tosses his beer in the trash and grabs another from the fridge, retrieving a vial of the serum as well. He holds it up. “It’s no different from that tree outside you’re always staring at. I never even had cravings.”

“There’s clearly something off about it. You said they don’t know why it even works.”

Why does anything work, Tyler thinks. In his twenty-two years, only the past three feel real. Tyler left full-service care at age 18. Unexplained atrophy of the hippocampus. Lost in the limbo of amnesia, Dr. Ramsay and his wife Isabelle gave him new life. If it weren’t for the videos of his care, it’d be impossible to know if it ever really happened at all.

“Alright,” says Jacob after a while, “who knows, it might give Ramsay some new ideas.”

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“Ok, ok hang on,” says Jacob. He finishes his fourth beer and sets it down hard on the table. The rubber band tying off his arm forces the veins to the surface.

“We’ve got to let it mix with your blood in the syringe first, so I’m gonna pull some out and then push it back. Make sense?” says Tyler.

“Not really.”

“It works better that way, and doesn’t feel so weird going in. You’ll see, it’s like a crawling sensation.”

Tyler pierces his roommate’s vein and draws about a tablespoon of the maroon liquid. Already halfway filled with serum, he doesn’t mix it. Rather, the black seems to invade the blood, overcome it. Soon enough the entire syringe is the original black. He pushes it back into Jacob’s arm, removes the needle and places a band-aid over the hole in a single swift motion.

“That’s it?” says Jacob.

“That’s it.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Give it a chance to work. Let’s just go to the Gateway and see what happens.”

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As soon as they enter the bar its clear there’s a cover band playing. This is typical of a Thursday night. People wanting to go out, but not enough to charge for a real show. Usually

halfway decent. At the bar, Jacob notes that everything sounds clearer somehow. He asks the bartender if there's been any sort of improvement to the acoustics.

The bartender looks around and shrugs. "Not that I'm aware of," he says.

"It's the serum man. Enhances things," says Tyler.

"Hey, you with the sorry face," Jacob sings to himself with the music, "welcome to the human... wait what the hell?"

"What? You want another beer?" says Tyler.

"No. I mean yeah, sure, but did you hear that?"

"What, your shitty singing?"

"They sang *pretty face* not *sorry face*. Wrong lyrics."

"It's *Mr. Blue Sky*. Maybe you're thinking of a different song? It's always been *pretty face*."

"That's one of my favorite songs, I know how it's supposed to go."

The bartender puts two Blue Moons on the counter and Tyler drops him a ten in return. The rest of the night passes without a hitch. No more lyrical errors, but Jacob can't shake the feeling that something strange has happened.

"I think I'm just gonna go for it," says Tyler as they're walking home.

"Go for what?" says Jacob.

"Gonna up my dose."

New Life

The lifeless bodies of comatose patients rest in beds that line the walls in the elongated New Life ward of the hospital. The hum of ventilators, bypass pumps, and other equipment is the only sound in the room. Light in the ward is dim; these patients have no use for it. Their night attendant, Shannah, has learned to cope and in fact even prefers it to the light outside. There is nothing left to see out there.

A network of tubes spreads over each patient. Feeding tubes run through their noses. Thick ventilator hoses emerge from their mouths. A saline IV flows into each patient's right arm. And on their left, another IV. Smaller, with an exceedingly slow drip of black serum.

Shannah opens her shift by tidying the blankets of each patient. The day nurses don't pay as close attention. They don't care for these minor details. "They can't tell the difference," they say. But surely, they can. Like feverish dreams on a cold night, the mind is always aware of the outside world. Comforting the terminal residents of the corridor-like room is noble, Shannah thinks. Or, at the very least, a distraction from her loss of Nolan just a under a year ago.

The night shift has become her anchor. It's peaceful. Her old position was chaotic at best: running from room to room, drawing blood, checking vitals, the constant buzz of the hospital. When this was too much to handle, Shannah volunteered for the night shift in the New Life ward, and Dr. Ramsay happily agreed. Difficult to find a willing nurse. In the dim light, time seems to crawl. These patients though, with their rich, internal lives are a curious distraction.

The recently established New Life ward serves to give comfort to the comatose, and even those in vegetative states. Keep their minds working. With the serum, patients are thought to live in the virtual, dreamlike world of their own memories. And though no one has ever emerged from the dream, Shannah imagines it as a world of peace.

She sees herself in the patients. Like Shannah, in the ward where she spends eight hours nearly every night, the patients are isolated and absent. They live suspended from the world. After Nolan died, Shannah broke down. Unable to care for the kids, they were sent to her sister. And now she has nothing but her companions in the ward.

It's one in the morning, and she goes about her routine. On a rotating basis, she'll wash the bodies, change their clothes, trim their hair, replace feeding tubes as necessary. And of course, replenish each patient's supply of the all-important serum. She's no stranger to it. She used to share it with Nolan, when they could get it. It was intimate, to mix your blood together with the serum and inject. You could share in the other's past, imagine yourself in their shoes, connect on a level never possible before.

She's stroking an elderly man's arm with a washcloth, careful not to soak his sheets or disconnect the IV. He still has a full head of white hair, and has permanently pursed lips. A feature Shannah finds enduring. On an upstroke, he twitches and Shannah nearly falls out of her chair. They never move, not these people. They are separate from this world, in another place entirely. They do not *move*.

