

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Calen MacDonald

March 24, 2022

What's Growing in Fort Cunningham

by

Calen MacDonald

Jim Grimsley
Adviser

Creative Writing

Jim Grimsley
Adviser

Deborah Elise White
Committee Member

Kim Loudermilk
Committee Member

2022

What's Growing in Fort Cunningham

By

Calen MacDonald

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2022

Abstract

What's Growing in Fort Cunningham

By Calen MacDonald

A disembodied arm grows up through the ground in the center of Fort Cunningham. A short story cycle about the nature of strangeness in small towns.

What's Growing in Fort Cunningham

By

Calen MacDonald

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2022

Table of Contents

I.....	1
Monochrome.....	5
II.....	18
Liberated Flesh.....	21
III.....	33
The Hollow Boy.....	36
IV.....	52
Magpie.....	58
V.....	69

I

On an otherwise placid April afternoon, Mable Paige discovered a disembodied limb growing up out of the ground during her walk home from school. Mable had a habit of slipping out of Fair County Middle just before the last bell. Her problem was, at the 3:15 PM dismissal, the Fort Cunningham kids would gather to walk home. They congealed in little fission-fusion groups, chatting about boys or girls or the Internet. Mable left promptly at 3:10 PM to avoid this crowd. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk about boys or girls or the Internet, just that she didn't have anyone who wanted to talk to her about those things.

So Mable Paige walked alone on that April day. There the limb was, at the intersection of North Street and South Avenue. It sprouted from the ground like a surrealist lamppost, easily seven feet tall. The wrist bent just so as to hang lackadaisically. Its flesh was a sickly gray.

Mable Paige didn't scream when she saw it, but that didn't mean she wasn't scared. Her first instinct was to look around in case further appendages had sprouted nearby, but the street was empty. Just hours ago Mable had walked the same route on the way to school, unimpeded by giant arms. Now she stood transfixed. Almost reflexively, her own arm slowly rose up, and Mable found herself softly waving at the gray limb. Its elongated fingers made no motion to acknowledge her.

Mable Paige ran until she collapsed at her doorstep. Mable's mother struggled to believe her daughter's story, but the morose child expressed an abject terror genuine enough to prompt a call to 911.

The depth Fort Cunningham's emergency services began and ended with a team of volunteer firefighters, so Mable's mother's call arrived at the telephone of Fire Chief Georgio Clements. Georgio didn't take the call too seriously. However, the last fire in Fort Cunningham

was half a decade ago and Georgio loved to drive the fire truck. Sirens blaring, Georgio rolled up to a growing crowd gathered around the arm. The hand loomed above their heads. Ignoring the onlookers, Georgio began his work with aplomb. In no time at all, he had established a perimeter cordoning off the limb. This was the first perimeter he had ever established. Georgio discovered he loved to establish a perimeter.

With a perfect square of caution tape in place, Fire Chief Georgio Clements set himself to the delicate task of examining the arm. Poking and prodding strange limbs barely fell under his purview, but there were few other people in town better qualified to conduct the investigation. The arm was surprisingly docile. If it was capable of noticing him, it didn't mind the intrusion. Georgio worked his way up from the base of the arm to as high as he could reach. His observations revealed little. Georgio decided he would have to delve deeper. And so, Fire Chief Georgio Clements called into the fire station to request one of the volunteers deliver his jackhammer.

Throughout the investigation, the crowd only continued to grow. Amongst the concerned, the curious, and the panicked was the 3:15 PM group from Fair County Middle. Talking about boys and girls and the Internet paled in comparison to the allure of a disembodied limb. Most kids formed small gaggles near the back of the crowd, trying to maintain an air of indifference but clearly intrigued by the strange limb. More brazen children snuck up to get a closer view whenever Fire Chief Georgio Clements turned his back. The boldest of these thrill seekers was Jeremiah Brown. Jeremiah had entered Fair County Middle School on that April day with not only a brand new pair of shoes, but a fresh haircut to match. Both of these attributes went unnoticed by his classmates. Jeremiah chafed under this slight all day, but the arm's sudden appearance offered a chance at redemption.

