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Chase Wolfsohn

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The Bright Blue Sign

by

Chase Wolfsohn

Tayari Jones
Adviser

English and Creative Writing

Tayari Jones
Adviser

María M. Carrión
Committee Member

Emma Davenport
Committee Member

2024

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By

Chase Wolfsohn

Tayari Jones

Adviser

An abstract of
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Abstract

The Bright Blue Sign

By Chase Wolfsohn

After a bright light appears in their local grocery store, the residents of Fideston, Minnesota, must contend with what the supposedly supernatural sign means for each of them and how it affects the small-town life they know.

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I

Descent

“Let us pray.”

Paul Michaels grabbed his wife’s hands and the two bowed their heads.

“Dear Lord, guide me as I speak for you today. Let me demonstrate to this community your will and guide their souls to understanding. We thank you for what you’ve done in this town, for blessing our son. For choosing him to be part of your divine plan. We pray that you deliver him from evil and help him guide the people of this church to knowledge, righteousness, and truth. Be with us, Lord-”

“Paul.”

He opened his eyes. Claire was wincing.

“Yes?” he asked, put off by the way she interrupted him.

“You’re squeezing too tight.”

He held her hands for another beat before she pulled away. He considered continuing the prayer, but his wife had already stepped back. She looked at the door that led to the chapel.

“Do you know where Peter is?” Paul asked.

“Probably hiding out somewhere until the service starts.” Her voice was filled with pity, like she wished she could also be hiding out to comfort him.

Paul reached out and rubbed her arm. She tensed beneath his touch.

“He’ll have to get used to talking with people,” Paul said, “He’s been chosen to be a leader. He’ll be an important voice with the help of God.”

Claire was still.

“Are we sure?” she asked.

Paul knew that doubt and fear were prevalent in his community but hearing it in his wife made his heart ache. He believed that he had been a good guide for her. There was no reason for her to dwell in disbelief.

“Our son was blessed and given a sign,” he said, “There were witnesses. And it’s not a coincidence that it happened not two days before Pentecost. ‘And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.’ Do you not believe in the word of God? In miracles?”

She nodded, silent, but he knew she hoped it wasn’t true. Hoped their son could remain only their son and not move onwards to being a leader. Paul wished he had time to convince her, but soon he had to be out there shaking hands and stabilizing faiths. He was the only one in town that could truly be their shepherd and he only had one day a week to do it. Although now, Peter would also be a force for good. If the light was an ordainment, Paul only had to make sure Peter knew his role and then there could be two voices of truth. As long as Peter didn’t let any of his temptation or earthly desires get in the way of that. Sin was fiercer when God had a plan.

“Did you talk to him about what we discussed?” Paul asked.

Claire had begun to move towards the door but stopped and turned halfway back. She looked at the cabinet where Paul kept his cassock and stole.

“We don’t know if it’s true,” she said, “I don’t want to scare him away. He barely talks to us now.”

He knew she was right, knew his son had always been the nervous type and avoided his feelings, but Paul couldn’t take any chances. He’d heard from one of the elders’ wives that Peter had been seen with a boy behind the school tennis courts. Of course, Paul took church gossip

with a grain of salt, knowing rumors often spread out of malice or boredom, but when it had to do with his family and such a severe sin, he had to be sure. People could not think his son was straying down the wrong path. It would hurt his leadership, damaging the people's trust in him and in God.

"I can talk to him," he said, "tonight."

Claire stood in the doorway for a moment as if to say something more on the matter, but only took a deep breath.

"I'll let you get ready," she whispered.

She backed out of the door and into the chapel where voices were already beginning to echo. Paul sighed and closed his eyes thinking of what he would say on stage. Most weeks, the message was prewritten, carefully planned and examined. But on days like this, when the passion of the Lord came upon him, Paul spoke without notes, letting God's voice be his own.

He went to the closet beside him and began to strip off his clothes. Though it was not customary to undress before donning the alb, Paul found a freedom from ridding himself of his worldly clothes and putting on the dressings of his calling. When he was naked, he wrapped the white robe around him and then placed the green stole upon his shoulders, feeling the responsibility of his authority under it. The stole was a sign to him and to his congregation that he would pursue God's will above all else. All of his life on earth was for one purpose, to lead those who could not find their way to God. And now was his time to do that.

"Good morning."

A unison of over a hundred voices responded with an identical greeting—the sanctuary was full today. Expectant eyes peered upon his every move as he took the pulpit, rising above the crowd in front of him.

“Pray with me,” he said.

He raised his hands, as if to grab God and pull Him down into the room. The congregation bowed their heads. His voice rang out.

“Merciful God, we come to you as sinners, lost. We ask for your holy blessing upon me Father, for my words are your words. Bless this congregation, give them ears to hear and wisdom to understand. In Jesus’ perfect name we pray.”

They spoke *amen* with eyes closed.

“You know, I prayed for this message today. And I felt a call upon my soul to speak a word of peace over this congregation and this town given the events that happened on Friday.”

A few shifted in their seats as he spoke. They were anxious. Of course they were. They were only lost sheep.

“I know you’ve all heard the specifics, if not from friends and family, then from the article published in the paper this morning, so I won’t go into too much detail. But I will say this. I believe God was in that grocery store on Friday night.”

A flourish of passive *amens* were tossed from around the room.

“For the Lord appeared to my son and by proxy to all of us, but why? Why did He come? Why on a Friday night in a grocery store and why to the few people who were there? Well, I’ll tell you why.”

At that moment Paul found Peter sitting in the front pew next to Claire. His eyes were on the floor, his face pale. Paul paused, but only for a breath so as not to interrupt the flow of words coming from him.

“Today, as many of you know, is Pentecost. A day to remember the coming of the Holy Spirit sent by God. A day to remember that God is living among us. And God is here to rescue us from our impurity and unbelief. He has given us a sign, in Peter, for this very reason!

“In the Bible God appears only to a select few so we must pay attention when He comes down in all of his glory and speaks. But you do not know what God said that very night. In fact, only one of us does, and that boy is sitting right here in the front pew. Whatever God said to him was because God knows that the glory will come, and the blessings will flow and we will see a new kingdom right here in this little church.”

They were stirring. Paul’s mind was still as the verse came to mind. He closed his eyes reciting it.

“The fourth chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians says, ‘For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.’”

He let the weight of the words settle among the people.

“For this light is the light of God,” he continued, “the light in our hearts that we must shine to the world. Because this world is a dark place filled with those who wish to act only on their own selfish desires and sins. But just as the light was shed upon my son, so too through him, God’s message will illuminate your sins and put you on the path to righteousness.

“So fear not. For salvatory truth is here.”

One by one Paul shook hands with the people as they herded out of the chapel’s annex. He thanked them for coming despite the fact that most came every week anyway.

“Pastor Michaels,” Bill Humboldt was shaking his hand.

“Bill,” Paul said.

Bill was wearing a green polo shirt and khaki pants. Of course, Paul knew that God didn't care what they wore, but some people treated it as if they were in their own home, donning shorts or too-short dresses. Bill was one of the few people who seemed to respect the formalities of Sunday service.

"Your sermon was very moving today, Pastor, and I'll be honest with you, up until this morning I was thinking the whole thing was a bunch of hoaky," Bill said, laughing.

Paul smiled. "And why was that?"

"Well, you know, it's hard to trust what you hear sometimes. People can believe all sorts of things when they don't know what's going on or when they're afraid."

"I felt they might be afraid," Paul said, "I hoped only to calm some nerves through God's word."

"Well, I think everyone in that room ought to feel better now after hearing that sermon," Bill said, "You know I was sitting there and listening and the thought popped into my brain that I ought to get my son baptized. You know we never got around to it, Bridgett wasn't all on board when he was born, but I really think I want to now."

"Well, that's fantastic Bill," Paul said.

"I'll run it by Bridgett, though I'm not taking no for an answer this time. And I know it's fast, but I want to do it this afternoon down by the lake, if you're free."

There was nothing Paul liked more about his job than baptisms. It felt an active part of the salvation process. He remembered doing his own son's baptism not a month after taking over as head pastor of the church seventeen years ago. The Humboldts had been hesitant when he asked in November after their baby was born but had promised to consider it. He was glad he could finally turn them around.

“It would be my honor,” Paul said.

“Terrific,” Bill responded, shaking his hand again, “I’ll call the family so we can have some people around, but all that matters is that you and Carver are there. Invite the misses too.”

“Sure thing,” Paul said.

Bill made his way out of the church and Paul continued greeting the congregants. He knew them all by name, what each one did, and what they struggled with. Though there were just under a hundred people in regular attendance, Paul felt the impact he was making as he spoke with them. He was changing their lives a little bit at a time.

As he said goodbye to some of the older women who had been attending Trinity Lutheran longer than he had, he saw in the doorway of the chapel a pale red sundress. Lilian Taylor approached and held out her hand.

“Pastor,” she said.

Since they had last met almost a year ago, Lilian had only come into the church during the most recent Christmas service, which Paul was sure had more to do with tradition than his preaching. He had seized the opportunity to speak with her then, meeting her in the sacristy like old times. But she had reiterated that she didn’t want to see him again and Paul thought that had been the end of their interactions.

However, yesterday, she had stopped by the house to interview Peter for the article in the Fideston News and had been strangely warm to Paul. And now she stood in front of him alone and he wondered if it was the light that had anything to do with her change of heart. He grabbed her hand delicately.

“Bill said Carver’s getting baptized today,” Lilian said.

They held hands for a few beats and Paul felt his skin tingle under her touch.

“It’s true. He just asked me to perform it this afternoon by the lake,” Paul said as she let go, much to his disappointment.

“Good. Then I’ll see you there,” she said, walking past him and out the front doors.

There was something changed in her. He desperately wished to follow her or call her back inside to behind the altar, but he could wait. At the baptism he would speak with her. God’s timing was often slower than his own.

As the last of the congregation exited, Paul locked the front door of the chapel and made his way through the chapel thinking of his times with Lilian before. He reached the sacristy and stripped off his alb, standing naked again for a moment. Very rarely in his adult life did his heart pound against his chest in anxious beats so loud he struggled to hear himself think. He never dared to do it for too long, thinking maybe his wife would find him there, standing like a child waiting to dress again. He knew of all people he did not want *her* to find him like that. She had seen him undressed in the privacy of their bedroom and seeing him here might profane the moment and the space. In the chapel he only thought of Lilian. He wanted her to see him like this again. To think about his chest, his arms, and the line of hair running down from his navel as she sat in the pews and listened to his sermons. He wondered if she had today.

His mind drifted to all the times they had been back there, and the memories brought to his chest a flutter which he hadn’t felt in a while. Slowly, however, he grabbed his underwear and began to cover himself, letting the excitement leave his body. Outside his wife and son were waiting.

The drive home was silent. Paul eyed Peter through the rearview mirror, who was fixed to the trees on the roadside. Claire, eyes closed, and head leaned back, seemed to be warding off one of her headaches, which came at least once a day.

“Bill Humboldt wants me to do Carver’s baptism this afternoon,” Paul finally spoke into the car.

“Oh?” Claire said, unmoving.

“Said he really liked the message today and wanted to get his son’s soul saved,” Paul continued.

“When is it?” she asked.

“This afternoon, but I think it’s a smaller event. For family,” Paul said.

He did not know if it would be, but he thought of Lilian and wanted to avoid his wife being there as well. Paul looked in the rearview mirror again to see Peter.

“Peter? How did you feel about the message today?” he asked, wanting to change the subject so his wife wouldn’t press.

“It was good,” his son said quickly.

Paul wanted to ask more but he was afraid to push Peter further into himself. He also needed his son to take some initiative if he was going to lead. Since Friday Peter had been relatively silent, acting as if the divine blessing was a burden more than anything else. Paul wondered if it had to do with his temptations. Peter didn’t seem to realize that the honor that he was bestowed was bigger than any earthly thing. Not that it would be easy, of course, to carry the torch, but God would not have chosen him if he could not handle it. There was reason in it all.

At home, after Claire retreated to their bedroom saying something about her headache and Peter disappeared to his room as well, Paul ate leftover communion bread at the kitchen table. He often erred on the sign of caution, blessing more bread than necessary in hopeful anticipation that the service would require it. Often, he was left with at least half a loaf of whatever was on sale at the grocery store the preceding night.

He carefully scanned the article that had been planted on the front page of the Fideston News that morning, his eyes hovering on the byline. When Lilian had come yesterday to ask for Peter's perspective on the event, Paul was excited to see her but also excited to hear Peter speak about it. After his son had returned to the house late on Friday night he had been pale and said nothing to Paul as he went to bed. Only when Lilian had come by on Saturday, prompted by questions from the reporter, did Peter say anything at all. By that time word had spread and Paul had heard about the strange happenings in the small grocery store. Everyone had been speculating as to what it might be. Some said a ghost. Most said God, which Paul was grateful for. Some, like Bill Humboldt, had believed it was a farce.

Paul could admit that the whole thing sounded almost unbelievable. Almost. But he was a man of faith. He knew God worked in whatever ways He saw fit. And if He saw fit to show Himself to Paul's son and not to others then that meant something. He could only hope that Peter and the church thought the same.

Near the bottom of the page Paul read his own words that Lilian had used in the article.

"My son was chosen," said Paul Michaels, father of Peter Michaels and local pastor at Trinity Lutheran church. "God has shone upon my family. It truly is a miracle."

He was glad that she had put his quote in there. Initially, Paul had thought that the light might discredit his own authority, that people would begin to erase him from any holy narrative that had to do with the light. But the paper helped and also Paul knew that God would not make Peter go on alone to guide Fideston. Paul would be by his side. And Peter by his.

For a last minute baptism the turnout was fairly large. The crowd of nine, plus Bill, his wife Bridgett, and the baby, had gathered around the lake. As Paul walked towards them, he saw Lilian and Bridgett talking closest to the parking lot. Bridgett and Lilian were cousins and about

the same age, being in the same graduating year as Claire when they were younger. The three had been friendly in the youth group, but Paul had always gotten the feeling that Bridgett did not like him as much as Claire or Lilian. Bridgett held Carver in her arms, who appeared to be sleeping under the warmth of the sunlight, and seemed disappointed as she saw him approach.