The remainder of the night passes without incident.

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Each night, Shannah is drawn to the man. She never neglects her other duties, but pays particular attention to the man. Lawrence, the frail but otherwise healthy patient who didn't wake up after a stroke. She inspects his arms, his legs. She takes note of each fold in his sheets, where his tubes hang, anything that might shift with his movements. After a week, she's failed to notice anything remarkable, but it is difficult to shake the feeling that something has changed, like he has tried to communicate in some way.

She has not had the serum herself for nearly a year. But there has been zero progress and the feeling has developed into a gnawing curiosity. Shannah attaches a syringe to his IV and draws his blood. It's stained black, a side effect of the serum. She pulls more serum from a vial into the syringe. She draws her own blood and lets it mix before injecting the contents into her own veins.

Shannah is experienced with the serum, and has little difficulty navigating its effects. She lays back in a chair and closes her eyes. Lawrence has led a full life. He has seventeen grandchildren and his wife is still alive. Shannah sees an experience with his daughter-in-law: they're in his crab boat in the Chesapeake Bay. The motor has died and Lawrence is exhausted in the sun. After several tries, Rebecca is able to get it started again and they're soon home safe. It becomes a common story at family gatherings and the two have a permanent bond.

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Shannah doesn't stop. Sharing the serum with the man becomes part of her nightly routine. She's careful not to withdraw too much blood from Lawrence, and finds that it's the only connection she's made with someone in a long while. His memories of family. His

wedding with his wife's dress, stained by a nosebleed just moments before the ceremony. When he told her he wouldn't change anything about the day. How the dress was now entirely unique, theirs and theirs alone. Shannah explores his life.

One night, a woman arrives at the door. "I've just got a feeling," she says. "Tonight's the night."

"Can I help you, ma'am?" says Shannah.

"My husband. He's a patient here. I want to stay with him on his last night. Is that unusual?" Shannah recognizes her immediately. Her faded red hair, cut to her shoulders. Unusual on a woman this old, like she's kept it the same for decades. "Lawrence. Lawrence Hardwick. I'm his wife."

"No," says Shannah.

The woman looks puzzled. "What do you mean, no?" she says.

"No, I mean... I'm sorry. No, it's not unusual. It'll be fine. He's right this way. But I've got to say he's really in pretty good shape, considering. I recently had to place him on a ventilator, but it could be temporary. He's stable now."

"I've just got a feeling I should be here for him."

And she's wrong. Lawrence does not pass away, and for nearly three weeks she returns every night to the ward and asks to spend the night. She lays next to her husband and doesn't ask for anything. Every night she comes into the ward, and Shannah goes about her usual duties. She breaks to sit at her desk in the corner of the room and stares at the couple.

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Lawrence dies after twenty days. Shannah shakes as she removes his tubes. She turns off the ventilator, still inflating dead lungs, still raising and lowering his chest. An illusion of life. She holds the small bag of unused serum in her hands, then hangs it back on its hook. Robbed. She's been robbed of his life. The final, all-important days. That woman, she doesn't feel for him this way. She didn't deserve those days. Shannah draws his blood, mixes the serum, and injects herself.

There is an immediate blackness, and then something quite unlike even black. Shannah struggles to maintain awareness. There is only silence, no odor, no taste. No feeling.

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A day nurse discovers her on the tile floor. Needle still piercing her arm, mouth agape, eyes wide. The staff relocates Lawrence to the morgue.

“She'll need a feeding tube. Breathing seems stable. Heartrate stable. We'll set her up in this free bed,” says Dr. Ramsay. When they have her in place, Dr. Ramsay attaches an IV to her left arm and starts the serum drip.

At Twin Lakes

1

The leaking wall on the far side of Director Matthews' cabin office had, for three or four weeks, been a mystery. Water, seemingly from nowhere, was seeping through the sheetrock walls, whether it was raining or not. After several failed inspections—one of which resulting in the inspector suggesting he “call a priest”—Matthews gave up. A lost cause. The only ‘solution’ for the sweating wall was a system of waterproof tape and tarp leading to a bucket on the floor. The aging camp director was forced to empty it every three hours.

By the time he discovered it, the water had already soaked through the backing of several frames Matthews hung on the wall—each of the ‘all-camp’ photos he took at the end of the season: the hundred or so kids, their counselors, cooks, the nurse, and Matthews himself. He would develop the film in a darkroom on the grounds, usually as part of an activity for the children interested in such things. And now, thirty-five years of soggy, wrinkled history was filed away in his desk drawer.

Matthews had founded Camp Hope in the shadow of the Sawatch Mountains on Twin Lakes in Colorado after returning from Germany in 1946. Without family to return to, he decided to forgo a suburban destiny and poured his savings into the formation of the camp, mostly recruiting the children of friends and other veterans. Initially just a place for parents to leave their boys to keep them out of trouble during the summer months, Camp

Hope developed into a full scale sleepaway destination where Director Matthews had found his career.

The trouble was that in recent years, attendance had begun a steady decline in the wake of a multitude of injuries—some involving children as young as six— which were mostly the fault, in Matthews’ eyes, of newer counselors, several of whom attended Camp Hope as children. Without the livelihood his camp provided, and with no familial support, Matthews was facing destitution.