Jeremiah trained his eyes on the Fire Chief. Nearly twice Jeremiah's size, Georgio looked like he could crush the kid with one hand. As Georgio disappeared to receive his jackhammer, Jeremiah found exactly the window of opportunity he was waiting for. He moved quickly, but with great care, slinking beneath the caution tape perimeter. He turned back to find his crowd of friends looking on with bated breath. Emboldened by their attention, Jeremiah dug the soles of his new shoes into the ground. With all the force he could muster, he jumped upward, stretching his arm as far as it would go, and gave the gray hand a hardy high-five. The resounding slap drew the attention of everyone in the vicinity and the ire of Fire Chief Clements. Jeremiah was promptly removed from the caution tape perimeter by the scruff of his shirt. Jeremiah didn't mind the extraction or the scolding; he had won his moment in the spotlight.

As the afternoon progressed and the middle schoolers were summoned home by concerned parents, Georgio rerouted power to his jackhammer from the Ragtime Cinema on North Street and began tearing up the pavement. He took great care not to knick the arm itself. What soon became apparent was that the arm extended much farther beneath the ground than Georgio had anticipated. Stranger still, the pale limb was unchanged the deeper he dug. As the sun slunk below the horizon, the moon rose to find Georgio waist-deep in a hole of his own making. The fire chief was beginning to get disheartened. His hours of work had uncovered nothing more than a continuation of the impossibly long arm. He hadn't even reached the elbow, if there was an elbow at all.

Fire Chief Georgio Clements hoisted himself out of the hole, coated head-to-toe in dirt, to find himself face-to-face with Mayor Valexia Doubleday. The mayor had chosen blue as her primary color for the day. Her tailored blazer was a deep azure echoed in her lipstick, her nail polish, her shoes, and the tips of her braids, piled on top of her head like an impossible hat.

Always clutched in her hands was a clipboard, a new color each day to suit her outfit. There was an air of impeccability to the mayor that in equal parts intimidated and impressed Georgio. In her presence swept the crowd with an instant ease. Even the arm seemed to loll less menacingly.

“Chief Clements, I have been informed of the situation. How goes the excavation?”

“I’ve been digging for hours ma’am. There’s no end in sight.”

The mayor pursed her lips and made a swift note on her clipboard.

“Then we shall have to dig deeper.”

Dig deeper they did.

Monochrome

The printer was an agonizing distance from Russell's cubicle. Peeking his head out to look, it seemed even farther than the last time. Russell's print queue had accumulated rapidly throughout the morning as he put off the tedious journey. There were just so many annoyances between his cubicle and the printer. The echo of the all-too-colorful tile. The nigh imperceptible flicker of the third hallway light. His coworkers.

The most offensive was Linda. Linda was the type of woman who wore a cardigan like a second skin, the sort whose perfume you could smell in a photograph and would one day be eaten by cats. Russell couldn't recall when he had begun to hate Linda, only that it was the sole emotion he was capable of associating with her. The worst part about Linda was her crippling inefficiency. Everything about her was slow and unproductive. It showed most clearly in the way that she walked. Linda was a shambler. Even now, she shambled back to her cubicle, coffee pot in hand, dragging both feet in uneven measures. Russell wondered if he could dart by before she returned, but a friendly smile and wave interrupted his egress.

"Good morning Russ!" Linda spoke as if there was a marble stuck in the back of her throat that she couldn't be bothered to dislodge. It pressed her words into flat little shapes. "How are you doing? I haven't seen you all day! You must have gotten into the office before I did."

Linda bloated conversations. In all the time Russell had worked with her he had never once escaped an interaction without telling her how his day was going or what he had done over the weekend. The constant triviality was chafing. Linda now looked at him with an off-putting eagerness. It seemed she would not relent without a response.