“Bridgett, Lilian. And how is this little boy?” Paul asked, reaching down to touch the child’s forehead.

Bridgett pulled away ever so slightly as Paul leaned towards her. He wondered how much choice she got in the matter of her son’s baptism. She rarely went to service even under the pressure of her husband. Paul had talked to Bill about the issue before. He was glad, at least, that Carver was being allowed to do this sacrament.

“I’m glad we could finally get around to this,” Paul said.

Bridgett shifted in the sand.

“Bill was just so inspired by the message today,” she said, “He thought it was time.”

“He’s a smart man,” Paul conceded.

“Could Claire not make it?” Bridgett asked, looking back towards the car.

“She wasn’t feeling well this afternoon, but she was upset she couldn’t come,” he said.

Bridgett scowled and opened her mouth to say something.

“Paul I’ve been meaning to ask,” Lilian butted in, “But is there anything special about a baptism out in the lake rather than in the church.”

Her voice was sweet. Paul thought again of the light and his sermon and debated which softened her heart towards him. He thought it was likely both.

“Well, you know Christ was baptized in the Jordan. It’s not common to do it out here, but I think those who are baptized in a body of water like this have a special connection to God. I was baptized in this lake. Peter too,” Paul said.

Lilian seemed to hang onto his words. Bridgett did not.

“Are we ready?” Bridgett asked, as if hoping Paul would not continue talking more about the sacrament of baptism.

Paul gestured towards the lake and Bridgett began to walk herself and the baby into the small waves that lapped along the pebbles. Bill, who had been talking to a few of the others, noticed them and followed Paul as he waded into the water. They stopped about ten feet in. Paul motioned to Bridgett.

“Would you mind handing me Carver?” he asked.

She was still, looking down at her child as if she were sacrificing him to Paul, but Bill put his hand on her back. She slowly lowered Carver into Paul’s arms.

On the beach, Lilian watched him intently. The nine on the shore gathered around the four in the water and Paul was quiet as he focused on the beauty of the moment. His eyes kept resting on Lilian’s red dress.

“We are honored to baptize Carver Humboldt today,” he began, “so that his soul may enter the kingdom of God. Just like a dove descended upon Christ, the Son of God, so too a light has descended upon us, and we baptize ourselves and commit our souls to the Lord.”

Carver wiggled in Paul’s arms, and he remembered when Peter, as an infant, used to squirm in his arms like he didn’t want to be held. The baby cooed.

“I baptize you Carver Humboldt in the name of the Father. The Son. And the Holy Spirit.”

As he named each person of God he submerged the child, who immediately began to cry. The shoreline cheered and Paul handed Carver back to Bridgett, who wiped off her child's face as if to try to undo the ritual. Lilian's smile from the shore seemed for more than just the child.

As those in the water returned to the land, plans were made to celebrate at the Humboldts' home. Paul politely declined the invitation from Bill and watched as the family members made their way out of the parking lot. At his car he grabbed a towel he had packed and sat halfway in the backseat to dry his legs.

"They really are a beautiful family," Lilian called out from a picnic bench on the edge of the beach.

He had watched her linger as the others drove away.

"Good to see another soul saved," he said.

She stood and walked towards him, leaning on the open car door when she got close. She tilted her face to the sky as if to observe the passing clouds.

About a year ago, Peter had walked in on Paul and Lilian in the sacristy one Wednesday night. Luckily, they had only been talking when his son entered the room and Paul was able to fashion a quick lie about a lost bracelet, but the situation had spooked her. Until then, the two of them had been meeting on and off for years. She had called it off shortly after. And though he'd tried to talk her out of it, he knew she had always wanted more than nights in the church.

"Do you know what Friday was, Paul?" she asked, still looking upwards.

"The night of the light."

"And our twenty-year anniversary." She turned to him. "Don't tell me you don't remember the night."

He did not remember the date but did remember the night of their first meeting in the sacristy. Communion wine. Her body and blood.

“Of course I remember.”

The words seemed to reassure her.

“Well on Friday, I was thinking about you,” she said, “I considered calling but I just wasn’t sure. So, I prayed about it. And then I hear that God had been just down the street. And do you know what I had asked for in my prayer?”

“What?” Paul asked, transfixed as she spoke.

“A sign.”

“For?”

“I remembered how Peter had looked when he came in that night,” she said, “and I thought of that when I prayed. It felt so menial, I guess, but apparently God heard what I was saying and gave me a sign that everything was going to turn out alright.”

Paul knew she was treading dangerous territory, imposing her own will on God. But he had not previously considered the light as more than a sign to his son. Could it not contain more than just that? Could it not be righting wrongs of the past? Lilian seemed to think so. He felt, suddenly, the flutter in his chest again.

“I’ll have to pray about this,” he said softly, but as he spoke, he already knew the answer he would receive.

Peter was at the kitchen table staring at the front page of the newspaper. Claire was probably asleep or lying down in the bedroom, which Paul was grateful for. God appeared to be on his side. As he had driven home from the lake, he had prayed about what Lilian had said, and

his mind kept coming back to Peter. He sensed that his son would need reassurance before Paul could proceed any further with Lilian. It seemed God was giving him that opportunity now.

“Did you see my quote?” Paul asked, sitting down across from his son.

Peter nodded, eyes fixed on the paper and the picture of the blue “Benson’s Grocery and Market” sign in full color below the headline.

“I know I didn’t say it today, but you know I’m proud of you, right?” Paul said.

Peter squirmed in his seat, looking up.

“For what?”

“Well for taking on this responsibility. It is not an easy one, but I know you can handle it.” He was careful as he spoke. “You do know what it requires of you, though, right?”

Peter swallowed and shook his head.

“It requires you to be a man of God. Reflect the desires of God. Spread His word. Set an example. You can do that, right?”

Paul tried to keep his tone light, but he knew his words were anything but. Peter was anxious. Paul cleared his throat, trying to regain his own confidence, but found it diminishing alongside his son’s. He thought of the rumors that he’d heard. It was possible they were just rumors, The Devil’s telephone, but with everything at stake he had to be sure. If his own son was doing what Paul had heard, how would anyone truly respect his spiritual leadership. He opened his mouth to continue forward, to speak his mind, but felt his tongue restricted.

“How would you feel about talking on Sunday?” he managed.

“At church?”

The thought came quickly, but it suddenly seemed perfect. If Peter was on stage, maybe he would feel the pressure of the people to change his ways should they need changing. And

even if the rumors were untrue, his son speaking about the light could only serve to help them. Show the people that their family was chosen by God.

“Yes. Before the sermon. You could talk about your experience, share with the congregation. I would be up there with you of course.”

“What would I say?”

“Well, you would speak with what the Holy Spirit offers you. Explain that the light means your ordination.”

His son flicked his eyes down.

“I don’t know,” Peter said, “It’s...scary.”

Paul felt his heart drop in his chest. He knew how young Peter was and yet God was calling to him. Paul had also been seventeen when he got the call to ministry, deciding to become a youth pastor, though he didn’t have God come down to tell him so. Of course Peter felt more anxiety. But Paul pushed back his hesitation. He was giving Peter the opportunity to lead them. This was God’s will.

“God will give you comfort,” Paul said, quickly, standing and leaving his son alone.

Their bedroom was large, but Claire had filled the space with an assortment of multicolored furniture, plants, and vases. When they had moved in almost two decades ago, she said it felt cold. However, even after they had purchased the soft pink ottoman for the end of their bed or the decorative sheer curtains, Claire still had the same complaint. She had eventually come to the conclusion that because the windows faced north and were mostly blocked by a large oak, no sunlight could get through and warm the space.

She was sitting on the ottoman tying her shoes as he walked in. He sat down on the bed behind her and wondered if she would ask him about the baptism.

“I’m headed to the store,” she said.

She moved to their dresser and began to put on her old silver watch she’d received for her high school graduation—a couple months before they were married.

“The baptism went well,” he said, realizing she wasn’t going to ask.

“I heard,” she said, “Bridgett called just a few minutes ago. She said Bill invited me, though, which I thought was weird since you said it was only for family.”

Though Bridgett and Claire were friends, he thought it odd that she would call. He assumed the baptism party would still be taking place.

“I don’t remember him saying that,” Paul said, “I must’ve missed it.”

“She also said Lilian was there.”

The statement caught him off guard.

“She was. She’s Bridgett’s cousin,” he said.

He realized his tone was defensive and he silently chided himself. Claire resumed putting on the watch. He tried to read her body language but came up blank. He felt uneasy.

“She was at church today, did you notice?” she asked, “It’s been a while.”

“I didn’t,” he lied.

“Her dress was something, like she was trying to make a statement.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

Claire huffed looking down at the dresser in an unmoving stare.

“Bridgett told me Paul,” she said.

“Told you what?” he asked.

“She saw you and Lilian today. Talking at the beach after everyone left.”

Paul felt his heartbeat thunder in his head. He tried to remember the parking lot but all he could recall was Lilian. He stood as if to be ready for whatever was coming next. Claire turned to him, her face steady.

“What did she say?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“What did she say,” he repeated.

“I don’t think that’s the right question,” Claire said, “Don’t you want to know *why* she told me she saw you, Paul? Why her instinct was to call when she saw you alone with another woman?”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Because you’re not a very good liar,” she continued, “Because Bridgett, like everyone, knows that everything you say on Sunday on that pulpit is nothing more than words.”

Paul staggered back at his wife’s sudden outburst. He felt dizzy.

“Those people would not know God without me,” he blurted.

As he said it, he hoped it was true. Hoped Claire was lying. She didn’t know about Lilian. And the church believed in him. In his ministry. They would not come every week if they didn’t. His wife was only speaking out of anger—to undermine him and God. God had shown himself to their family.

“You know what this means, right? For Peter,” she said.

Her quiet rage had turned, now, to sorrow, but his body was tensing even more.

“What do you mean? This doesn’t mean anything for him, Claire,” he said sternly.

She closed her eyes.

“Is he downstairs?” she asked.

“What are you going to tell him Claire?” he demanded, “That I spoke with a woman in a parking lot? That you doubt God’s in our church?”

He suddenly felt that maybe she did know more than she was letting on. He only needed to explain himself, though. She would understand.

She shook her head in pity.

“I’m going to tell him that I love him,” she said, walking out the door.

On Sunday, in the sacristy again Paul stood alone, his cassock in the cabinet beside him. It was colder today, and he felt a slight draft from the vents prick his thighs and arms, causing goosebumps to rise. He examined his body in the mirror, trying to view it from the congregation’s eyes. And then Lilian’s.

He planned to see her that afternoon after service. He had told her on Wednesday about Claire and that, in time, the two of them could be together. She had been happy, of course, though she worried what the church would say. What Claire would say. But Paul knew everything would work for their good.

He had asked John, the youth pastor, to talk to Peter a few days before. Paul had counseled him a couple years ago about the things that Peter was rumored to be tempted by. With Paul’s aid he had left that life behind and was not happily married to another woman in the church who was said to have similar temptations. Paul believed John could show Peter the right path. Already he had reported to Paul that their conversation had gone well on Wednesday, hopefully meaning Paul could let the rumors of his son stay in the past.

All that mattered, then, was Peter. His son, blessed by God, could show the congregation that they were chosen. Peter would understand that Paul only wanted what was best for their

family and that it was Claire who would be the one choosing to leave. It would not be easy on them all, but Paul knew that God was on their side. The light showed that. Peter would too.

Outside the echoes of the people grew and Paul bowed his head. He prayed only that they would understand.

2

Serenity Prayer

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestonetimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Friday, May 22, 2015, 8:49 p.m.

subject: Prayer Box

Phoebes,

Since I saw you at the funeral a couple of weeks ago, I've been wondering whether or not to write. I honestly couldn't tell from our chats about the house and where all the stuff was going to go whether or not you actually wanted to talk, but I feel that it can't hurt to try.

I got the few boxes that you shipped. I don't know if you went through before you sent them, but I've been looking at stuff I haven't seen since high school. Do you remember those prayer boxes that grandma got us, the little wood ones decorated with pom-poms around the edges? I found mine with the blank notepad and little pencil inside. It's weird that Dad kept them (if he even knew they were in the attic with the rest of our shit). I still can't believe he let her give us those. I think she called them meditation boxes when he asked that Christmas. I wonder if he bought that or he just didn't think they could hurt us that much. He was always weird about stuff like that. Anyways, seeing mine just reminded me of how you used yours to hide cigarettes and when we would smoke in the backyard. I kind of miss that. I've taken up smoking again.

I don't know where I'm going with this. I've just been feeling off since coming back from Massachusetts and Dad dying and have been thinking it might be good to catch up soon. Maybe we could call this weekend if you're up for it. Let me know.

Best,

Jewel

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Monday, May 25, 2015, 5:32 a.m.

subject: I saw something

I know you haven't replied yet to my other message, which I'm hoping isn't a sign not to email you again, but something happened. The details are in an article I'm forwarding to you but let me tell you that for the first time in a long time I'm freaking the fuck out. When it happened the first thing I thought was to call you. I don't know why. Maybe it was seeing you just a couple weeks ago. Maybe it was because I was at the grocery store to buy two bottles of wine and AA always talked about telephone therapy. But they said a lot of shit I don't do anymore.

I've been thinking about it all weekend and I still don't know what to make of it. My mind keeps telling me that there's some sort of explanation and yet it seemed so surreal. Supernatural. I'm working on another article about the whole thing now, even though Lilian (my coworker) has

seniority and typically gets the interesting shit. My editor says I have an “insider” look but I feel just as confused as everyone else.

I’ve been doing a lot of research but honestly all of it just makes my head spin. Last night I went on a walk and for whatever reason I walked to the Catholic church down the street. I don’t know why I thought there might be answers there, but there weren’t. I even had the courage to sit quietly in the pews and listen to see if God would tell me anything. I still don’t think I believe in God, but it can’t hurt to check right? Maybe that’s dumb.

I realized walking home that I hadn’t been to a service since Grandma took us when we were little, I think I was like seven or eight which means you would’ve been in kindergarten. Dad was so mad about that. I think he hated her more than he hated God. Why do you think that was? I mean it seemed he hated a lot of things, but when it came to her, he always got terrifying. I don’t remember much about the things he told us of his childhood other than he used to hate going to Mass and that was the reason he never took us. I guess it doesn’t really matter anymore, I’ve just been thinking about him and you a lot since Friday.