He left the dripping wall and began the walk across camp to the mess. The sun was still rising over the Twin Lakes, casting orange beams through the wisps of early morning fog that hung over the water and into Matthews’ eyes. Soon enough the humidity would be dizzying and the heat inescapable. The pines were only beginning to recover from wildfires that plagued the region two years prior—thankfully sparing most of the camp—creating a bizarre pattern of black, stripped poles towering above the buildings. Fresh saplings dotted the East side of the mountains. It was during those fires that a thirteen-year-old, nearly trapped, had escaped by wading down one of the many creeks that carved their way toward the lakes.

Matthews had the explicit goal of maintaining the facilities, both functionally and aesthetically. At sixty-five, he considered himself a craftsman. He allowed curious vines to curl themselves up walls and around windows, careful not to disturb the natural order. Over the years, Matthews had done most of the construction himself in the off seasons: the lone dock that stabbed into the western bank of the Twin Lakes, the gathering of cabins, and

Matthews' own lodging secluded near the crease at the base of the mountains. The entire layout was his design. In recent years, the dwindling population had the unintended consequence of allowing him to focus more on the land itself.

The path to the mess hall revealed itself as a network of trails, the least disturbed of which were being continually reclaimed by the forest. The ever-present needles littered the forest floor, protecting it from the summer sun. Inside, the kitchen staff were nearly finished preparing for breakfast, while one of Matthews' senior counselors prepared the space—arranging tables and chairs just as he had been shown years prior by the then enthusiastic director.

“I was starting to wonder when you'd show,” the counselor said, holding the door open. “Took your time this morning!”

“It's already too hot for a stroll, Dylan. No, it's the damn wall. I can't sleep. It's just dripping. And dripping. I haven't slept more than a few hours at a time in damn near a month.”

“It's seriously—”

“I just don't know what to make of it. No pipes, no rain, no A/C, no dead animals.”

“Can't you just take the wall down?”

“No, no. It just doesn't make any sense. You've never seen anything like it. It's a god damn miracle I think. A horrible one at that. You know, if it's still leaking during the winter session maybe I can get you and some kids to chisel it away for me during the day.”

“I actually was meaning to talk to you about that. It’s not looking so good for my plans next season.”

At this, thirty or so children marched through the doors accompanied by their counselors—lately only a 5:1 ratio—and drowned out the conversation. With so few of them in recent years, the room’s echo seemed more distinct, the sound reflecting off more open surfaces.

“What do you mean, *not looking so good?*”

“Look, I’ve just been talking to a few other counselors and I don’t think everyone’s coming back. I’m just looking into some other opp...” A child, maybe ten, pulled on Dylan’s shirt cuff, asking him to come see some trinket he had whittled the night before.

“Opportunities. I’ll come by later and we can talk about it, ok?” The child towed him away before Matthews could provide his response.

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The bucket was full. Matthews had waited too long and was now forced to lift it a few inches at a time toward the door, the water sloshing over the edges and leaving a trail of water stains in the wood floor. The bucket dug a trench in the blanket of pine needles as Matthews dragged it through the door and around the side of the cabin. Stiff wind brushed through the trees, renewing the calls of cicadas beginning to finally die down in the later hours. Out of the sound, hurried voices, at first just a murmur from across the grounds, soon elevated into hysterical crying.

Cutting across the snaking trails, hands in front of his face, defending against raking branches, Matthews sourced the intensifying screams to the lake and soon came upon the boys. Three stood crying in swim suits, their clothes tossed lazily in the dirt at the base of a nearby tree. A fourth lay face down in muddy shallows, one broken leg twisted awkwardly under the dock. One of the thin planks above the boy's head was cracked, the end dangling by a few strained threads of wood. Moonlight distorted with ribbons of deep crimson flickered over the water near the boy's head. A rope swing came to rest near the edge of the lake, just barely dipping into the midnight tide. In Matthews' cabin, a pool of shimmering water soaked into the floor below the eastern wall, stretching as the breeze pushed in through his open door.



Mid-January, well into the winter camping season, and the only footprints in the camp are Matthews'. He maintained the heaters in each cabin—classic Franklin stoves—and cleared the dock of ice as he always had. Unable to cope with the loneliness of the empty camp, he ran it as normal. He staked the seasonal “No walking on the ice” sign into the dirt near the water. He chopped wood for the fire pits that he would light each night. He would ice-fish with no children around to teach. Weekly, Matthews would attempt to clear the cabins of roaches and spiders that had taken up residence for the winter.

He shoveled excess snow from the roofs.

He watched for precarious branches, weakened by ice storms.

He identified winter bird calls.

He ate in the mess, and cleaned it each night.

He measured the waxing ice that filled the creeks, now entirely frozen, entombing stray animals that may have fallen in earlier in the year. The ice would preserve them until the distant thaw.

Each night, Matthews retired to his cabin, lit the stove, and chiseled away the patch of ice that formed on the eastern wall. He slept soundly. In the morning, he chiseled again. In time, he embraced the routine of it, preferring the ice to the incessant dripping in the summer months. The cold was distracting and invigorating. It isolated the grounds, and Matthews, and provided an immediacy and focus so that the absence of winter companions became, over time, irrelevant, even welcome. Despite this, Matthews looked anxiously forward to the next season: planning activities, preparing schedules, and waiting near the mailbox for returned rsvp forms.

When the ground began its long-awaited thaw, Matthews determined that a new cabin would be a fine addition. Seeing the camp expand was a joy unto itself. He dug four narrow trenches, and within them laid a foundation from the last remaining charred pines.