"I'm doing fine Linda." Russell spoke with clenched fists, anxious to escape the conversation.

“Russ, I heard you’re almost done with The Big Project!” Linda was oppressively loud. “I’m so impressed with how hard you’ve been working! You should be proud, even if mean old Mr. Davies won’t say anything.”

Linda chuckled as she mentioned Mr. Davies, like he was some private joke between friends. Russell was certain he had never once laughed in front of Linda, but he acted on the lull in the conversation to abscond down the hallway.

Russell was loath to agree with Linda, but she was right about one thing. Despite The Big Project’s importance, Mr. Davies wouldn’t acknowledge his hard work. He was again made grateful that Linda was removed from The Big Project. It had initially been a joint venture for the two of them, but Linda’s lackadaisical attitude had irked Russell to no end. She refused to work through her lunch breaks or put in weekend hours. She had even once called in sick, which Russell suspected was a thinly veiled excuse to visit her grandchildren. After weeks of persistent complaining, Mr. Davies relented and allowed Russell to take on all the work himself. Now, with The Big Project on the verge of completion, Russell would be promoted, and his days of suffering Linda’s prattling would be over. He could have an office all to himself, isolated from the rabble of the cubicles.

Russell’s eyebrow twitched as he passed beneath the flickering light. Finally, the printer was within reach. Russell manipulated the keypad with dexterous ease. His coworkers often complained about the complexity of the printer, yet Russell had never struggled with it. In many ways, Russell thought he was better than the people he worked with. They would gather around the water cooler, or take their lunches in the breakroom, guzzling a pot of communal coffee like medieval serfs sharing the last drops of a dry well. Whenever Russell worried that he was too convinced of his own brilliance to see objective reality, the mundane faces of the office reassured

him that he was special. The Big Project just showed that he was doing things right. And everyone else was doing them wrong.

From his vantage point, he could see his useless coworkers scattered throughout the grid of cubicles. Johnson in cubicle 1D wore “fun ties” that were vulgarly inappropriate for a corporate workplace. Today his tie was dappled with tiny flamingos. Sandra in 1E was a *Solitaire* fiend. Russell kept a calendar of the many hours of wages she had stolen with her pitiful addiction. When he was promoted, he would fix things. Linda would be transferred far, far away, or even fired if he could swing it. Johnson’s ties would be banned, and Sandra would pay back her stolen hours in unpaid overtime.

The printer gave a satisfied purr as it spat out the last document. Russell gathered the warm stack close to his chest and began the trudge back to his cubicle. Thankfully, Linda did not rear her chatty head this time.

With his papers retrieved, Russell was able to set himself back to work. The final step of The Big Project required that these documents be neatly and efficiently sorted into a number of categories. This was Russell’s favorite part of his job—the tiny, menial tasks that his coworkers took to with a hint of ire, but he alone was talented enough to cherish. He fondled the snow white paper, leered over the pitch black ink, and suckled at the warmth of every fresh page. Each sheet found a perfect slot in the perfect stack in the perfect row. Russell conducted a private symphony. The world faded as his senses narrowed into his immediate surroundings. The errant hallway light, Linda, Mr. Davies’ apathy, none of it mattered as long as there were papers to sort. For a brief moment it was beautiful. All the colors of the world drained away and everything was rendered in a pleasant gray. For just an instant, a dazzling gleam alighted the many papers.

Russell's beautiful work was ensconced in a unique color he couldn't quite describe. He felt altogether at peace with the world. Then he found the pink slip.

Russell was shaken from his stupor and the colors of the world returned, the beauty drained from his work. There it was, at the bottom of his stack. It must have been left in the tray by mistake and slipped in among his papers. Well, no harm no foul. He could return it easily enough. But curiosity got the better of him. Who was getting fired? Could it be Linda? With her gone, Russell would be one step closer to a workplace utopia. He had to read it.