Please email soon if you can.

Jewel

Bright Light in Benson's Grocery Store Baffles Shoppers

Lilian Taylor | Sunday May 24th, 2015 | 8:00 a.m.

Friday the 22nd of May was a night to remember for four Fideston locals inside Benson's Grocery and Market. At approximately 9:30 p.m., Juliette Connelly, Peter Michaels, Sebastian Santos, and Miriam Taylor witnessed the inexplicable as the lights flickered off and a singular ball of light reportedly hovered in the air above them.

"It was really terrifying," Taylor said, who was hospitalized after fainting inside the grocery store, sustaining only small bruises. "It still is."

Local officials from Eastern Minnesota Power said that there were no reported outages on the night in question anywhere near the grocery store which is situated on the corner of Church St. and Mills Rd. However, Santos, the grocery clerk and only employee present on the night of the incident, explained that he had to flip the breaker to restart the lights.

Connelly, a reporter at Fideston Times, described the ball as about the size of two fists and glowing a bluish white. "It just hovered for a few seconds above [Michaels'] head and then disappeared.

Michaels described the event similarly, saying that the light "didn't make a sound or move at all, it just sat there above [him] and then just vanished." Michaels didn't expand much on the fact that it appeared directly above him, but others believe this may be more than coincidence.

“My son was chosen,” said Paul Michaels, father of Peter Michaels and local pastor at Trinity Lutheran church. “God has shone upon my family. It truly is a miracle.”

While “miracle” seemed to be the common belief by many of the Fideston residents who heard of the event, what actually occurred is yet to be decided and is leaving everyone wondering what the light means.

This story is unfolding and will be investigated further. Stay tuned for updates.

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Tuesday, May 26, 2015, 6:20 p.m.

subject: Coming to Mass

Hey Phoebes,

Good news! For the story I'm working on I'm flying out to Mass. However, it's primarily for the purposes of going to a swamp to see ghost lights... I know. I've been doing research on the light, and it seems it could be related to stuff seen out there in the Hockomock Swamp.

My editor was hesitant to send me down, but I told him I'd pay for the flight myself if he paid for a night here. He gave me exactly one night so I'm really hoping I find something. Maybe answers to this whole article and light thing. However, the main reason I've decided to go is because I hoped you might be free (don't tell my editor). I'm flying in tomorrow morning to Boston at seven a.m. and was wondering if you wanted to grab breakfast or lunch. I was thinking of that diner with the really good pancakes that Dad would take us to when we went outside the city on the way to Grandma's. Just email me and let me know—I'll be free until the late afternoon.

I think I might also go to Dad's grave. I know we were just there, but I feel like if I'm in the area I should go and pay respects again. I know he would hate the idea of us going to a tombstone and talking to the dirt, but it feels like the right thing to do, like a gut thing. I've been trying to listen

to that more, the gut thing. I think that's another reason why I'm coming to the swamp. It just feels like I should, like I'm going to find something there. Is that crazy?

Miss you,

Jewel

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Wednesday, May 27, 2015, 4:19 p.m.

subject: Re: Coming to Mass

Hey Phoebes,

Sorry we didn't get to see each other today. I'm sure you're really busy with work but I had really hoped we could fit something in.

I'm currently at a motel right now waiting for the sun to come down so I can go into Hockomock. You know I'm only about ten minutes from Grandma's old house? I drove by it on the way in. It's the same ugly green it used to be. I honestly don't remember this area very much, but when I drove along the road bordering the swamp, I think I remembered being there before. There are trails and whatnot and I was thinking we must have walked through there with her once or twice. It would've been so long ago, but it made me happy to think about.

I also saw the church we went to that one time. It looks like I remember it. I wonder if any of Grandma's friends are still there. Probably not. They'd have to be like ninety now. It's strange how places can be the same even after people become memories. I'll let you know how the night goes, but if you're available tomorrow morning I could probably squeeze in coffee before my flight (though thinking you'll answer now feels silly—I'm hoping you even look at this email and I'm not just sending words into the void).

Love you,

Jewel

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Thursday, May 28, 2015, 2:32 a.m.

subject: I'm sorry

I think I saw something again. Well, I know what it was, it was the moon, but the more I think about it the more I think it was another thing altogether. I know that doesn't make sense. It was the moon, of course, but I felt the same thing I did in the grocery store. And I thought of you. I wanted you to be there to see it with me. Or at least be there so I could tell you about it. And now, well I don't know if it's too late to say, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry for leaving. I'm sorry for not really coming back. I'm sorry for not standing up to him. But he terrified me. I know he terrified you too. I shouldn't have left. I was supposed to take care of you, but I don't think I knew how. I wish I could go back and change it. I shouldn't have left. Please email or call me. I miss you.

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Friday, May 29, 2015, 8:45 p.m.

subject: I'm finished

Hey Phoebe.

I finished my article today and it's being printed for distribution tomorrow. My editor liked it, but he's putting it under the "opinion" label. I'll forward it to you when it's out.

Tonight, after I submitted everything, I went back to the grocery store. There's been a lot of foot traffic there, especially at night. I think people are hoping the light happens again. And if I'm being honest, I do too. If only for a moment. I don't know why, but when I saw the light that night, I prayed. I don't even know to whom or what, but I prayed. I prayed for peace or something like that though it wasn't really words strung out. Just a feeling, really.

When I was in the swamp I kind of prayed again, but it felt so silly. If you don't believe in God, who are you supposed to pray to? Maybe yourself. Maybe to the people you love. I don't know if that makes any sense. Since the swamp that gut feeling I've been following keeps leading me to pray to something. Anything. But I don't know how.

Those bottles of wine that I bought last week have been sitting on my counter but last night I finally poured them out in the backyard. I didn't go to Dad's grave like I said I might, but I don't think I needed to. He's down in the earth with Grandma and the wine.

The Light

Opinion | Juliette Connelly | 30th May 2015

Five blocks from town hall on quiet Church St., a little grocery store lights up surrounding houses with its iconic blue sign—Benson’s Grocery and Market. Only those who live on the block shop here, mainly when getting essentials during late night errands or snacks when other stores are closed. On a typical night there are no more than five or six shoppers in the tiny supermarket, and such was the case on Friday, May 22nd when four individuals found themselves witnessing history.

The miracle that happened in the small-town grocery store was officially reported on Sunday, May 24th by this paper and the event has been baffling Fideston residents since. In order to clear up some of this confusion, I embarked on a week-long sleuth in hopes of uncovering the mystery a little more so that readers may understand the full story of what happened in Benson’s Grocery that night.

I start with a statement to inform readers that I was in fact among the four in Benson's on said Friday and being an eyewitness to the event has been a new experience in my career as a journalist. I am writing this account from the perspectives of those who were able to see the light, those who may have particular insights into what it could’ve been, and my own involvement in the event.

Barry and Anna Valer live at 1847 Church Street, catty corner to the Benson’s Grocery and Market and on Friday, May 22nd, were watching TV in their home. Quaint and cozy, Mr. and Mrs. Valer’s residence does not possess much wall space. Their living room is bordered by the newly remodeled kitchen, a hallway opposite that, one blank wall, and finally the wall containing the front door and

a bay window. This window looks out onto the street and has a relatively unobstructed view of Benson's Grocery and Market, save a small TV propped up by a coffee table. Their sofa, a green and red flower-patterned loveseat, faces the window and TV.

On Friday, as an episode of Law and Order concluded, Mr. Valer receded into the kitchen for a late-night snack while out the bay window Mrs. Valer watched the bright lights that sometimes keep her awake at night flicker out. Knowing the store normally closes half an hour later, Mrs. Valer stood and peered out onto the darkened street to see if she could see anything when a call from her husband pulled her away. Though simply a request to help open a pickle jar, the call narrowly kept Mrs. Valer from seeing what may have been a miracle. She graciously walked to the kitchen and helped her husband.

Upon returning to the window both the Valers saw the light of the grocery store turn back on and ten minutes later an ambulance come to take away Miriam Taylor. Mrs. Valer said a silent prayer that the local school counselor was alright, wondering what on earth could have taken place.

What Mrs. Valer informed me about that night is assuring. Except for a pickle jar intermission, Mrs. Valer seeing the lights go out at the store from her bay window is similar to the events that I witnessed that night. The lights did in fact go out around 9:30 p.m. just moments before the light appeared.

But the question still remains—what was a ball of light doing inside the grocery store? Was this a singular event or have other similar things happened before?

Waynesville City College, just forty minutes from Downtown Fideston on State Highway 13, currently enrolls over three thousand local students and has almost a hundred professors teaching

each semester. One of those professors is Dr. Matthew Stern, a religious studies professor and scholar of ancient European mythologies.

Stern's office is situated in a small building alongside the quadrangle of the college, partially underground. One must descend into his office where the only bit of sunlight comes from the sliver of a window near the top of the room. His walls are decorated with pagan images and paintings, immersing any visiting students in a world of nature and the divine. Stern welcomed me in and handed me a copy of his book, *Lights and Lore*, which explores the phenomenon of will-o'-the-wisps—a common folkloric light in cultures across the world.

"They're really quite diverse," Stern said, speaking of the will-o'-the-wisps, "In terms of folklore and where they appear. Western Europe, the United States, Southeast Asia. Everyone is fascinated with these lights."

Stern explained that his research had included ethnographic studies in Scotland where he was able to see some of the lights himself on a tour with local guides. "It was quite amazing. It didn't move much, just flickered a little and then disappeared after a while."

I explained to him that his research caught my eye as it related to the phenomenon in the Benson's Grocery store. After filling him in on the details, Stern seemed interested to weigh in.

"Well, I haven't heard of will-o'-the-wisps happening indoors before, but I can't say that it's impossible. More often than not it's seen in bogs or other marshlands, like those of Pennsylvania or Massachusetts. That's why many people believe that it's some sort of natural gaseous phenomenon rather than spirits."

However, Stern also made it clear that there is very little evidence for any one explanation as the event is not widely studied. He informed me that while some believe the event can be caused by

ignited gases in swamps, others attribute the lights to something akin to lightning. “There is really so much we don’t understand about so many natural processes, so I wouldn’t discount them at all.”

I asked Stern what he personally believed the lights that he had studied seemed to be. “It really could be several things. I think what is more important is that will-o’-the-wisps have been a source of so much fantastic mythology, folklore, and culture really. We all believe different things don’t we, but that’s what makes these things so interesting.”

After my conversation with Dr. Stern, I decided that I would search out the lights he described myself. If such an occurrence was real and I could see it, it might provide better insight into what happened here in small-town Minnesota.

In the Hockomock swamp, there are thousands of acres of protected wetlands. Situated in the Bridgewater Triangle, an area in eastern Massachusetts known for paranormal sightings, the Hockomock swamp is where I decided I was most likely to see the “ghost lights.”

At a spot off the beaten path, I set up my camera, a chair, and takeout breakfast-for-dinner waiting for the sun to set and any number of strange sights to begin. Along with bear spray as precautionary protection against wildlife, I settled into a small patch of grass overlooking a stagnant body of water. Around me was a fair amount of tree coverage, but not so much as to completely block out the stars that trickled through the leaves above. The moon was just over half full, illuminating the area while a chorus of frogs croaked together in unison and vibrated the air—a comforting presence in the dark.

Around one in the morning, after a quiet few hours of tense waiting, the moon had just disappeared behind the trees. As it darkened, I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and saw a light in the distant part of the marsh. My body froze and I waited for the light to move, thinking that if I made any

motion, I might scare it away. As I crept towards my camera and lined up the lens with the distant glow, I realized suddenly that my exhaustion was getting the better of me and that the light was only the last reflection of the setting moon in the water.

I decided to leave the marsh and though the only thing I encountered that night was a skunk on the way back to my car, I learned something interesting. The human mind is a powerful thing. Sitting in the Hockomock Swamp alone in the dark I thought it very possible that I was experiencing what generations have claimed to. There was something religious, otherworldly, in the reflection of the moon. Something that reminded me of the light inside Benson's.

My final interview was back in Fidelity the following day, with one of the other three observers in Benson's Grocery—Peter Michaels. Michaels is one of seventy-three eleventh graders at Fidelity High, and he spends most of his days playing on the tennis team, reading, or helping his father, Pastor Paul Michaels, around Trinity Lutheran Church.

I sat down with Michaels on Thursday afternoon after he returned home from tennis practice and asked him his own opinions on the light. "I'm not sure what it was in the moment," Michaels responded, "but I definitely felt something else was there. Both beautiful and terrifying."

Michaels says that recovering from the interaction has been difficult in his personal life, though he did not expand much more on the topic. When asked what his present understandings of the event are, he declined to respond.

Further questioning didn't yield any new information for the facts of the case other than Michaels making clear the supernatural effect the light had on him. "I just think that this was something you read about in stories, like in the Bible. Not things that actually happen to you. But people don't seem to really understand that."

I reached out to the other two individuals in the store on May 22nd, Miriam Taylor and Sebastian Santos, who both declined to be interviewed. However, conversing with Michaels reaffirmed to me that even us who saw the light are struggling to make sense of it all.

So what was the light in the Benson's? Upon further investigation into the physical explanations, it could still be a number of things. Randomly ignited gas from a gas leak. An area of electrically charged particles similar to that found in lightning. A group hallucination of four people at the same time. A trick of the light from the moon. All these situations are possible and though we would like to try, there is no definitive way of knowing what really happened on the night of the 22nd of May.

What I can say is this: four people saw something, myself included, and what we witnessed will live in our brains forever. My interviews and experiences have pointed me to the conclusion that there was something beautiful and mysterious that night that we may never understand. A ball of light etched in our mind's eye, refusing to be known.

from: **Phoebe Connelly** <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

to: Juliette Connelly <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

date: Saturday, May 30, 2015, 4:27 p.m.

subject: Re: I'm sorry

Jewel,

I read your article and genuinely think that if it had been anyone else who wrote it I wouldn't have believed it.