2

A Hiker disturbs the newly frozen eastern edge of the Twin Lakes. In the ice, like a cracked mirror, he can see the jagged skyline of the Sawatch Range. Autumn is hardening into winter, quieting the nights except for lone owls or the occasional shuffling of deer through the Hiker's makeshift camps. He has been walking west for several weeks, sticking

to trails far removed from the cities. Enduring the persistent hunger, and the growing cold, is perhaps the only way to make the events of the previous year seem bearable.

The Hiker had attempted to finish his thesis on Melmoth the Wanderer until realizing that he actually cared nothing for the gothic novel. Damned to hell, Melmoth was trying to escape his self-inflicted fate while the Hiker had done nothing to deserve his. Yet he keeps a copy in his pack. A token of the life he has left behind, or the life taken from him.

After his fiancé was run down by a taxicab outside a Chicago department store, he left the university—as well as a lease; a stray, friendly border collie; his phone, his laptop; and a collection of first editions—walking southwest out of the city: but not before hitting his ATM withdraw limit. By the day of the funeral, he had reached Peoria and turned west. After realizing this wouldn't be a short journey, he began gathering supplies.

The Hiker has been camping on the shores of Twin Lakes for three weeks, the first location he has remained for any extended time. The small towns in the region offer opportunity to resupply with little personal interaction. The daunting Sawatch Mountains are a comfort. The trees of twin lakes are a natural windbreak, close enough to the water that he can easily reap the benefits of their shelter while still fishing for mackinaw lurking under the ice.

A particularly violent storm prompts the Hiker to move further east along the coast of the Twin Lakes. Freezing rain coats every surface, creating a dreamlike glare. The thin sheet hampers progress even along gritty terrain, and it is not until the sun dips over the horizon that he encounters a derelict dock which sits confidently above the surface of the

frozen lake. It looks as if the freezing rain has re-formed the decaying structure, sealing its numerous cracks and holes. Remnants of what once was a thick synthetic rope dangles lazily from a tree above, conjuring images in the Hiker's mind of his late fiancé's cabin in the Missouri Ozarks.

She had invited him to spend a weekend with the family in their lakehouse, which she assumed to be an ideal place to meet her family for the first time. One alcohol driven discussion—or argument, according to her—about the role of the humanities in modern society devolved into direct attacks on his chosen field of study. Though all was well after she pulled him from his room that night to swing naked from a rope into the lake. This, of course, only encouraged future debates.

But there is no longer an opportunity for future debates. Now, he's standing under the stiff cord and pulls until it tears free from the branch and falls in coils through the thin layer of ice on the water's surface, splashing into the mud beneath.

In the morning, the Hiker continues west, into a settlement clearly older than the trees it stands among. There is little room to walk between the strange assortment of buildings that litter the area. They form what is almost a maze, with no obvious reason for their location. They all have the same basic design, but face in all directions as if no thought were put into their organization. But the pines are reclaiming this land, some towering several stories over the small cabins. Despite the early morning sun, the trees cast nearly the entire area in shadow, leaving only dim patches of light scattered here and there. He gazes inside the mostly obscured windows and is surprised by their true state of repair. Though the

exteriors are worn and overgrown, the interiors look as if they had only been abandoned in recent years. Bunk beds stand undisturbed, their sheets crisp and made with precision and a desk topped with pen and paper sits waiting for its next occupant. In front of each cabin door is a newly matured pine barring entry.

This trend continues as the Hiker shuffles from structure to structure: dilapidated exterior, seemingly clean interior, and entrance blocked by young adult pine. One building is larger, perhaps a cafeteria, and has a substantial window built into the wall. And while there are several stones within reach that could be used to shatter the glass, the bizarre, almost alien serenity of the scene compels him not to do so.

Pushing further westward along no discernable trail, there is yet another cabin, this one solitary. He misses it at first, hidden behind a series of trees, younger than the others, in a row along the entire perimeter of the cabin. Though they're thinner than the others, the pines form a sturdy barrier, blocking all but the lone window near the door. He attempts to peer through the glass, but a layer of ice from the storm obscures his view. Only after heavy breathing, chipping, and rubbing for several minutes does the ice melt away enough to see inside. The emaciated, even skeletal remains of what he guesses to be a man, kneeling, prostrate, arms fully extended before the eastern wall; a wall featuring a long river of ice that reaches from the ceiling to a frozen pool on the floor, encasing the man's hands.

The interior is unlike the others: scattered with old wool blankets, piles of wood in one corner and a mess of paper plastered to the walls and floor. The Hiker pulls at one of the pine, and though it flexes, the trunk is too strong to break. He searches for his hatchet

and proceeds to chop the trees. One by one they fall, exposing the wooden door of the cabin. He tries the knob, but it's either locked or the wood has swollen shut. He kicks at the door, but it holds steady. He steps back and rushes shoulder first, but it doesn't budge. The hiker then proceeds to cut a large hole into the door with the hatchet. The air inside seems to rush out, a warm breeze.