The pink slip bore Russell's own name. His fingers froze into claws, begging to tear the doom-saying paper to pieces. The paralysis spread up from his hands and exploded at his spine throughout his entire body. He couldn't blink. He couldn't breathe. It couldn't be true. An error. A sick joke.

"Russell." Mr. Davies' rough baritone shook Russell from his trance. The tall man stood at the cubicle entrance, dressed in a smart pinstripe suit, crimson red in color. Mr. Davies always liked to impress his wealth upon his employees through his suits, no matter how garish an effect they created. His face belied no emotion, not because of an unnatural stoicism, but more so due to the egregious mustache that consumed his mouth and much of his nose. The ghastly thing was comprised of the rejected thistles of a bird's nest, bound together like an abused library book.

"Russell," Mr. Davies repeated. The furs of his mustache always made it sound like he was mumbling. Russell scurried to obscure the pink slip, sliding it beneath one of his many organized stacks of paper. "I need to see you in my office before you leave for the day."

"Yes sir," Russell said.

"But not before you've finished The Big Project." Mr. Davies walked off, each heavy clomp of his shoes a hammer to Russell's skull.

So it was true. The pink slip was no mistake. Russell was to complete The Big Project, only to be tripped in the final stretch of his victory lap. Russell began to fume. Heaps of air funneled in and out of his flaring nostrils. He could no longer sit still and his lips failed to contain the frothing of his jaw. Moving with jerking, labored steps, Russell righted himself and began to stumble down the hall to the men's bathroom. Linda poked her head out to greet him, but Russell silenced her with a manic look as a bit of foam dribbled from his mouth.

With the steps of a gored beast, clinging to the walls for support, Russell shuffled his way into the bathroom. The lights automatically turned on and blasted him with an accosting fluorescence. He propped himself up on the sink and locked eyes with his own panicked reflection. The rubble of Russell's dedication threatened to flatten him. He splashed a handful of cold water on his face and took a deep breath.

An unearned tranquility descended suddenly, as an unfamiliar switch flipped in Russell's brain. It felt as though a waiter, in delivering a bowl of soup, had tripped and fallen, sending the bowl flying into the air, but Russell, rather than finding himself doused in piping chowder, had vaulted over the table and managed to swallow the bowl's contents effortlessly. Russell, his eyes still firmly closed, wanted to investigate this calm, but feared pushing against it would plunge him again into panic. Instead, he opened his eyes, and discovered a far stranger quality had descended upon the world around him.

The bathroom was cast entirely in black and white. Everywhere he looked, the world was leached of color. In the mirror, his green eyes were nearly white. His blue tie had become a slate gray. Despite this strangeness, Russell had never been more calm. These ashy hues carried a mystifying tranquility. Immersed in this beauty, Russell no longer felt the need to interrogate his peace, so he instead decided to continue about his day.

Russell patted his face with a paper towel—no longer brown but a dull soot—and made his way out of the bathroom. The rest of the office was similarly grayscale. Not a speck of color remained. The tile, previously a mishmash of discordant hues, now resembled a checkerboard. Through the office's lone window the sky itself had lost its blue, the trees their green. Russell watched as Linda left the breakroom holding yet another fresh pot of coffee, her chunky jewelry robbed of its turquoise tone. But it was the coffee itself that caught Russell's attention. Unlike the rest of the world, it was alight with vibrant color—a strange, lively hue, that undulated softly, and, try as he might, one he couldn't quite describe. It was as though it had heavily considered being blue, but decided that would be an unpopular marketing choice, and instead rebranded to vermilion. Yet, the color was simultaneously very much like pink and entirely unlike any pink Russell had ever seen and in fact a great deal more like chartreuse. The longer he looked at it the more it felt like a plain old fashioned red, but a red that had been promoted so far up the corporate hierarchy that it resembled lavender. Whatever it was, it escaped Russell's understanding, and yet, it was a familiar sight. Just earlier that day, in the heat of his paper sorting, he had seen the very same color. The familiarity delved even deeper than that. It was though this shade had always lurked at the periphery of his vision and only now was he fully awoken to it. The coffee, and its unknowable color, needed to be his. He suppressed a shiver as he realized he would have to speak to Linda.