I am going to be honest. I've been re-reading your emails all week and been deciding whether or not to call you or just write back. But I need to let you know that you're not going crazy.

The day you called and told me Dad died I went to a synagogue down the street and asked a woman inside if they prayed for people. Death makes you do weird things. Now I have to walk a different way to work because I'm afraid the woman at the synagogue might see me and ask me to come in. Robin says that therapy would help, but that's what you get for marrying a psychiatrist, I guess. If you think that would be good for you go for it, but I find other things do the trick. I wouldn't blame you for drinking.

Yes, I remember the prayer box and I remember smoking in the backyard with you. Yes, I remember the church that we went to with Grandma and how all the old ladies used to pinch my cheeks. Yes, I remember the swamp. We walked there after the church service and let out all the

energy we had pent up from sitting in those pews. I remember running circles around Grandma trying to get away from a handful of mud that you chased me with. I remember thinking that Dad was going to be mad about us getting our nice dresses so dirty. But he was just angry at Grandma for taking us to church in the first place.

I don't know why I didn't tell you this, but a few days before he died, he got a priest to come give him his last rites. He told me not to ask questions about it. Robin says a lot of people turn to religion when they don't know what to do. It seems hypocritical. Especially the way he used to talk to Grandma when she tried to get us to do God stuff. But he was dying, and you don't call your dad a hypocrite if it might be the last thing you say to him. He was praying one of the last times I saw him. He was on the fucking hospital bed eyes closed, mouth moving like a crazy person. I thought he might be talking in his sleep so I sat down as quiet as I could and heard him muttering something about the two of us. When he opened his eyes and saw that I was there he turned bright red and started acting all weird. I tried to pretend I didn't notice. I've never seen him so uncomfortable.

I also need you to know I forgive you. I know this is probably something we should talk about in person, but I know you weren't that much older than me. Neither of us knew what to do. After you left for college, I was so angry at you for leaving me alone with him. And then later when you told me you were in AA, even though we had always sworn not to drink because of Dad and what it did to him, well that was the nail in the coffin. Don't be mad at me. I had so much rage and I never knew where to put it.

Phoebe

from: **Juliette Connelly** <jconnelly@fidestontimes.com>

to: Phoebe Connelly <sevenagainstphoebes@gmail.com>

date: Saturday, May 30, 2015, 5:35 p.m.

subject: Re: I'm sorry

Phoebe,

I appreciate you responding and I'm going to be honest—I needed it. Since coming back from Massachusetts I've been wishing that I had been there with you and Dad when he passed.

You know, a couple years ago he called me, and I didn't pick up. I rarely did when I saw it was him. I think it must've been right after Grandma died and he asked me if I would come home to Massachusetts for Christmas like when I was in college. I almost called him back to yell at him, but I didn't know how to explain that he was the reason we never wanted to be there. I never responded to him. It's all so far away now. I know I can't go back and call him. But I think Dad was praying about that. I don't know why I think that, but I know he probably wanted me there and I think he could've been praying for a way to make amends. Maybe that's optimistic—thinking he had enough heart to feel bad about how he treated us—but I'd like to believe it. Just so I can find a way to move on.

I love you.

Jewel

Martyrdom of the Forgiven

Work. Home. Sleep. Work. Home. Take care of Dad. Work. Mass. Work. Wonder whether or not this is how the rest of life is going to go. Work. Talk to Dad and hope for an apology. Receive silence.

At the register, each *beep* was a word in his head. Before, he spent his time thinking of philosophy and architecture. Descartes, Aquinas, Aristotle, maybe not in that order. But now each methodic movement of groceries from this side of him to that side just brought to the forefront of his mind nothing more than steps. Tasks. Memories of the days behind him and ahead. Anything to keep him from thinking too much about the store and what fruits were on sale this week.

Work. Beep. Sleep. Beep. Home. Beep. Peter.

He wished all the *beeps* were Peter. The one thing he liked about being back. One of the only queer men that Sebastian knew of in town beside his ex-boyfriend John, who was now married to a woman, and the man with the gold tooth who came into the grocery store at least four times a week and was old enough to be on social security.

Sometimes Sebastian could not believe his luck at having found Peter upon returning to Fideston and thinking his life was over. He was sure there had to be other queer people somewhere in town, hiding like he had been, but Peter just happened to be the only person in town who Sebastian had his eye on when he came back from Santa Barbara. They also happened to get along really well and Sebastian also happened to love the smell of his hair. And his smile when he was trying not to laugh. And his laugh.

It was true Peter was seventeen and Sebastian was going to be twenty in a month, but it wasn't Sebastian's biggest romantic age gap. John had almost been nineteen when Sebastian was fifteen and finding himself his freshman year of high school. Age was power, at least for John, and Sebastian refused to let the same be true about himself now. The thought that one day Peter might look at their relationship the way Sebastian viewed his first, filled him with a preemptive sense of remorse.

"You okay hun?"

Sebastian looked up at the woman whose groceries he was scanning. He had forgotten she was there, even though he was holding a bag of grapes she had picked out and was typing in the code at that moment. She seemed familiar.

"Yeah," he said, nodding.

"How is everything?"

She said it like she meant it, and Sebastian realized that she was one of the grandmas from Sunday school at Lady of Guadalupe. He had seen her just last week at Wednesday Mass. They all knew how he had had to drop out of UC Santa Barbara in order to come home and take care of his dad.

"As good as it can be," Sebastian said, grabbing from the belt the various foods rolling towards him.

"You'll get back soon honey."

As she said it she stiffened. They both knew what it meant. She opened her mouth to apologize, or so he thought, but closed it before saying anything more about it. They stood in silence.

"Is it true what happened?" she asked, probably trying to change the topic.

He knew what she was talking about, but pretended he didn't. She was the seventh person to ask about it today.

“What?”

She leaned in slightly and lowered her tone as if it were a secret the two of them were sharing.

“The light?”

She looked at him expectantly. He had been there that night but he hadn't seen it. He'd been in the back checking for apples when the lights went out and he had tripped over a pallet. By the time he got to the breaker in the back room, whatever had happened out in the storefront was over.

“So they say,” he said.

She seemed to read that he was not interested in expanding. He finished checking out her groceries in silence. As she left with her bags, she muttered a quick goodbye.

It was not the first time that he wished he had more to say but the truth was he had missed the whole thing. The paper had said he'd been there and yet he felt like he was just as lost as everyone who wandered in and tried to envision a miracle under the water-stained ceiling tiles. However, more importantly, Peter had been there, supposedly coming into the store as Sebastian went into the back. When Sebastian had returned quickly after turning the light back on he saw his boyfriend leaving. To no avail, Sebastian had been trying to talk to Peter for over a week about what happened last Sunday, the events which he had been running over in his head every waking hour.

While his parents had been at Mass, Sebastian had invited Peter over for lunch. He knew his parents had intended to go to the Feast of the Lady of Guadalupe after service and that they'd

be gone long enough so that Peter and he could spend some quality time together. Between Peter's school and Sebastian's job they eked out hours here and there to make it work but they both dreamed of the time when they could spend their days together.

"I'll make you fried tacos. I got *cotija* at Benson's," Sebastian said as Peter sat down at the kitchen table.

Peter sat stiff as if he were ready to jump up at any moment, but relaxed bit by bit as Sebastian began to prep the food.

"You know, if you come out to California with me, you can get actual Mexican food that you don't have to cook yourself. There's this taco place down on State open late and they have the best *birria*. I'll take you when we're out there."

They talked like that sometimes, about both of them going back. However, each time, a prick in his chest reminded Sebastian of the things that needed to happen for him to travel back across the country.

"You said you went kayaking right?" Peter asked.

"Yeah, in the marina."

"Could we do that too?"

Sebastian nodded. Peter asked often about Santa Barbara and Sebastian loved to share. His boyfriend was the only one who seemed to care about everything back in California and acted like it still existed. He felt Peter staring at him as he began to warm the tortillas on the stove. He knew Peter liked cooking, but Sebastian refused to let him make Mexican food. On one of their first dates Peter had offered to make him a quesadilla and Sebastian had suffered through the burnt flour tortilla and unmelted cheddar.

“You wanna help?” Sebastian asked after a moment of debating, knowing Peter would stare like that until the food was done.

Peter nodded, his smile widening. Sebastian loved when he got like that.

“Start crumbling the *cotija* and I’ll get the other stuff ready.”

Peter began to work on the small white wheel in front of him. Sebastian watched his hands carefully break the cheese apart.

“They have food trucks, right?” Peter asked, “In SB?”

Sebastian also loved when Peter called it “SB” like he was already a local.

“Yeah,” he said.

“We should open one. ‘Bastian and Peter’s Taco-stop.’” Peter said, looking up at him.

Sebastian shook his head. “Let’s see how these tacos turn out first and we can decide if your name is on the sign.”

Peter rolled his eyes and resumed crumbling the cheese. They worked in silence side-by-side, letting only the sound and smell of the hot oil fill the kitchen. When he diced the onion, he showed Peter how to do them small and even, guiding his hands so he wouldn’t hurt himself. He understood why Peter wanted to start a food truck with him. He could do this forever.

When they finished, he watched Peter’s expression melt as he ate. He waited until Peter was done eating before he leaned over the table and kissed him. Peter turned red. He still flushed every time Sebastian did something like that, but Sebastian understood. It took him a while to get over the fact that he was allowed to do things like that, and God wouldn’t come down to smite him in that moment or a group of homophobic churchgoers wouldn’t break down the door and ostracize them.

And then he had said it. He hadn't been planning to, but the words slipped out and he knew it was the truth. But Peter's expression had suddenly turned from embarrassment to shame. As if naming their actions were worse than any action itself. As if calling it love was reifying something bigger than a mistake.

"I have to get home," he had said, quickly.

And Sebastian had frozen and watched as Peter got up in his shame. And had said nothing as he left.

"How are you today?"

Sebastian blinked out of his memory. Again, he found himself looking at a gold tooth. The old man was grinning and holding a pack of beers.

"Good, and you?"

The response was automatic. Forced. Sebastian scanned the beer.

"Better now that I've gotten to see you."

The comment was more direct than usual. Normally, the old man only stared for a moment too long or brushed Sebastian's hand as he bagged the groceries.

"What was your name again?" Sebastian asked.

He had used that trick before with creepy guys back in SB. The gold tooth disappeared behind dry lips. The old man had introduced himself nearly every time he visited for the last couple weeks.

"It's Basil," he said.

Sebastian nodded.

Dinner. *Gorditas*. Just cheese no chicken because it was too expensive even with his ten percent discount at Benson's. His mom sat beside him cutting into the *masa* for his dad. Smaller

than bite-size pieces because his dad could hardly chew anymore. His speaking was off and on. Sometimes Sebastian could understand him. Other times he just nodded and smiled.

“Work... good?” his dad asked, like he wasn’t being spoon-fed by his wife—like everything was how it used to be.

Sebastian gave a slight nod. Everything happened quickly. They knew about the Parkinson’s a couple years ago, but it had gotten so much worse. His dad had just been let go from his job in October, already being moved a year ago from the warehouse to paperwork and finally on disability which barely covered their mortgage. The rest fell to Sebastian’s mom and her daycare aide salary which didn’t quite fill in the gaps, thus cutting Sebastian’s time at his university shortly after he began his second year. At 40 hours a week, Benson’s just covered things.

His mother gave his dad a bite. Sebastian kept himself from screaming at the two people across from him. He didn’t know why he wanted to. His dad held the food in his mouth before swallowing. He tried to smile when his son looked at him, but his lips were trembling. Shiny white teeth. His dad had always taken care of himself.

“You get paid on Friday, right?” his mother asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Electricity is due.”

“Ok.”

His dad coughed and the half-chewed *masa* fell in pieces on the table.

The fluorescent lights were the worst part of the job. They hurt his eyes. He was beginning to feel nocturnal; awake all night, sleep until his shift at 2pm, and then do it again. The first five hours always went faster than the last three, primarily because fewer people did their

shopping after seven and partially because after the sun went down Sebastian lost all track of time under the white and greenish lights. They buzzed. Or at least the one above the register did and he tried to block it out with the *beeps* of the scanner.

“It’s Basil.”

Gold tooth.

“I’m sorry?” Sebastian asked.

“You keep forgetting my name. It’s Basil. Like the plant.”

The man wasn’t holding any groceries. The store was mostly empty.

“Can I help you with something?” Sebastian asked.

“You were here weren’t you. The night that God decided to go grocery shopping.”

Basil smiled at his own joke.

“That’s what they say,” Sebastian said.

For the first time ever he wished someone would come up to the register just so he could have an excuse to do something besides talk to the old man in front of him.

“What do *you* say?” Basil asked.

“What?”

“What do you think it was?”

“Why does it matter?” Sebastian asked.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“Well as one of the four witnesses you’re like the gospel writers who knew Jesus,” Basil said, “So what do you say?”

“Luke didn’t know Jesus.”

“What?”

“Matthew, Mark, and John probably did, but Luke only knew Paul.”

Sebastian had taken a course on the Bible at school last year and imagined for a moment the look of pride on his professor’s face if he were there. Basil did not look quite as amused.

Sebastian had been asked by the reporter and others about what he thought about it. Strangely, the one person who didn’t ask was his mother. He thought maybe she believed it was all made up or if it was real, it didn’t matter because his father was still in a wheelchair and if God hadn’t come down to perform miracles, then she should keep praying for one. He wasn’t sure either way. What he did know was that the lights went out and he knew what Peter had said in the newspaper. He tried to talk to him about the whole thing over the weekend but received no response.

If he was honest with himself, he didn’t care what it was, but nobody seemed particularly interested in hearing that answer. He wondered what the old man in front of him wanted to hear.

“We’re closing soon, so if there isn’t anything I can help you with I’m gonna have to ask you to leave,” Sebastian said.

Basil opened his mouth to say something, but instead turned and walked to the front doors. Sebastian felt his body relax slightly, but he was thinking of Peter again and wished he could call him.

Dinner again. This time frozen pizzas. His mom helped out at the late-night women’s group on Tuesdays and left Sebastian and his dad to fend for themselves. Sebastian stood in front of the oven waiting for the pizza to finish. Seven minutes left.