The papers on the floor aren't simply documents. They're photographs developed from film, some stained, corrupted, but discernable nonetheless. In each of them, a man stands alone against a backdrop of the lake. In some, his arms are extended outward as if resting on the shoulders of others, while other pictures depict him leaning against a tree, smiling. Digging through the filth of the cabin interior, still more photographs reveal themselves. In one he looked to the side smiling, in the next the man kneels and holds his arms wide and excited, in another he's stuck his tongue to the camera. There are nearly forty in all, split evenly between summer scenes and those with snow. In all, the pines stand tall in the background, his only companions. The threadbare remains of the clothing on the corpse match the photographs. This corpse is kneeling, as if praying toward the river of ice on the eastern wall.

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The hiker searches the room for an ID, but can't find one. He looks for information on the grounds, a pamphlet or even a notebook. Using a rusted shovel leaning in one corner, he digs a hole roughly five feet long. And deep enough. He chips away the ice binding the man's hands to the floor. The hiker straightens him: careful to avoid pulling his body to

pieces. The man is rolled into his grave, piles of dirt, needles, and snow on top. The hiker stands over the disturbed earth. The dirt, piled unevenly, will soon be indistinguishable from the surrounding forest.

Lifting the Veil

With the serum, you can feel as if you've climbed Everest, even if that were impossible. That was the claim. The most intimate of acts, to share the serum. This was Austin's reasoning when he proposed it to Jackie.

"We're not gonna get sick," he says, "I just want to get a little closer. Get to know you better. See what makes you tick."

They'd been friends for three months when he made the suggestion.

"Just a little blood is all it takes," he'd said.

And she agreed. Sharing your memories with another was the most intimate thing she could imagine. She swooned at the idea that you could enter each other's minds, or at least a reproduction of the mind. Who wouldn't do it? What luck to find a guy who didn't just want sex, but wanted to know you. The method didn't really matter.

So, here they sit: in the middle of his studio apartment on an overused twin mattress; a room scattered with clutter overflowing from the kitchenette; the empty syringe lay discarded near a waste basket by the bathroom door, its black contents streaming through the veins of the young couple. Jackie, her back propped against the wall, looks as if she's dreaming. Her eyes dart behind closed lids. They sift through the temporarily shared memories of their lives.

There is a beehive in a gargantuan oak near the South Georgia home of Austin's childhood. There is a familiarity to the place, as if Jackie is returning after some long

vacation. This place that she can map in her mind without really knowing why. The color of the façade, the gravel paths and the air with its sickly humidity that seems to form a layer on the skin. The ever-present buzz of insects. Caught too close to the hive, a squirrel struggles violently as it is shrouded by bees. The scene is at once familiar and alien, like looking into a fogged mirror. Jackie cannot conjure the sadness that she might normally feel for the suffering of the innocent creature. The squirrel release its grip on the oak. It falls to the ground next to several dead bees. Soon there is a calmness to the air.

In another time and place she is looking upon herself. Jackie struts down the street ahead of Austin, and though the aggressive confidence in her walk is attractive, it can't overcome her rather plain feature. The judgmental gaze she casts upon herself feels justified.

The memories wisp into each other, none lasting more than a few moments, and before long Jackie finds herself again in the dingy apartment, arms wrapped around herself. She looks across the bed to Austin, unresponsive, and struggles to imagine what he must be seeing. He seems almost imperceptibly further away, as if the bed has somehow increased in length. When Austin comes around he places a hand on Jackie's shoulder.

"And that was only a small dose," he says, "how'd it feel?"

"I... I don't know. Why didn't you try to help that squirrel?"

"What are you talking about? What'd you see?"

"A squirrel, and some bees. I, you were little. Just watched it," she says.

“I don’t remember that. Huh.” He swings off the bed and fills a glass of water in the sink. “You were cute back in high school though. All nervous about everything. Couple years haven’t changed you much.”

Now that the serum has worn off, it’s impossible to sift through who’s emotions are who’s. Frustrating not to have access here, in the physical world. Not to be able to see how he’s really feeling. What he’s thinking.

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She hasn’t figured out how to sleep, and decides to leave the apartment. The halls are silent except where she stops to listen near a door and hears hushed voices, laughing, or music. What could they be thinking, in these moments, in the dead of night. Outside it’s cold, and snow still lingers on the edges of the sidewalk, and in the alleys between buildings. She waits at the corner of an intersection for a car to pass so she can cross, but seems to misjudge its distance, like it’s moving too slowly. She stands alone at the corner and watches it approach, but it simply pulls over on the street. She watches the driver as he enters the adjacent building.

She continues toward a twenty-four-seven diner a few blocks from her apartment. She takes a seat inside and an elderly waitress pours coffee without asking and walks back into the kitchen.

“Your server’ll be out in a minute,” she says. She looks as if she’s been awake for days, like working the night shift is her life. She’s got a boyfriend at home, Jackie imagines. He’s not physically abusive. No, but he collects her tips to bolster a large collection of

women's wigs. He wears them when he thinks she isn't looking, but claims he wants to open a small museum someday. She's a freak for putting up with it. She can't leave him because she forgets what it's like to be alone, and the prospect is terrifying. The couple at the booth across the room has dreams of opening a cake shop together. He has the experience, but knows his wife won't have the stomach for the years without a salary and will likely leave him for another man in a coastal city. Why wouldn't she? Leave this man who cannot begin to satisfy. They smile as the waitress brings them a plate of pancakes to share. The man glances across the room at Jackie and notices her stare. He must feel nothing but pity for the nineteen-year-old. What could she possibly be doing here alone. Likely a runaway, nowhere to go but down. But he's got problems of his own and can't be concerned, and so he returns to the plate in front of him while his wife spreads too much butter across the cakes.