“Excuse me, Linda.” Russell caught up to her just as she was settling into her chair.

“Could I see the coffee pot?”

“Oh Russ! I didn't realize you partook.” The marble in Linda's throat squashed ‘partook’ so that it sounded like a fake word she made up on the spot. “You know I never used to drink this

much coffee but then my niece introduced me to those little coffee pods and since then I have a cup every morning and by the time I get to work—”

The color was resembling indigo more and more, but also shifting entirely toward goldenrod. Alongside the pale black and white features of Linda’s cubicle, it was altogether breathtaking. Linda continued to flap at the mouth.

“But now I have so many coffee mugs that I feel like I don’t even know what to do with them! Every Christmas, every birthday, I feel like I just get more and more—”

Russell couldn’t take it. The coffee’s scintillating hue enchanted him and he could suffer no more whingeing. He seized the pot with both hands. It scalded his fingers but he couldn’t be bothered to care. Russell pressed the pot to his lips and began to guzzle the hot liquid. It dripped down the side of his face and stained his pressed collar, but an overwhelming bliss drowned out any concern for facial burns. When he had finally emptied the pot he ran his fingers over the liquid that had spilled on his neck and face and lapped up what remained. He pressed his lips to the stain on his shirt and sucked out the last drops.

Linda looked as if she were staring into oncoming traffic. Her face slowly cracked a nervous smile as her common sense lost the battle with this befuddling event.

“Russ... Are you okay?” Linda sounded genuinely concerned, in a way that made Russell’s stomach churn.

“Perfectly fine Linda!” Russell seized control of himself but suspected he didn’t sound quite as sane as he felt. “Having a lovely morning. Off to finish The Big Project!”

Russell spun on his heel and slid into his cubicle in a slapstick manner entirely unbecoming of himself. Concerns unalleviated, Linda slowly turned back to her work with a cacophonous clattering of jewelry.

Russell collapsed into his chair, entirely at ease, despite everything. There was something about that color, some ineffable quality that made him feel better knowing it was now a part of him. As he leaned back in his chair, he spied a strange change in his hands. They had begun to glow, just at the edges, beneath the fingernails, with that very same color. Russell was altogether elated. This color—his color—was a part of him. He looked around frantically for any sign of it elsewhere.

His attention returned to the stacks of paper that made up the completed Big Project, and the dreaded pink slip. Only, it wasn't quite so pink anymore. The slip had shifted to that same indescribable color. Russell stared at it for just a moment. In an instant he had crumpled it into a little ball and slammed it down his gullet. It wasn't easy to eat the paper, but with a hearty swig of water he managed to wash it down.

The same satisfaction from the coffee washed over Russell. There was a rightness to this consumption, a righteousness. This color belonged to him and, more importantly, it belonged in him. He immediately looked to his hands again. It had spread further, filling up to his knuckles. The big problems, the small problems, none of them mattered against the steadfast calm of his personal color. The Big Project was all for nothing, but who cared! He would be jobless come five o'clock, but that was inconsequential!

Russell blinked and a grin lit up his face. All his problems could collide into one mass of splendid color.

The papers, stacks and stacks of them, the entirety of The Big Project, were suddenly alight with a dazzling gleam. The beautiful brilliance of those sheets stood with stark contrast to the drab, colorless world. Russell immediately went to work. At first, he had to douse each page with a mouthful of water, but as he continued to eat stack after stack the consumption itself

became a pleasure. This was an act of conquest. Russell spared himself no indulgence. He relished in the long, slow process of gobbling each and every delightful page. He ate them in a discordant fashion, hopping from stack to stack with no rhyme, reason, or intention. Chaos had descended upon Russell's life like the ill-fated flight of a baby bird and he embraced it. It took him hours, but Russell swallowed each and every page. The best part was, by the time he finished, he didn't even feel full.