He had texted Peter again. Still no response and he’d decided not to try again. Maybe Peter just needed space. Though a text would be nice.

A loud sound from behind him broke him from his thoughts. Sebastian ran to the living room where he saw his dad crumpled on the floor between his wheelchair and the fireplace. Sebastian stooped down to pick him up. His dad was silent as he maneuvered him off the hearth.

“Why’d you do that?” Sebastian’s tone was angrier than he wanted it to be.

His dad looked at the mantelpiece. Sebastian followed his eyes and saw the picture they had of the two of them at the pier in Santa Monica for Sebastian’s fourteenth birthday. When Sebastian had fallen in love with California and began looking for any way he could go back. Back then—before, though not long before, Sebastian knew who he was and who he liked. Before his parents knew. Sebastian grabbed the picture and handed it to his dad who accepted it with a shaky hand.

“You’re... happy,” his dad mumbled, pointing at the past.

“Yeah, that trip was a lot of fun,” Sebastian said.

His dad nodded. He looked like he wanted to say more but did not want to stumble through the words. He couldn’t imagine how frustrating it was to not be able to make the sounds you wanted to. Sebastian stood awkwardly as his dad said nothing but stared at him.

“Now?” his dad asked.

Sebastian nodded.

“Yeah, I’m happy dad.”

But they both knew he was lying. His dad wasn’t mentally gone. He knew what he had left behind in Santa Barbara and why. A future for a past.

“Don’t...be mad,” he mumbled again, his eyes getting watery.

Sebastian opened his mouth to say he wasn’t, but the oven beeped in the kitchen, and he turned to get their food before he had to lie.

On Wednesdays he worked midday shifts so he could go to Weekday Mass by eight. His mother said if he didn't go on Sunday he should at least go during the week, which Sebastian only did because he loved his mother and hated to see her more upset than she was most of the time. Also, less people were there on Wednesdays. Since Sebastian had been a kid the church had dwindled from over a hundred to now just forty. Most had moved, some had died, and a few had converted. Trinity Lutheran, the larger church in the area, had a much younger crowd. Peter had invited him before, but Sebastian knew his parents wouldn't approve.

Lady of Guadalupe was across town. It took him thirty minutes to walk there, but he was late because his manager had asked him to help restock produce before he left and said he couldn't leave until it was done.

In the sanctuary there were less than twenty now and Sebastian knew all of them. The grandma from the store was one of them and she smiled as he walked in and took a seat next to his mother and dad in the back row where there was room for the wheelchair. His mother did not break her view from the altar. His dad grinned.

The priest's voice resounded around him, but he was fixated on the half-nude Christ in the Apse. Ever since he was a teenager, Sebastian had been fixated on that crucifix and the way in which Christ was draped. The cloth around his waist hung precariously. Sebastian had seen men like this, when they were undressing in front of him. The thought almost made him laugh. Jesus recalling to his mind the very sins he had committed. He wondered what his parents would think if he said these things out loud.

They knew, of course, but they chose not to *know*. When he had told his mother a few years ago, in high school, she treated it like confession.

"God forgives those who repent," she had said.

He didn't have the heart to tell her that admittance was not repentance. He chose not to mention it again and only once after did his mother ask how he was dealing with temptation to which Sebastian said nothing.

His father had never said anything directly, but right when Sebastian started school, he'd asked how the churches in California were responding to what the new Pope had said in July.

"They're just trying not to judge," was all Sebastian had said, skirting the truth.

The papal comments had been controversial at home, but the California Catholics were a lot different. The church he had attended hung pride flags on the columns outside and the priest there had started with an "all are welcome" announcement. It was there he began to question why he left God back in Fideston. But now he wondered if God had chased him all the way to the west coast and was looking for him out by the Pacific, because here, looking at the cross, he saw only a man dying.

"I'm sorry," Basil said.

The store was quiet, empty as the clock passed 9:30. Tonight was the first night that people did not gather by the candy to see if the light would reappear at the same time it had almost a week ago. Right now, it was just him and gold tooth.

"I think we started off on the wrong foot," the old man continued, "It's just that I get a little nervous around gorgeous boys."

Basil smiled and Sebastian felt his chest tighten. He realized once again the man didn't have any groceries.

"What are you doing after you get off work?" Basil asked.

"I've got to go home. Help my mom with dinner," Sebastian said.

"At ten pm?"

“We eat late.”

“We could go for a drink. Just real quick.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“I got some bourbon in my car. We can sit out there for a while.”

Sebastian studied him. The old man was trying to be nonchalant, but there were hints of desperation in the way he was speaking. Something else too.

“I’ll pay you,” he blurted, after Sebastian said nothing.

“I’m sorry?”

“Listen, I’m just asking you to sit and talk for a while. I could use the company.”

The something else was hope. Sebastian suddenly felt guilty in an odd way. Seeing the lonely man in front of him.

“How much?”

“How much did you make being at work today?” Basil asked.

“About eighty bucks.”

“I’ll give you eighty for every fifteen minutes you spend with me.”

Sebastian felt his heart skip a beat. He was expecting the man would maybe offer eighty for the night. He wondered if the gold tooth was real gold. The clock was almost at 9:40.

“Give me twenty minutes to close and I’ll meet you out there, alright?”

“I’ll be awaiting.”

He watched Basil exit with a confidence that he was sure the old man had not felt in a while and strangely thought of Peter. He remembered him rushing out of Sebastian’s kitchen as if he were ashamed to be with him. He pushed the thought aside and began to close the store hoping the old man hadn’t been lying about the bourbon.

The car smelled like cigarettes. The alcohol burned.

“So, you’re sure you didn’t see it?” Basil asked after they had sat for a while waiting for the whiskey to do its work.

Sebastian shook his head.

“That’s unfortunate. I was hoping to have a night with a saint,” Basil said.

“What?”

“The blessing from God. That would make you a saint.”

“No, it wouldn’t. You need more than just one miracle,” Sebastian clarified, recalling Sunday School and a presentation he did in fifth grade on St. Joan of Arc.

“Eh, I never did well listening at Mass.”

Sebastian looked at him with suspicion but took a drink and felt the whiskey soften him.

The shadows of the parking lot obscured his face. He passed the flask.

“You go to Mass?”

“Sometimes. Other times the Lutheran church. Some days I’m too drunk to go to either.”

“Why do you go back and forth?”

“My father was Catholic. My mother Presbyterian. They didn’t convert for each other, so I got to pick which place I went every week. I guess the habit stuck.”

“Well, I wouldn’t ever choose Mass,” Sebastian said.

Basil passed the flask back.

“I know why you came back,” the old man said, as if not hearing him.

It wasn’t surprising. Everyone knew about his dad. He took a long drink.

“My advice. Get out as soon as you can,” he continued.

“It’s not exactly that simple,” Sebastian argued.

“Why?”

“My mom needs me here and...”

“And what?” Basil asked.

Sebastian’s mind drifted to Peter. He realized though that he could no longer think of him as a reason to stay. He hadn’t talked to Peter in almost two weeks. However, the idea of returning to Santa Barbara without him also felt impossible. He wondered if he could ever look at the beach again without wondering where their food truck could set up shop.

“There’s not much more important than your future,” Basil said, “I know that. I didn’t leave and look at me now.”

He laughed again, but this time less enthusiastically. Sebastian drank. Outside one of the streetlamps flickered slowly between off and on. They sat in the quiet.

“Sometimes I think it would all be so much easier if my dad would die,” Sebastian said into the car.

He waited for a reaction, but Basil only chuckled and motioned for the flask.

“Who hasn’t?” he asked.

Sebastian passed it. It was almost empty. He watched in the dark as the old man finished it off. Sebastian was silent for a while. He didn’t know what he had expected to happen when he said it aloud.

“What?” Basil asked, inspecting him, “If you want someone to tell you to feel guilty you better go to a priest.”

He sucked off the last drop of bourbon from the lip of the flask and grunted in dissatisfaction. Sebastian wasn’t sure what he wanted. He only knew that speaking the words

didn't relieve the pit in his stomach like he thought it would. He thought of all the things his dad couldn't say.

"I already feel guilty," Sebastian conceded.

"Guilt's easy," Basil said, screwing the cap on the flask on and tucking it into the pocket of the car door, "Everybody feels guilty about something."

Sebastian thought of Peter leaving his house on that Sunday, head bent downwards like he was looking to his eternal condemnation. He wondered if there was a difference between that and what Sebastian felt every time they talked of returning to Santa Barbara like his dad wouldn't be dead or dying alone a thousand miles away.

"You too?" Sebastian asked.

"Eh, I don't know. I've done a lot of shit I've felt bad for, but it's different from what I feel bad for nowadays."

"Which is?"

"For letting guilt be my penance for so damn long."

The house was empty. His phone was dead. He called his mother's cell on the landline.

"Sebastian?"

"Mom, where are you?"

Silence.

"Mom?"

"Your father fell."

In front of the fireplace the picture was face down on the stone.

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know. Come to the hospital."

He hung up and stumbled to the hearth. Kneeling, he picked up the picture and stared at his childhood smile.

He sat with his mom in the hospital room as she prayed, his dad asleep on the bed. The remnants of his drunkenness were pushed away as he had called Basil. Without hesitation, the old man had agreed to take Sebastian to the hospital after he had asked. The car ride had been silent and neither of them said anything when he got out and handed the cash back to Basil.

“You should be praying too,” his mother said, finishing a long stretch of prayer.

Sebastian looked at her reddened eyes. Her tone was prickled with anger, but he knew she was only scared. He tilted his gaze to the floor and said nothing. His father’s heart *beeped* in the room moving him from this breath to that one. He listened as his mother began to whisper her prayers again. He was aware, suddenly, that it was *his* silent prayers that did this. He looked at his father as if he were sleeping and could not help but remember every passive wish he had made that this would all be over one way or another. That his dad would’ve fallen months ago reaching for that picture.

He wondered if a prayer now would undo all of it. He felt that it wouldn’t, but carefully, he slipped onto the floor and knelt at the bedside. The ground was cool. Up close, the pallid lips of his father made his heart ache. He wondered if he would see him grin again.

“He never stopped smiling,” Sebastian said, quietly, “Since coming back. He was always so...happy.”

From behind him he heard his mother stop her Hail Mary’s.

“He thought if you saw him happy you might be too,” she said after a moment, “He knew how much you left behind. And he was grateful.”

Sebastian turned to her.

“Did he say that?” he asked.

Her face was sad as if she knew something he could never understand.

“He couldn’t *mijo*. He cried the night you came home and every night since. No father wants to be the reason for his son’s unhappiness. He couldn’t bring himself to say it all, but he felt it. God knows he felt it.”

Sebastian imagined his father lying in bed with tears in his eyes and was filled with sorrow. Shame of being the reason his father lay awake at night. Of his own anger. He felt it grow bigger inside of him, slowly covering each of his memories as he squeezed his eyes shut. Laying his head on his dad’s hand he listened to the long breaths, slow and deep like forgiveness.

In The Desert

They were lying in the dark inches apart as they had been for over three decades, and yet for the last two nights Russell felt miles from his wife. Even here, when he thought of reaching for her he felt that she was not there, but back in the grocery store picking up coffee and milk.

“I love you,” he whispered into the dark, thinking maybe she might be awake.

Silence.

“I love you too,” she said after a second.

They had said it countless times, enough times that it started to lose its meaning, but tonight it felt different. Felt as if they were somewhere uninhabitable. He considered laying his hand on her head, which he used to do to wake her up softly from weekend afternoon naps but kept his arms resting by his side in the quiet.

He met her on a Wednesday, which had no real importance other than the fact that it was where the two of them found themselves in a California desert dive bar at three in the afternoon. Russell had seen the bar on the drive into town nearly four weeks ago but had not yet been in since he started basic training.

He had just deserted. His sergeant had used that word when Russell had asked to leave and been denied. Sergeant Collins said should he choose to abandon the base; it would be considered a crime if he didn't return. It sounded drastic to him, but he needed to leave because two thousand miles away his brother had called from jail asking to be bailed out, and Russell was the only one who would pick up his phone calls. This reasoning clearly didn't matter to

Russell's superior, but he left anyway and didn't know if he would be back. He had snuck out that morning and packed his way down the road to the nearest payphone.

He barely noticed her at first, but she held the door open for him as they escaped the sweltering sun and ducked into the shadows of the Steel Stockade. The bartender, who was sitting behind the bar, said nothing.

"Do-"

Both of them started speaking at the same time and stopped. She laughed and he smiled in return while motioning for her to continue.

"Do you know how to get back to the highway?" she said to the bartender, "I thought it was just a straight line from where I came, but it seems I got turned around."

He nodded, like he wasn't expecting a patron at this hour and knew his only role at present was as local guide.

"You came from the base?" he asked in a low voice.

She nodded.

"Then continue the way you were going and make the next right down the road, and you'll find it," he said, looking back at his drink like it was more interesting than the pretty woman in the doorway.

She thanked him and motioned for Russell to speak, who looked from the bartender to her, and decided that a phone call wasn't what he needed after all.

"Where are you headed?" he asked her.

"L.A.," she said.

"Can I hitch a ride? I promise I'm not a murderer, I just need to get out of here" he said.

She laughed.

“Don’t we all?”

As she lay in bed Miriam was frightened. For many reasons, but the thing that scared her the most was the fact that she couldn’t talk to him. That had not been an issue in a while. When they started dating, Russell was silent about anything that was bothering him. It took him two years to tell her that the way she tapped her foot while reading bothered him so much that he had to leave the room.

But Miriam always knew how to say things. Her father was a military psychiatrist and her mother a college professor. Both were intelligent and communicative to a degree that they had very few friends who could put up with their methods of speaking. And they had poured every ounce of advice they could into her. Set verbal boundaries, be willing to meet people where they are, but don’t lose yourself. Most problems arise from a breakdown in communication. Love takes time but so does hate. Know what you’re willing to fight for.

She stuck to those for a while until seven years ago when that parent of a student met her at an open-house and made her think that a quick night in a motel room wouldn’t be that bad for either of their marriages. And it wasn’t for his, as far as she knew, but for her and Russell what followed was an instant wall between them built by her secrecy and gnawing regret. Miriam kept it quiet for a month of sleepless nights before she broke down in front of him admitting that she wouldn’t blame him if he wanted a divorce. What she didn’t expect was his understanding and sudden admittance that he too had not been wholly faithful to their matrimony.