There is a man smoking in the corner, but no one cares enough to stop him, and he isn't the type to give a shit on his own. He once gave a beggar a fake five-dollar bill, a beggar who would later have it stolen by another man with a knife. The thief would later be thrown out of a gas station for attempting to spend the counterfeit bill. Jackie writhes in her seat, unable to get comfortable, and sips at the coffee with nothing to do but envision the lives of these midnight diners. The waitress asks what she's having, and Jackie says she'll stick with water, that everything on the menu sounds bland.

And the waitress is thinking the same of her. Envisioning how this pale girl arrived in the diner, alone on a January night. Back from winter break, at a school she felt was a fallback. A safety. Where she'd study psychology or some other default subject, attempting to draw attention to herself despite her general disdain for the inevitable small talk that

would ensue with her newfound peers. She'd never been a particularly good student, nor an athlete, but would likely lead an average, unremarkable life.

By the time she finishes her water, the coffee she hasn't touched is cool, and Jackie finds herself alone in the diner, though smoke still hangs in the air waiting to form its yellow layer on the walls. How much time had passed? She's missing her phone, left it in the apartment. When did she arrive? She leaves two dollars on the table and rushes down the street. There are no cars, no pedestrians, just a yellow glare of street lamps that reflects off patches of black ice on the road. To the left of her stoop, just off the sidewalk, leaning in the alley is a gaunt figure, presumably a woman. There is no reaction as Jackie rushes past. Before entering her building, she turns to consider the woman. She cannot conjure a story for her presence. A blank slate. At once refreshing and unnerving.

The woman is standing with her arms crossed, head down. "Hello?" says Jackie. She doesn't respond, except to turn and walk into the alleyway.

It must be two in the morning. Three even. Back inside, Jackie lies restlessly in bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. She gets herself up and spends the rest of the night cleaning. Decluttering, scrubbing away, unsure of how to define the problem. This *feeling*. It's more than insomnia, and has only gotten worse as the night has drawn on. The room is too *long*, as if everything is farther away than it should be. Her finger tips extending further into the dark than she's ever noticed before.

She searches the nearby closet for a tape measure. She begins to measure the dimensions of the room. Crawling on all fours, she maps the apartment. She calculates

seven-hundred-fifty-five square feet. Can that be right? Yes, she checks the lease. Fifty-four inch windows. The ceilings, nine feet exactly. Why do they seem so tall? Everything appears stretched, too thin, and yet the measurements are accurate. She double checks the floors, measures the cabinets, the refrigerator, the bookshelves. What time is it? Only three. Surely it should be dawn by now. But there is no glow from the eastern horizon, just the wind through nearby trees and the occasional sound of a car on the street below.

She moves through the apartment extinguishing every source of light. Unplugging the microwave, clocks, the tiny bead of green light from the smoke detector. Tearing through her closet, Jackie retrieves extra sheets, towels, blankets, and proceeds to secure them over her windows until finally the room is cast in a rich black through which her eyes struggle to reach even inches. She rolls herself into her comforter, tight like a swaddled infant, and lapses into sleep, now hidden from the terrible sense of smallness.

This process becomes routine over the next several days. Jackie attends to her business: class, work, the occasional call home where she explains how well her second semester is going. But she returns at night to the apartment. And though the sensation of smallness has faded, she is still irked by the strangeness of it all and cannot help but to sleep in pitch black, in a cocoon of heavy blankets.

“Austin, I want to try it again,” she says after a week. The imaginings aren’t holding her attention. The lives of those around her, on the street, in class, in the diner, are lacking...authenticity. She apologizes for her comments about the bees, for thinking him odd not to react. He assures her that he’s thought nothing of it, and hardly remembers the

incident in the first place. She never mentions his gaze on the sidewalk, how she felt about herself through the eyes of another, and how she can't be sure who's feelings where who's.

“You sure? You sort of hurried out of there last time.” He appears genuinely concerned, but of course he always seems concerned. Especially this past week, banging on the door with no response, pleading that he was sorry. For what, Jackie couldn't be exactly sure, but there was little that would pull her out of bed once all the light was sealed. And she couldn't be sure that the sounds at the door were real anyway.

“Yes, I'm sure. Know anyone else who's into it? What about Jacob?” she says.

“Yeah, I mean I can ask. You want more than just us?” he says.

“I'm thinking maybe four. Can we do four? Will the needle hold enough blood for four?”

“It should work I think. I've never tried it but I know people do it. I heard about a guy that runs groups of fifteen or more even. Crazy shit, really.”

“Could you call Jacob and set it up?”

“Can I ask why? I've barely been able to talk to you for a week and now you're all gung-ho about moving forward with it. And look at this place,” he says, tearing the blanket off the wall to reveal the sunshine now streaming through the window.

“I just think it'd be fun not to know whose memories I'm experiencing. Could be fun to figure it out. Can you just take care of it and let me know? We can do it here even. Bit cleaner than your place.” She smiles.

“Ok, yeah. Could be cool.”