Russell checked the clock on his desk. It was almost 5 PM. Lost in his gluttony, he had wasted away the entire day. He ought to go see Mr. Davies and get fired. Russell righted himself and stifled a belch as the paper settled in his stomach. It settled just right.

Russell erected himself, expecting to draw strange looks from his coworkers in response to his feast. Instead, he saw them bunched around the one office window, mouths agape. Each member of the huddle had eyes fixed on the street below. Sandra had abandoned her *Solitaire* game. Johnson's flamingo tie soaked in his coffee, escaping his notice. Russell heard strange murmurings from the crowd, yet no one seemed to have anything to say about him. Russell almost felt compelled to bid them goodbye, but their fixation on the street below and the mixed terror and confusion on their faces advised him otherwise.

He left his cubicle for the last time and made his way toward Mr. Davies' office. Mr. Davies had the nicest office on the floor. It was tucked away down the long corridor to the printer where the boss wouldn't have to see any of his employees.

Russell found the walk much more palatable in comparison to this morning. The tile was less jarring. The light's flicker barely registered. The printer itself was a stalwart friend. As he passed by, Russell caught his reflection in the blank screen of its digital display. He had thought himself doused head to toe in brilliant color, but he was dismayed to find his upper lip had been

left a lonely gray. This wouldn't do at all. Russell took a breath, put a big smile on his face, and walked into Mr. Davies' office.

Soft light filtered from the large windows lining the office wall. The other walls were dominated by wildlife photography. Mr. Davies had a particular penchant for lions. Everywhere Russell looked, his eyes rested on another photo of barred teeth and bushy manes.

"Russell," Mr. Davies said. "I was beginning to worry you wouldn't stop by. I assume The Big Project is finished?"

Russell could only nod, his teeth frozen in a glistening smile. Mr. Davies' crimson suit was now a docile gray. The bushy vortex of his mustache remained as impassive as ever.

"Well, take a seat." Mr. Davies gestured toward the lone chair that sat opposite his wide mahogany desk. Russell sat himself down. The chair was lower than he had expected, so much so that it felt Mr. Davies peered down at him. The furry mass on the man's lip peered down at him too.

"Russell, I've really appreciated all the hard work you've put into The Big Project." The absurd mustache bounced up and down like a ping pong ball. It was a wonder it didn't get caught in the man's throat. "And you're a valued member of the company family."

Russell barely heard Mr. Davies' words. There was a glint of something in his mustache that had caught his attention. He swallowed another belch.

"So I want you to know that I don't feel good about what I have to do here. But, some cuts have to be made. We hired you for your expertise on the project, and now that it's done, we no longer need your services."

It was the same spectacular color. Not the entire mustache, not at first. But a few bristles lit up. And slowly it spread. As Mr. Davies continued to jabber, going on and on about corporate

downsizing and trimming loose ends, it spread across his upper lip. The smile that had cemented itself on Russell's jaw grew ever so slightly longer.

“With that said,” Mr. Davies reached beneath his desk and pulled out a pink slip—well, it may have once been pink, but it now was a calming gray. “I’m going to need you to deliver The Big Project, and then pack your things.”

Russell finally unleashed the belch he had been suppressing. It was deep and hearty, and only brought him further satisfaction. He remained fixated on Mr. Davies' glistening mustache.

“I can't deliver The Big Project.”

“And why exactly is that?” inquired Mr. Davies, his face incredulous after Russell's burp.

“Because I ate it.”

“What? You...ate it?” The paper in Mr. Davies' hand had begun to shimmer. Russell shot to his feet, cutting Mr. Davies off mid sentence.

“I can understand that you might be upset Russell, but there's no reason to—”

Russell snatched the paper from his boss' hand and gobbled it up. It slid down his throat after a day of practice.