Two years of couple’s counseling and five years of over-communication led them to where they had started—happy, in love, and hopeful.

But now it was happening again. And this time it was only partially her fault. Because she hadn't kept her relationship with Jean a complete secret. But she hadn't fully revealed her deepest feelings.

That's why she had fainted. And Russell had been so worried. She'd only bruised her hand and her eye from where she'd landed on the tiles in Benson's, but he had insisted that she stay at the hospital for a night in case she got a concussion. He had asked over and over again what had happened, but she was brief in her responses, walking old territory with outright lying and shame bigger than herself.

Down the long stretch of desert highway, the car ride was awkward and Miriam was beginning to wonder if her passenger was just shy or had lied about being a murderer.

"So, what were you doing all the way out here?" she asked, breaking the silence.

From the corner of her eye she saw him shift uncomfortably in his seat. He cleared his throat.

"Do you want the whole truth or the half-truth?"

She laughed.

"Why wouldn't I want the whole truth?"

"Cause it doesn't paint me well," he said.

"How bad could it be?"

"I'm deserting," he said.

He shrank as he said the words, like he didn't like the sound of them out loud.

"From the base?" she asked.

He nodded. She understood what that meant, possibly that she was harboring a fugitive, but also that her dad could definitely not know about this man.

“Why?” she asked.

He didn't say anything for a moment, and she wondered if he regretted saying anything at all.

“My family needs me,” he said after a while, “I have to go back.”

“That's not a bad reason,” she said, relieved with his answer.

“It was for my sergeant,” he said.

“Well, he's not here and I am. And I say it's not a bad reason.”

He smiled and looked out the window. Around them was the expanse of the Mojave, both barren and beautiful. Miriam had always had an affinity for the quiet grandeur of the dirt and sparse plant life stretching for miles in every direction. When she was younger their family had vacationed not far from where they were now and she remembered gluing her face to their car window as the city turned to nothingness and they plunged into the lonely landscape.

“Joshuas,” he said after a particularly long stretch of silence.

The name made her grip the wheel tight. She thought she must have heard him wrong.

“What did you say?”

“Joshua Trees,” he said again, pointing to the side of the road where there were in fact a few Joshua trees bending towards the earth below them, their arms raised high.

She felt her hands get clammy. There was no way he knew; it was only a coincidence. He was remarking about the trees.

“Yes,” she said, “They're beautiful.”

In his twenty-five years at the lumber yard, Russell had been jabbed with more splinters than days he had worked. Over time it happened less, especially with the gloves, but today he

had been pricked three times, and he was beginning to want to throw the 2x4s he was moving as far as he could.

“Everything okay Russ?”

Bill Humboldt was looking at him across the yard as Russell inspected his ring finger. He picked at the sliver of wood and felt it dig deeper into his skin as he broke it in half.

“Fuck,” he said, “that’s the third one today.”

“Stop running against the grain,” Bill said slyly.

Bill was almost fifteen years younger than Russell and had only been working in the yard for eight or nine years. Russell had definitely given him the same advice when he trained him. He wanted to throttle him, but he took a deep breath instead, thinking of Miriam. She made him do things like that when he got angry, close his eyes and breathe. As much as he hated it, it tended to calm him down a bit.

“Get back to work Bill,” he said.

Bill raised his hands in defense and walked towards the offices across the yard. Russell was distracted. He couldn’t stop thinking of how Miriam had been acting for the last few days. Since the thing at the grocery store, she’d been shaken. Understandably so. Nobody knew what the hell had happened that night. Russell assumed it was some sort of gas leak or something, but Miriam insisted it wasn’t. Though she wouldn’t tell him her hypothesis. She was the type to always have a hypothesis.

He didn’t want to press, but he knew last time she had been acting this weird she had leveled the playing field of promiscuity. But he hadn’t slipped up since then, the first and only time being a drunken mistake while Miriam was away at a conference years ago. So any admission of guilt from her now would change the scale they had worked hard to maintain. The

thought made him feel sick. He looked down at his hand again and saw the black speck that throbbed at the tip of his finger.

He came back to L.A. She had given him her phone number before he left and once he got his brother squared away, he used the rest of his savings to book a flight straight back to California. She knew a friend who he could stay with, and he got a job within a week with a local contractor. Their first date was at the beach, which Russell hadn't been to before. She showed him sand dollars and the waves, but he watched her.

For their six-month anniversary she took him to a lake in the mountains. He had missed the trees and a weekend among the pines reminded him of home. The smell brought his mind back to Minnesota.

"You know people are saying we should think about getting married soon," she said.

He stopped. They were walking a small trail alongside the lake, and he thought for a moment he might fall into the water.

"Are people saying that?" he asked, looking at her to see her reaction.

Her face was stoic.

"Do you want the whole truth or the half-truth?" she asked.

He smiled. "The whole truth."

"Well, my mother is saying it. And maybe I'm saying it too," she said.

He felt his face grow warm.

"Well, do you want to marry me?"

"Was that a proposal?"

"Do you want it to be?"

She looked out onto the water.

“No,” she said, “But maybe next year, after I finish my degree, you could ask me again.”

He laughed.

“Well why don’t we just do it now if you think you want to settle down eventually.”

“Because Mr. Taylor, you don’t know everything about me yet and I don’t know everything about you. And I think we both ought to know everything about each other before we think about something as serious as an engagement.”

“Well, what do you want to know?”

She shrugged looking at him.

“I don’t know yet. That’s why we have to give it time.”

“Well, what about me? What don’t I know about you yet.”

She shrugged again, this time though her eyes didn’t meet his.

“Nothing,” she said, unsure.

He opened his mouth to press, but she continued walking beneath the parted green and brown before them. He wondered for a moment what she may have been thinking of, but he trusted that in time she would tell him.

Miriam was dozing when a knock on her office door shook her awake. She had not slept much last night. When she slept, she would dream of the light and Jean. When she was awake, she would think of Russell. Both had been exhausting.

“Come in,” she called.

As the door opened, a boy appeared in the doorway. She recognized him almost immediately and tried to compose herself.

“Hi Mrs. Taylor,” he said.

“Peter,” was all she could say.

It seemed probable of course that she would see him around the school, but she had not prepared to talk to him. He was one of the only people who was there with her that night. One of the only people who saw Jean too.

“I thought I should come here,” Peter said.

“Oh?”

“I was wondering if you could talk.”

Suddenly the nature of her job came back to her. She nodded.

“Of course, come sit down.”

She motioned to the chair in front of her, which Peter took after closing the door behind him.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked.

He fiddled with the corner of the chair, scratching at the cushioned arm and looking out the window behind her.

“What do you remember?” he asked after a moment.

She straightened.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you remember? From that night?”

She hesitated for a second. She tried to collect herself, keep herself from falling into the fits of anxiety that had begun since Jean had come to see her.

“What do I remember?”

He nodded.

“Well, I remember coming into the store and grabbing a basket. Then the lights went off and I remember a bright light. And then it disappeared and I don’t recall much until the paramedics were helping me onto a gurney.”

She felt her hands begin to shake as she recounted the story. She put them in her lap.

“What do you remember?” she asked him.

It was clear he wanted to talk about it—it was only natural after a traumatic event. But it was also clear that he didn’t know how. Most of the students didn’t actually come to her for emotional help, but it was technically part of her job description as a counselor.

“I remember the light,” he said quietly, “And feeling afraid but also like it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.”

“Has that night been on your mind a lot?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Mine too,” she said.

He looked up at her with an anxiousness in his eyes.

“What do you think it was?” he asked.

She froze. She should have anticipated him asking such a question, but she didn’t know what to tell him. She considered telling him that she had no idea, but the problem was that she did know. She knew with an unwavering certainty what it had been. Who it had been. She could lie to Peter, of course, but she suddenly felt that if there was the slightest possibility of someone understanding her, it might be one of the few people who had seen it too. Her voice lowered to a near whisper.

“A ghost.”

She met Joshua too late. She always thought that if she had met him earlier, then maybe something would be different. Maybe she would've married him and stayed in California instead of moving across the country with Russell. Maybe they could've gotten pregnant and had a family. She didn't like to think about those things.

She had told Russell about Joshua after they were married, much later than she should have, but she never told him the details. Joshua felt like a memory for her and the people that knew him. However, Jean, his mother, was probably the only other person who remembered him thirty years later. Miriam called Jean every year on the day of his death because of that, to remember him. Russell knew, but he never pressed too much about their conversations.

"Miriam?"

Jean's voice over the phone was ragged. She was nearing eighty, but her health had been going for years.

"How's it going Jean?"

"Quite miserably. But better now that we can talk."

Miriam knew this was how it would go. Jean didn't have many people to talk to and even fewer who actually cared about her. The two of them didn't stay in contact much, maybe a check-in every couple month, but on May 22nd they called without fail. To remember him.

"Been a hard couple months since we last talked?"

"Been a hard couple of decades if we're being honest, sweetheart, but you know all about those. I'm dying, Miriam."

"You always say that, Jean."

“Yes, but this time I’m actually dying. The doctors say they’re serious this time about getting my things in order. Little do they know I haven’t a thing on this planet to order even if I wanted to.”

The old woman laughed. Miriam was glad she still could.

“Do you need anything from me?” she asked.

“Well, if you’re offering, you can send me some flowers. This goddamned room is so gray and I’d at least like some color in my life before I croak.”

The thought of Jean dying alone in a dull room squeezed Miriam’s heart like a noose. It was too much to think of a sad life having such a sad ending.

“I’ll order some as soon as we get off the phone,” she said.

“And do something else for me, okay?”

“Anything.”

“When I die, keep remembering him.”

Miriam’s heart dropped for only a moment. She didn’t know what she expected, but it wasn’t that. The request terrified her. Though she hated to admit it, the calls with Jean were draining—memories of a time that Miriam would rather forget.

“No one remembers him but us sweetheart. No one. And I’m going soon. He lives a little bit if you still remember. It’s the least you could do.”

“I will Jean.”

The words caused her throat to constrict. A knock on the door interrupted the beginning of her tears as the secretary’s head popped in.

“Your husband is here to see you, Miriam.”

Miriam put the phone to her chest.

“Oh. Do you know why?”

“It looks like he brought you lunch.”

Miriam nodded. She put the phone back up to her ear and wiped her eyes.

“Listen Jean, Russell’s here so I have to let you go.”

Jean tutted over the phone.

“Can you call me after?” she asked.

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t forget,” she said.

On his lunch break Russell considered driving towards the school but instead found himself headed downtown towards the Fideston News office. Lilian was working and for some reason he felt that she might be someone good to talk to.

She was sitting within view of the front door, and he stood at the threshold awkwardly until she looked up from her computer at him. She smiled but was clearly worried. He didn’t talk to his sister that often. They were technically half-siblings and fourteen years apart. He was married to Miriam by the time she was entering elementary school. But they were still family.

“Russell, what are you doing here?” she asked, standing.

“I think my wife is cheating on me.”

The words slipped out before he had even thought of them, but suddenly he knew that’s what had been circulating in his brain for the last few days. He felt sick.

Lilian’s eyes widened, and she looked behind her at the closed office door in the back of the room. Russell could make out a man behind a computer too focused to notice him.

“What? Why...why do you think that?”

Lilian’s voice was concerned, but also prying. Russell shook his head.

“She’s been acting strange. She’s definitely keeping something from me.”

“What do you mean strange?”

Lilian motioned for Russell to sit in the chair by her desk and he obliged, taking his hat off his head as he did so. Lilian propped herself on the edge of the desk and set her hand on his.

“She hasn’t been talking to me. Since Friday and the light and everything.”

Lilian nodded.

“Well, that does have a lot of people shaken up, I know.”

“Yeah, but this is different. It’s like last time.”

Lilian bit her lip. He had told her of what happened seven years ago, and she had been supportive of him despite his transgressions. It was when they truly got close.

“Well, I’m not going to say it’s impossible, but if you’re only going off of the way she’s acting you’re going to need some more proof before you confront her about it. You don’t want to get divorced over a misunderstanding.”

Russell stiffened. He had briefly thought of investigating this further, but he wasn’t sure how. What concerned him more was Lilian’s conclusion that if he did find something then his marriage would be over. The feeling in his stomach only intensified.

“I don’t want to do that. Get a divorce.”

“Well then you should make sure that she's not cheating on you.”

“How?”

He could feel himself start to panic. Lilian squeezed his hand and he felt the splinter sting.

“Listen Russ, don’t freak out. You’ll just have to be a little more on guard. Press a little bit more about where she is when you’re not around, but don’t be aggressive. You don’t want to ruin your marriage if there’s nothing going on.”

Russell’s brain began to feel fuzzy. He did not want to leave her or her to leave him.

“How did you get through it last time?” she asked.

“We talked,” Russell said.

“Then talk.”

Their car inched forward in a line as Russell maneuvered it towards the curb of the “Departures” lane. Miriam gathered her bag from the floor in front of her. Russell put the car in park and got out, walking around to open the passenger door for her.

“You got everything?”

She nodded as she pushed out of the car.

“Thanks for driving me,” she said.

He pulled her into a hug.

“Call me when you land okay? And if you need anything.”

Miriam gave him a peck as she waved goodbye and headed inside the airport. As Russell moved to go back into the car, he wished he had pressed more. He didn’t want to make the grieving any harder, but he knew so little. Lilian had told him Jean had died and that she was going to California for the funeral. He knew Jean didn’t have much family and Miriam felt some sort of responsibility to her. He didn’t really understand it, but he hoped now his wife could finally move on from whatever she felt she had owed the old woman.

“Whose ghost?”

Peter had stiffened, but his question came immediately after she said the words out loud. She felt that she was treading into odd territory with the boy in front of her.

“Jean,” she said, “She was a woman I knew. Her son and I dated for a long time, but he died and after that I kept speaking with her.”

“How did he die?” Peter asked.

“Suicide,” she said.

Peter winced and suddenly Miriam felt like she was snapping out of an odd trance. She cleared her throat. She felt wildly unprofessional.