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Jacob and a girl Jackie has never met sit across the coffee table. They’ve decided sitting on the floor was fine, better not to fall out of one of the cheap folding chairs Jackie keeps for guests. She’s sitting with Austin on the couch and stares as he fills the syringe with his blood, mixing with the blood of the others already inside the glass tube. He hands the syringe to Jacob who pierces the lid of the glass vial containing the deep black serum. It seems to crawl toward the needle even before he pulls back the plunger. Jacob pulls the serum into the syringe and watches it corrupt the red liquid. It’s like staring into the night sky: a deep empty void that really isn’t empty at all, but merely a veil.

Jacob injects a quarter of the contents into each of their left arms, and one by one the group lays back, their eyes closed, searching for an image to latch onto.

As they fade into the slew of memories, Jackie attempts to assert control, guiding herself through the experiences by focusing first on the beehive, but the collective memories of four individuals is impossible to control. Shifting from experience to experience, it’s difficult to tell where the memories originate. Falling from halfway up an old maple, breaking an ankle. Cutting inner thighs in the bathtub. Cutting class in high school to walk in a park. Trying blood orange sorbet for the first time, the rich crimson chunks of fruit isolated against the rest of the scene. It’s chaotic, faster this time, but somehow the memories are comforting. Filling up Jackie’s mind, a soft pressure, a closeness that she’s come to crave.

Jackie searches for a scene where she is present. But cannot find one. She cannot judge herself through the eyes of another. The serum has taken a life of its own in her veins, guiding her to a variety of experiences more sensual. She finds it difficult to cast judgement. There is a community to this feeling, a sense of oneness.

When she opens her eyes, she is alone. The others are around her, already awoken, but the sense of distance has returned. Other senses too seem disrupted. The sound of their voices muted, and the energetic lime walls faded to mint. Jackie rubs her eyes and sees Austin shake Jacob's hand and escort him out the door. They wave across the room and she half-heartedly responds in kind.

Austin approaches the couch. "You alright? I think I need to go too," he says. Jackie matches the words to the movements of his mouth. She nods and leans forward for a hug before he leaves the room.



The cycle is renewed, but now with a creeping, unsettling loneliness. She knows there are others on the opposite sides of her walls, but it feels as if she is the only person for miles. The lengthening perception of space, the dulled color and sound, can be accommodated for. No matter how dark she can make the room, it is impossible to hide this feeling in shadow. Jackie is alone in a building, on a campus, in a city filled with people.

She waits until night, then drives west. West until the roads lose their names and become numbers, until the glow from the city fades in the east. She exits the highway in search of gravel roads, driving until there is nothing but cool air sweeping over open fields, shaking

the branches of the bare, late winter trees. She parks the car in a field and builds a nest from blankets stuffed into the trunk. Laying in the open, with only the trees on the edge of the meadow and moonless sky for company, the aloneness is more palpable, less unnatural. Just before she drifts to sleep, Jackie makes out the outline of a human figure, barely distinguishable from the tree-line. Too far for detail, it seems almost *more* black than the surrounding brush.

The feeling sticks for longer this time. For a week, she makes the hour and a half trip out of the city each night to sleep. Though color never returns to normal, the chilling isolation fades away. It is replaced by a craving, a drive to experience what she will never see or feel.

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Austin's at the dining hall on campus when Jackie spots him from across the room. It's well populated for three o'clock on a Monday, but where she'd expect a dull roar of voices there is little more than a muted chorus. He waves her over.

"You need some more sleep," he says, "your eyes are all black."

"Pretty hard these days."

"Maybe if you weren't holed up in our room so much. You should come out sometime. We've been friends what, a year now?"

"Like, six months." She steals one of his French fries. "There's just a lot going on. And I don't know, just seems kinda pointless don't you think? All of *this*."

"I mean, gen eds kinda suck." He dumps a few fries on a napkin and passes it over.

"No, I mean, everything is just so boring." She says.

“It’s really not so bad. I’m having a few people over tonight. Why don’t you come hang out?” She’s not sure if what he’s saying is even real, or rather just an image of what she imagines he’d say. The disconnect, while bearable, just seems obvious.

“You said you knew someone who’d done up to fifteen?” she says, ignoring his offer.

“What? Oh. You mean serum. I don’t know it wasn’t feeling the best after our last go of it. I think I’m done with the stuff honestly. But no, I said I heard about it. I think you should stay away though, Jackie. Not that I’ve known you for long or anything, but I don’t remember you like this.”

“All I want to do is remember,” she says.

“Well come hang out with us, seriously. Have a few drinks. All we do is tell stories.”

“Maybe I’ll just ask around.”

“Jackie, come on.” But she’s done talking. She stares down at the fries and absent mindedly picks at them. After a while Austin mentions that he hopes to see her later. She nods as he leaves the cafeteria.

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“Yeah, Austin told me you were asking him about the large groups. Jackie, it was just a rumor,” says Jacob. They’re sitting in the diner and Jacob is sipping at his second cup of coffee.

“You were one of the first to even try the stuff. You must’ve heard something,” says Jackie.

“Part of the reason I’d never try something like that.”

“Didn’t say you had to try it. I’m just looking for info. You’re not curious? Don’t tell me you haven’t felt it too.”

“Go forward too fast and you lose your grip on reality, Jackie.”

“No. No, no, no it’s *revealing* reality. The serum lifts the veil. We get all these experiences, and then it’s stripped away and you can almost see... see how things really are. It’s just, empty space.”

“That’s called death, Jackie. Is that what you’re talking about? Because it sure seems like it,” he says.

“Maybe it’s just another way of looking at the world. You said they make it out of trees, right? Maybe this is how they see it.”