“I’m so sorry Peter, I should not have shared that with you. I think you should go back to your class.”

“It’s lunchtime.”

He remained sitting and Miriam shifted in her chair.

“What do you think it was Peter?” she asked, trying to shift the conversation away from her.

He took a deep breath and let the word come out with the exhale.

“God.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Why do you think it was Jean?”

His pointedness was unexpected and yet it made her suddenly feel like she could share with him again. She examined his eyes, which seemed genuinely interested in her response.

“A feeling,” she conceded.

“Me too.”

“And why do you think God appeared to you?”

“I don’t really know. Maybe to tell me something,” he said, with sorrow in his voice, “Do you know why Jean was there?”

Miriam felt tears begin to come to her eyes as she looked at Peter. He did understand. He had been there, and they had felt something similar. Miriam tried to control her breathing. She knew what Jean had been doing there and what she had said.

On the anniversary Miriam tried to call her. She knew she wasn’t going to be on the other end of the line, but she hoped maybe someone might be. The number was out of service.

She put the phone down and stared outside her office hoping that the feeling would go away, but the tightness in her chest was overwhelming. She couldn’t remember what color Joshua’s eyes were. She knew somewhere in the depths of her computer there would be a picture of the two of them. She thought of the one at their senior prom where she had that light green dress on and he had his white suit. But she couldn’t remember his eyes. Her mind kept thinking hazel, but those were Russell’s eyes.

The ringing phone made her jump. She stared at it, thinking that maybe by some miracle it was Jean, but when she picked it up Russell’s voice was on the other end.

“Hey honey. I was gonna bring lunch over. Is now a good time?”

Miriam was silent for a moment. She thought of his bright hazel eyes on the road somewhere. She suppressed a sob.

“Um, actually I have a meeting with a student in a few minutes,” she said, “I don’t think you should come.”

The lie came quickly, but the thought of seeing Russell, or Russell seeing her at that moment was too much.

“Oh. Ok.” He sounded disappointed. “Well, have a good day honey. I’ll see you at home?”

“See you at home.”

“I love you, Miriam.”

“Love you.”

She hung up before he could hear her cry. She thought of Jean being gone and Joshua going again.

Russell sat in the truck. He grabbed the wheel like he might have to jerk the car to safety even though the ignition was off, and he sat silently in the driveway. It was still light out, but it was later than he normally got home. He wondered if Miriam was worrying about where he was or if she didn’t even notice that he was gone. The thought made him grip the leather wheel harder. He felt like crying. He tried to steady himself. His body began to shake, and he bent down so his head was almost in his lap. He was alone. Miriam was everything.

She was somewhere in their house right now, probably cooking dinner or reading. She would be alright without him and that made it so much harder to think about her leaving. Maybe she wouldn’t even cry.

Small drops appeared on his pant legs, and he tried to take a deep breath. He had to know. If she was cheating on him or going to leave he had to know. It would be hard, but it was better than wondering whether or not she would leave at any given moment. He pushed out of his truck and wiped his nose.

Miriam was sitting on the couch, reading, as he walked in. She looked up and smiled but quickly changed her expression as she saw him.

“Russell?”

He opened his mouth to speak but could not find the words. He couldn't even find a tone of accusation as he looked at her face. His wife's face.

"Miriam?"

His wife sat beside him in the passenger seat, looking out onto nothing.

"Miriam?"

She turned her head and yet it still felt that she didn't see him.

"Miriam if you banged up your head, I need to know so we can go back to the hospital."

"I'm fine Russ. Thank you."

"Do you want to talk about what happened now?"

Her smile died. She turned back to the window.

"You have to talk to me about it at some point, honey."

"I told you I didn't want to," she said, her voice stern.

The tone caught him off-guard.

"Why?"

"Russell."

"No, tell me why and I'll stop asking about it."

"Because it's not important. You don't need to know."

"I'm your husband. It's important to me to know why you ended up in the hospital."

"I told you. I fell at the grocery store."

"You know that's not what I mean. I don't think you've ever fainted, Miriam. So why last night? People are saying there was a light or fire or something. Is that what you saw?"

"I told you I didn't want to talk about it."

He felt warmth rise to his face.

“Miriam!”

“No Russell!” Her voice filled the car. “Just because you’re my husband doesn’t mean I have to tell you everything. Let me have something to myself for once!”

Russell shrank back at the wheel. He could not think of a time that she had yelled at him like that. He opened his mouth to say something, but he feared that anything might be too much at that moment. Though he wanted to, he was even scared to utter ‘I love you’ because he didn’t know what would happen if she didn’t say it back.

Miriam had seen her husband cry. He cried when his mom died, but not when his dad did. He cried when his brother got out of prison and again when he was found dead in a bathroom stall an hour outside of Fideston. He cried when Miriam was pregnant and when she miscarried. One winter when Miriam had skidded the car into a ditch and he’d found her trying to flag down a car, he cried because she was okay.

But this was different. He was on the floor before she knew what was going on. When she rushed to his side, he was hugging his knees, barely able to choke out words.

“You can leave me, but I need to know.”

The sentence froze her.

“Russell, what are you talking about?”

He shook his head. He caught his breath.

“I’m... losing you Miriam. And I don’t know why. Just... just tell me.”

He pushed his head into her chest.

“You’re not losing me sweetheart. What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been losing you for a while, but just now you’ve been...”

“Been what Russell?”

“Gone.”

She squeezed him tight.

“Just tell me the truth,” he said.

For a moment she was quiet and held him.

“Do you want the whole truth or the half-truth?” she asked.

He looked up at her, his eyes red.

“I thought I saw Jean,” she whispered.

Russell wiped his face.

“What?”

“The light, I- I’m sure it was her. Her ghost.”

Russell’s eyes softened. She was ready for him to call her crazy for believing in ghosts or stupid for not telling him, but he only wrapped his arms around her.

Miriam had a recurring dream.

She would be out in the desert where she and her parents used to travel, but where a resort had once been now only stood a singular Joshua tree. There, she felt as if she were waiting for someone to come, as if the tree were a bus stop and the bus was right down a road that wasn’t there. And she would sit in the slim line of shade the tree offered, wondering how much longer until her ride came, looking out onto the horizon for any movement in the wavering air.

Russell was confused, but he had never been so relieved in his life. He could barely process the fact that his wife was not cheating on him before he saw the light in her eyes dim. He straightened as she spoke softer than she had before.

“She blamed me, you know. For Joshua. She never outright said it, but she did. And you know at the funeral I was sad of course, but there was a weight gone too. One I didn’t even know I had.”

She said everything while staring at the floor, her vision somewhere far away.

“And I’m forgetting him, sweetheart. And before I thought that was okay, but now I don’t know. But I can’t do it, Russ. I can’t bear it.”

“Why do you need to?”

“For Jean. She told me I had too.”

“But why do *you* need to?”

“Because who will? If I stop, then he’s gone Russ. I’m so tired, but that’s a bad reason to forget.”

“That’s not a bad reason,” he said, “In fact, I think that’s the only reason you need.”

And they held each other on the living room floor.

Distazō

If one more person indicated that he was the Messiah or a prophet Peter was going to go full upturning-the-tables-in-the-temple angry. The irony, however, almost made him laugh, knowing that his dad would spin it that way. It wasn't enough that his father had all but commanded Peter to speak in church next Sunday, or that his US History teacher had spent the first half of class interviewing Peter in front of the students, but his mother had forced him to come to youth group tonight in order to "share his experience with his peers."

It had been five days since that night and yet each time Peter closed his eyes he saw it. Every blink a momentary daydream in the spot beneath the light and though he tried everything to force his thoughts elsewhere, it was beginning to consume him. He had avoided walking past the small grocery store a few blocks away and tried more often than not to change the subject when conversations inevitably gravitated towards what people were calling a miracle, but the problem was Sebastian. His ex-boyfriend had reached out twice already and both times Peter had instantly turned his phone off to resist the temptation of texting or calling back.

Before Friday Sebastian had tried to get in contact a few times as well, which made sense. The two hadn't had a conversation since last Sunday when Sebastian had blurted out the words at his kitchen table and Peter felt nothing but panic. Of course, Peter knew that things were getting serious—they had been seeing each other for over three months—and yet it wasn't until Sebastian said what was between them aloud that Peter felt the gravity of their situation. However, by last Friday after an extensive amount of thinking he had concluded that his response was mainly born of anxiety of the unknown, even if that unknown was the eternal

placement of his soul. Following a brief round of prayer where nothing seemed to jump out at him but the lingering feeling of navigating something new, he decided to follow his heart and go to the store and talk to Sebastian. But doing so was almost immediately interrupted by a glowing orb that flashed above him in the dark—for it wasn't much more than a moment—that filled him with a newfound fear but mostly just confusion.

And his primary problem was that no matter where he went, everyone wanted to keep asking about it and he couldn't say much without also telling them why he had been at Benson's in the first place. What he wanted to do was run down the street to Benson's again and find Sebastian and tell him what he had been meaning to tell him last Friday, but that wasn't a possibility for two reasons. One, Sebastian didn't work late on Wednesdays and two, even if he did, the last time Peter had gone to confess his feelings the whole town believed God had decided to make a late-night snack run.

So as he stood outside the ministry center, on the opposite side of the parking lot from the chapel, his stomach started to turn. He considered standing in that exact spot until the Bible study was over and his dad could drive him home but a voice beside him jolted him from his trance on the pavement.

“You okay Peter?”

He realized he must look crazy standing in the near-dark parking lot alone. His eyes adjusted.

“Is there something on your mind?”

John, their youth pastor, often spoke with a tone like he was ready to initiate some heavy topic and wanted everyone to share their deepest darkest secrets. Peter didn't like being alone with him. He'd heard the rumors. Even though the talk had died down after John married Annie

a year ago, Peter thought that there was always an awkward tension between the twenty-three-year-old and himself. He was only a little over three years older than Sebastian, so it wasn't impossible that the youth leader saw Peter in that way, but Peter didn't have anything to base those accusations on other than the whisperings of high schoolers and an uncomfortable feeling every time they were alone in the same room. But he was hesitant to trust his gut anymore.

"I'm gonna go get food," Peter said.

John paused like he was about to engage in some of his therapy talk, but just nodded.

"Okay. See you inside?"

"Yeah."

Peter rushed towards the ministry building, leaving the outline of John behind him.

Bible study started promptly at seven. Peter had managed to avoid talking with people at dinner by retreating to his dad's office with his plate of lasagna and garlic bread. However, in the youth room, at exactly 6:57, everyone was eager when they saw him enter and take a seat.

"So have you figured it out yet?" Jamie asked, sitting down next to him on the big green sofa that engulfed whoever chose it.

Jamie was a year younger than Peter, but they had known each other since preschool. They rarely spent time together outside of church but there was a time when she had had a crush on him last year and tried to hang out more. He didn't really have an interest.

"Figured out what?" Peter asked.

"What God said. Didn't your dad say God told you something and you were figuring it out."

Peter hated that his dad spent the entirety of the sermon on Sunday almost declaring Peter a prophet—though he refrained from such direct blasphemy. His dad had asked a few questions,

but then ran with the message without consulting him. He wondered if the reason why he asked him to speak next Sunday was because he felt bad about the whole thing. Peter doubted it.

“No,” he said, “Not yet.”

Jamie nodded and got up like she no longer wanted to consult with Peter because he wasn't going to tell her her fortune. A few of the others said hi to him as they filtered in the room but nobody else asked him about the event. He was glad for it. Though it had been less than a week he hoped maybe they were finally getting over bothering him for a divine message.

At seven John walked in and quieted the talking in the room as he did most weeks.

“So, I know we're going through Acts right now,” he said, “but I was thinking maybe Peter you start us up tonight and talk about your experience last Friday? It seems somewhat fitting for the Bible story.”

Peter tried to gulp back the sudden feeling of panic. He should have seen it coming and yet he didn't have anything to say.

“Well, my dad kinda talked about it on Sunday, but there was a light in the grocery store, and it appeared above me. And then it disappeared.”

He tried to say it as if the story wasn't all that exciting, but everyone leaned into his words like there was hidden meaning in them. He saw a few inquisitive faces clearly attempting to glean some sort of analysis from what they had just heard.

“And your dad said it was God,” John said, somewhere between a question and a statement.

Peter nodded.

“Yeah. It was God.”

The response was somewhat automatic, remnants of what he had been saying over the last few days. In actuality he was having difficulty believing it. That God would come down to him to stop him from confessing his love for a boy. But that didn't matter to them. He felt the silent awe emanating from his peers. Across the room Jamie leaned in even closer towards him, almost falling out of her seat.

"And why do you think God was there with you that night?" John asked.

The youth pastor seemed genuinely interested, but Peter felt that he was also testing him. He hesitated to say anything, thinking he might get the answer wrong.

"Well-"

"I think we all know what God was saying, John," Jamie interrupted.

All eyes turned to her.

"And what would that be Jamie?" John asked.

"That Peter was chosen. In the Bible God appears to all sorts of people that he chooses for a certain task."

Her tone was dead serious. Unfortunately, what she said was what people were talking about. His dad being the loudest voice of all. John nodded, like he agreed with what she was saying but was upset that she was the one saying it and not Peter.

"Do you agree with this Peter," John said, looking at him.

Peter nodded, though he didn't.

"And you are willing to take on such a big obligation? Of representing God?"

Again, he nodded. Though as his head moved up and down, he felt like he had committed a mortal sin. Even if it had been God, what authority did he have other than being at the wrong place at the wrong time?

“This isn’t something to take lightly Peter,” John said, “But you know that, right?”

He noticed Jamie was studying him from across the room and wished he could disappear.

“Why’d you lie in there?”

Jamie was standing outside the bathroom door as Peter exited. After Bible study he’d thought he might throw up as John talked about Acts and the descending of the Holy Spirit while constantly looking at Peter between each sentence. Luckily his dinner stayed down.

“What do you mean?” Peter asked, trying to inch past Jamie.

She stepped to block him. The bathrooms were in a hallway down on the other side of the dining room. Most of the youth group kids were probably getting dessert by the kitchen.

“I mean about what you think it is,” she said, “You were thinking about something while we were talking about it.”

He was surprised that she could read him and wondered if he was just bad at lying or if she was extremely perceptive.

“What was I supposed to say?”

“The truth? What did God say to you?”

She sounded sincere. She truly believed that there was some phrase or image passed down to Peter while he was by the candy in the Benson’s. He didn’t know what to say to her.

“What if He didn’t say anything?” Peter asked.

Her eyebrows furrowed.

“Then why would the light appear?”

“I don’t know. I’m not God.”

“You are to most people here,” she said.

Her words almost forced the lasagna up. Mostly because he knew it was true. The way people looked at him now, the questions he got. Yesterday he swore that a kid in the hallway tried to reach out and touch his arm with a look of hope in his eyes. Jamie seemed to notice his change of expression.

“But don’t worry. God doesn’t call the equipped, he equips the called.”

Peter had heard that before about Moses and Gideon but the thought of him in that category made him want to retreat into the bathroom behind him forever. Lock the door and never come out. That wasn’t a very godly thing to do. Maybe it would convince everyone that he was neither equipped nor called.

“Thanks Jamie,” he said, pushing past her.

“Oh by the way, did you hear?”

He almost didn’t take the bait knowing that whatever was going to follow had a fifty percent chance of being made up and another fifty percent chance of being none of his business. But he turned around to look at her anyway.

“What?”

“Who Paige saw last weekend in Saint Paul?”

Paige was one of Jamie’s friends a year older than Peter. He didn’t know much about her except she often went to Saint Paul because there were bars there that would accept her fake ID.

“She was at a bar with her friends Diane and Charlie and apparently she saw John there.”

“Okay?”

Jamie looked behind him, almost to check if the coast was clear, and then stepped forward. She lowered her voice.

“It was a gay bar. And he told her not to tell anyone or he would tell her parents that she was there too.”

“But she told you?” Peter asked.

He didn’t automatically believe Jamie or Paige and he studied Jamie’s expression to see if she was joking. She was serious.

“Yeah, but I’m not supposed to tell anyone. So you can’t either.”

“But why are you telling me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “I thought you should know if what John said is true. If you’re representing God or something.”

He felt his body tense. He knew if he kept talking to her he might actually explode out of fear and frustration, though he wasn’t sure which was more potent at the moment.

“Have a good night, Jamie,” he said and turned on his heels.

He made his way back towards the main room and turning the corner out of the hallway he nearly ran right into his father. His dad grabbed his shoulders to keep the two of them from colliding.

“Hey, I was just looking for you,” his dad said.

Peter stopped but didn’t respond. His mind was on Jamie and John.

“Listen, I need to stick around a little longer to help someone tonight so Pastor John said he would take you home,” his dad continued.

The suggestion jolted him. Their house was only a few minutes away, but now Peter felt like he couldn’t be in the same space with John without thinking of the gay bar in Saint Paul.

“Can’t I just wait for you?” he asked.

“Not tonight, someone asked for some one-on-one counseling, so I want to give them my full attention,” he said.

Peter took a deep breath. He considered asking Jamie for a ride, which he did sometimes when his dad was busy but now that didn't seem like an option. He wished he hadn't stormed off from her.

“Ok,” he managed.

His dad smiled at him. Over the last two days his father had been staring at him as if he was seeing something beside his son. Given his sermon on Sunday, the thing he could be seeing was God, but that thought terrified Peter. He had tried to say something to his dad about it all, but almost all of their conversations now ended with his dad relaying some adage or Bible passage to try to reassure Peter. None of them did.

Peter turned and pushed through the crowd of kids grabbing dessert and made his way to the parking lot, knowing John's minivan was typically parked at the far end. He knew it would be a little bit before John came out, but he couldn't risk talking to anyone else. He might fly into what his dad would surely call “the wrath of God.”

He waited by the car for a while, preparing for the awkward conversation that was sure to come with John. He knew he couldn't say anything to him about the bar, but the idea circulated in his head. If it wasn't made up, it meant that not only the rumors from before were true, but that John was actively engaging in behaviors that could get him fired. However, contrary to Jamie's beliefs, that was not of much consequence to Peter personally. He thought of Annie of course, but what was Peter to do about it? If John wanted to ruin his marriage and career Peter couldn't stop him.

“Hey, sorry for the delay, the elders needed some help putting away the chairs.”

John was jogging towards him in the dark.

“Thanks for driving me,” Peter said, forcing a smile.

“Of course. Anything for the Michaels family,” John said, as he unlocked the car and they both got in. “There is a caveat though. I have to stop for some eggs. Annie accidentally dropped the carton this morning.”

Any reason to be in the car longer with John was something Peter wished he could avoid, but he was already buckled in.

“Sure,” he said.

John began to pull out of the parking lot and onto the street.

“How are you holding up? After the light and all?” John asked, his therapy voice on again.

“I’m fine,” he said, “Just still a little shaken up from the whole thing.”

“I would be too,” John assured.

Peter smiled, wondering if they could sit the rest of the ride in silence.

“But it’s your responsibility now,” John continued, “to figure out what God was saying to you.”

The words did not sound unlike his dad’s, leading, almost forceful.

“I know.”

“Do you? Know, I mean, what God was saying to you.”

John’s face was more worried now, his eyes glancing to Peter every second or so. Peter shook his head. He worried if the rest of his life would be this—people believing he knew something he didn’t and asking him for answers.

“Why were you there, by the way?” John asked, his tone flecked with accusation.

“At Benson’s?”

“Yeah, that night. It was late, no?”

Peter shifted in his seat.

“I was visiting a friend. At work.”

“Sebastian?”

Peter felt whichever muscles were around his heart spasm. Everybody knew that there were only four people at the store that night. Their names had been circulated around every conversation over the last few days.

“You know who he is, right? What he is,” John said, “I also went to school with him, Peter, though he was a couple years younger. Everybody knew back then. He’s not good to hang around. Especially for people like us.”

The last two words were rapid and clumsy.

“Like us?” Peter repeated.

John paled but then nodded slowly.

“The things that draw us from God come in many forms,” he said, his voice cracking, “But people are the most dangerous. Especially when we think they love us. Or when we think we love them.”

His tone was raw and the only thing that kept Peter from reaching out to touch his shoulder was a sudden glowing blue around him. He realized in an instant where they were and the mistake he had made in agreeing to make a stop to get eggs.

“Do you want to come in with me?” John asked, pulling up in front of the store and shifting the car into park.

Peter shook his head. John unbuckled and exited, and Peter held his breath as John walked around to the front of the car and stared at him, expectantly. He hoped maybe John would turn into the store alone, but the youth pastor stood patiently. Slowly Peter slipped out of his buckle and the minivan door. John seemed eager to get inside. The Benson's loomed in front of him. He thought of Sebastian and felt his heart rate rattle his chest, but remembered, in relief, that Sebastian didn't work late on Wednesdays. Seeing him would likely shock Peter into a coma.

They entered the brightly lit store and Peter felt the coolness wash over him. John studied him as they walked past the cash registers, and only looked up to see who was working. Methodically, they weaved down the aisles and made their way towards the back wall.

"They said it happened near the front, correct?" John asked.

Peter heard him, but his voice sounded far off. They made their way to the cold cases where John grabbed a carton of eggs. Peter's legs shuffled beneath him, but John was guiding them. Suddenly they were back in the front of the store and John stopped right in front of a black tile a step from the small shoulder-high shelf that held the rows of candy.

"They say it happened right here," John said.

Peter looked up. He noticed John was still, eyes on the roof, almost as if he were waiting for it to happen again. And then, quickly, Peter realized he was. He took a step back. John's shoulders dropped and he hesitated before walking to the register where a woman scanned his eggs. What bothered Peter the most was the silent expectation he too felt in his chest as he stood there that he had not previously recognized. A feeling that maybe returning to the tile or candy would offer some sort of clarity. All he received was the sound of the register a few feet away and the buzzing of the lights.

He barely processed walking back to the car and as he got in John did not move to turn the engine over. John only gazed at the neon sign above the front door.

“Your dad asked me to talk to you about something,” he said.

Peter tensed. He knew his dad had been nervous that Peter would embarrass him somehow. Since the light his dad was on edge about everything Peter did, but he wondered why any conversation fell to John.

“He said that there has been talk about you going around with Sebastian and he wanted me to make sure that you’re not going down the wrong path,” John said.

The words sounded alarms in his head that had been at the ready for months.

“My dad knows about Sebastian?”

“You know I struggled with this too,” John said, as if not hearing Peter, “It happens to a lot of us. But it was by prayer and mercy, and really the guidance of your father, that I was delivered from it.”

“Delivered how?” Peter asked, his voice filled with the thought of the gay bar in Saint Paul.

“God can take any part of us. All of us, the sin. Whatever we give to Him.”

“Then what’s left?” Peter asked.

“God.”

“So we’re nothing but God dressed in sin?”

The question seemed to catch John off guard. He considered for a moment.

“We’re a lot of things,” he said, finally, “Sin is one of them.”

“Did marrying help?” Peter asked, “With being delivered.”

John was silent for a while but shook his head. Peter wanted to ask about Saint Paul, but he stopped himself. He didn't need to know.

"Not yet. But I hope it will."

"Why get married then?" Peter asked.

"Because it was good. Your father said so," John said.

"And whatever my father says is good?"

"Whatever God says is good."

"So *God* told you to get married?" Peter asked, suddenly seeing how much his dad had influenced John's life and how much he wanted to influence Peter's.

John was still, the water in his eyes reflecting off the light of the Benson's.

"God didn't tell me anything," he said, "but he told you Peter." He pointed at the store. "He told you. Right in there."

Peter looked at the man in front of him and felt his heart ache. John was not much more than a child looking for answers. Peter wondered if he was really there to convince Peter of something or convince himself.

For a moment Peter was overwhelmed with the need to say a comforting word. To say that on Friday God had told him that this kind of love was very good, and that John could live the life he wanted to. That the light in the Benson's was also a light at the end of the tunnel. But He hadn't. Nor the opposite. Because it had been dark and quiet. And then the light. And then nothing at all.

John stared at him with a glimpse of hope, but Peter shook his head.

"Let us read the Psalm today together."

Peter's dad stood at the pulpit as the words of the Psalm appeared behind him on the monitor. The people spoke in unison.

"You may be seated," he said as they finished.

The people sat and waited.

"Before I get into the message today, I've decided to have my son speak to you all. I know many of you were here last week, where we discussed the miracle, but now Peter would like to share it in his own words. Peter?"

His father motioned for him to come up and Peter stood from next to his mother. As he walked towards the stage, his father moved to the side of the altar and sat in one of the chairs sometimes used by the acolytes. He nodded at his son, his face eager.

Peter looked out onto the people. Today, the pews were full, not unlike last Sunday. He knew all of them, in some capacity and yet for a moment they felt like strangers, looking at him like he was someone unknown. His eyes lingered on John, who sat a few rows from the front next to Annie. John would not meet his gaze. Peter cleared his throat and adjusted the small microphone on the pulpit.

"Good morning."

The voices returned his greeting. He peered down at the notes which he had stashed on the wooden stand before service. He had gone over what he was going to say with his dad the night before, when he had been told if the notes didn't work God would speak through him. But he had only been thinking of Sebastian and what he would say to him after church when he went to the Benson's to see him.

Shuffling. A cough in the back. His father's voice lingered.

“All of you know me. Know where I was two Fridays ago and know what happened. My dad’s told you. The newspaper has told you. I’m sure you have told each other. But there were only four of us there that night.”

Breaths. His voice was strengthening. He closed his eyes. He saw it.

“My dad asked you all to believe in me. To see something only the four of us saw. And some of you have. Really truly have. You’ve believed without seeing. Blessed. That’s what Jesus says, right? Those who believed without seeing.

“If I’m being honest, I was really afraid that night. But it’s not the fear I have now. What I was afraid of in the grocery store was God, I think, but it wasn’t just fear either. There was love. I think we get those two confused though. The fear I have now is of all of you. Of some responsibility to be God on Earth so you don’t need faith. And I feel like I am sinking so you can see me and see all of truth and put your prayers away and call it good for eternity because the hard work is done. But is *that* belief?”

Silence. Before him the people were looking, but it was different than before. Now they did not just see God mirrored in his face and his body. They really saw him. Peter did not turn to look at his father but could imagine his face. He swallowed his trepidation at the image.

“There’s nothing I can do to show you. Show you that if it was God, right above the candy and the gum, that He didn’t say anything at all. He was quiet. So quiet and close I could’ve reached out and touched Him. And I mistook that silence for the voice of God. Because even when it’s quiet we still think that we know better. Because we’re afraid of what happens if we don’t. Terrified of not being able to explain the inexplicable. But that’s what it was. Unknown. And that’s what it will be.”

The voices like wind came from them, but he saw the wind and was not afraid.

Peter walked down Church Street. His mother had said she would talk to his dad who had, in an unfamiliar nature, struggled to speak after Peter got off the stage. Peter had understood that his father would likely be furious, and he had bolted out the doors as soon as the last song ended so that his dad couldn't stop him from going to see Sebastian. He kept along the sidewalk as some of the cars from the congregation drove past him. They were probably giving him looks, but he felt a strange peace that he had not before. Giddy, he kept himself from skipping towards the store.

The sign was on, but in the daylight, it did not glow quite as brightly as it had on Wednesday or two Fridays ago. Peter kept his gaze fixed on it as he approached, examining each neon blue letter like they were from another language. Stepping inside, he realized how warm it was outside as the AC welcomed him in. He paused, however, seeing the woman from Wednesday at the register. It was almost noon and on Sundays Sebastian worked overtime so he didn't have to go to Mass.

“Is Sebastian here?” Peter asked.

She looked him up and down, the loose bun of her hair bobbing up and down as she did.

“He asked me to switch mornings with him. Said he needed to go to church,” she said flatly, “He should be here in a few though.”

Peter nodded. Sebastian hadn't been to Sunday Mass in a while and Peter decided to ask him about it rather than bother the woman in front of him anymore. He thanked her and stepped back outside into the late morning and the sounds of Sunday. The parking lot was almost empty, and Peter sat down at the small curb in front of the store. He closed his eyes in the sun, letting the warmth wash over him as he waited, and for the first time in a while he did not think of the light.