“Jackie, I’m not going to be responsible for this. You need some help.”

“Maybe it’s like a window, or even a doorway,” she trails off, looking down the pool of condensation collecting under her glass.

“I’ll give you a ride. We can go to the counseling center on campus. Free for students, right?”

Jackie swats at the glass, splashing it across Jacobs chest and dripping off the edge of the table onto his legs.

“Jesus Christ, Jackie.” He stands and brushes off as much water as possible before it soaks in. Ice cubes sit on the pseudo-leather booth, melting into the crevices, and soaking into the edge of a crumpled napkin. “You know I’m just trying to help. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to meet you, the way you’ve been lately. It’s Austin that convinced me to come here.” When she doesn’t respond, he scoffs and walks out the door.

Jackie just watches a stray ice cube melt, spreading out over the wooden table. Into her view, a hand slides across the table, too long fingers push a small jar of honey towards her.

“Try some of this next time. Maybe it’ll soothe that attitude of yours.” It’s the woman from the alley. Her features are sharp, youthful, but her complexion makes it difficult to tell an approximate age.

“Why have you been following me?” says Jackie.

“I’m not following you,” says the woman, “I’m just... around.”

It’s business as usual in the diner. The waitress pours coffee for a small assortment of customers scattered around the room. The woman reaches for a napkin on the seat and passes it across the table. There’s a street address written in blue ink.

“Go here, Saturday evening. Around midnight. Just climb the stairs behind the door in the alley. Bring some money, you should have enough. A few hundred will do if you want to see what the mind is truly capable of. You see, there is no *I* with the serum, but only a fleeting sense of *we*.”



The address is across town. Jackie parks on the street and walks into the alley. She approaches the nondescript wooden door and knocks. There's a camera near a light off to the side. There's a click, and the door swings open a few inches. She pulls it open revealing an immediate staircase. It's steep, but there are no railings. The narrow walls offer support for her ascent. At the top is a square room, a door on the far side. In a circle are twenty or so steel chairs, nearly all occupied.

There is a man with a shaved head, shirtless, revealing skin that seems stretched over his ribs. A woman who could be mistaken for a housewife, in a purple dress. An obese man who's body spills over the edges of his chair. Another appears almost genderless, shaved eyebrows, sunken cheeks and frail arms. There are a host of others, all variety of shapes, colors, ages, affect, and each is sitting still, a tube fixed to one arm that extends to the center of the room toward an IV bag already filled with nearly a quart of blood.

A large, well-built man walks toward Jackie. "You've got the cash?" he says. Half the room turns to face her, some look her up and down before turning back to the bag and closing their eyes. She pulls a handful of twenties from her jacket pocket and hands them over. "You can have a seat here," he says, gesturing to one of the empty chairs. She sits down next to a woman with platinum blonde dyed hair, but there's grey showing at the roots. The man approaches from her right and swabs her arm with alcohol before tying her off and piercing a vein with a few swift motions. He's had practice.

“Is everyone ready? I think we can begin.” He says. A few in the circle nod their heads. He carries jar of the black serum to the middle of the room. A few ounces. Using a larger syringe than Jackie has ever seen, he transfers the serum into the blood bag. It rushes voraciously through the bag and it takes only moments before it is fully corrupted. The contents now a living, almost breathing ink. The man turns a plastic knob and the liquid begins to trickle through the series of tubes and into the veins of each person in the circle.

It is slow at first, but soon there is a cacophony of memory, ceaseless. The jungle, Vietnam. Bullets crack the air, near misses. A soldier fifteen yards to the left suddenly detonates, little remains of his body. Soon after, another is shot, a round removing the upper left side of his face. There is a car accident. A small child is thrown from a window on the interstate and is quickly run down by a pick-up. Several cars pile up; one flips over the median into oncoming traffic. A four-hundred-dollar assortment of nigiri is placed before her. Bluefin tuna, octopus, eel, salmon, a rainbow display of fish, seaweed, and rice. The memories begin to blend, sex from every imaginable perspective: rape, a virgin wedding night, an elderly couple in a hospital bed behind thin curtains, the cold steel of a morgue table, Egyptian cotton. Dark satisfaction, violation, unmatched love. A child kicks a red ball over a fence, another finds her first success without training wheels. Hugs from countless loved ones, family, friends, the last kiss to a recently deceased grandfather. The summit of Mount Everest, a Syrian bazaar, a life raft marooned off the coast of Chile. Ruined castles in northern Europe.

It is impossible to control the flow of hundreds of years of memory. There is no sense of time, just a relentless deluge of experience. Jackie opens her eyes, there is an intense

numbness in her limbs. Head slumped, she stumbles toward the staircase in the corner of the room. The needle slips out of her arm and blood streams from the torn skin. She misses the railing and tumbles down the stairs, left arm snapping, bone pierces the mangled limb. Her ankle cracks on the bottom step before she crashes through the door into the alley outside. It must be night still, but it is impossible to tell if the darkness is merely a new revelation, the world as it truly exists. She crawls, braced on the brick wall of the alley, for maybe twenty feet and collapses into the concrete.

There are the faint sounds of voices around her. Austin perhaps. He will lament her passing, grieve that he brought this upon her. He will sit among crowds, searching for some sort of feeling that no longer exists. He will withdraw from the world, seeking respite. And then, nothing.