“Russell! What is the meaning of this?”

Russell vaulted over the desk and knocked Mr. Davies to the ground. Russell was bony and oblong, but he sat himself atop Mr. Davies to pin him to the floor. Practically drooling, Russell latched his grinning teeth onto Mr. Davies' mustache and ripped it clean off his face. The older man unleashed a pained howl and lay stunned on the floor as Russell relinquished his grip. Mr. Davies placed a hand to his newly-clean upper lip and stammered gibberish.

The mustache had found a resting place just below Russell's nose. It tickled his mouth playfully. Russell stood himself up and looked down on his weakened boss. As Mr. Davies continued to quiver, his suit suddenly took on a new glow.

“Your jacket.” It was a statement and a command. Russell didn’t need to say anything else.

“B-but—” Mr. Davies was still shell shocked, occasionally moaning in pain.

Russell had no desire to exchange further pleasantries. He rolled Mr. Davies over onto his back and tore the jacket off. No sooner had he settled it around his shoulders than Mr. Davies’ pants adopted the same hue. He didn’t bother talking now.

In no time, Russell had Mr. Davies stripped to his skivvies. He looked at himself in the glass of one of Mr. Davies’ lion portraits. He radiated light head to toe, a resplendent beacon among a colorless world. He looked good. He looked smart. He looked special. And he looked very, very employed.

Russell scooped Mr. Davies’ briefcase off the ground and grabbed his hat off the back of the door.

“See you Monday,” Russell said to Mr. Davies, who had finally righted himself but still failed to form coherent sentences.

Russell turned off the office lights as he went. The color gleamed perpetually in the edges of his vision. He had never felt happier.

Russell cruised past his old cubicle. It barely even felt like his anymore.

Strangely, the office was almost entirely cleared out. Only Linda remained, staring out the window just as Russell had last seen her. She whipped her head around hearing the clacking of Russell’s boots, and forced a smile up through her horrified expression. Russell kept walking.

“Good night Mr. Davies!” Linda called after him.

Russell didn't bother to correct her, in fact, he wasn't sure she was mistaken at all.

II

Georgio spent the next two days grinding apart the pavement, cleaving out a 10 foot radius around the arm. When this revealed nothing more than a now eighteen foot tall arm, Mayor Valexia Doubleday called in a full construction crew. The intersection of North Street and South Avenue became a dig site. Days turned to weeks with no revelations aside from an increasingly longer arm. Still no elbow.

The mayor shut down the excavation after a month of uninspiring progress. The arm had proven immeasurably long, and, with a quarry-sized hole dug in the center of town, the mayor could no longer justify the cost. Her job now consisted of fielding calls from interested news crews, biting on the rumors of a strange visitor in an otherwise normal town. The mayor stamped out all these murmurings, denying the existence of the arm. She doubted she could profit from the unbelievability of the story for too long, considering how quickly word of mouth had already spread the news, but she was unwilling to go public. The arm's presence was a stain on her town, one which distracted the townspeople from all the good, practical work there was to be done. The Ragtime Cinema needed new roofing and the Oxtan Memorial bike path wanted for funding, but no one could be bothered to talk about anything but the arm.

In contrast to the mayor, Fire Chief Georgio Clements developed a budding respect for the arm throughout the excavation process. He liked seeing it every day. It might have been frightening at first, but it had proven itself harmless. Even better, it gave him the opportunity to do his job. And Georgio loved his job.

Once the excavation closed, Mable Paige paid the defunct dig site a visit. Mable had become a bit of a local celebrity since her discovery of the arm. The Fort Cunningham Daily Shouter even tracked her down for an interview, but the paper had been unable to entice a quote

from her beyond a faint description of the abject loneliness she had felt that awful afternoon. Since the interview, Mable had spoken a scant few words. At her mother's insistence, she began to see a child psychologist who convinced Mable she was suffering from a litany of traumas brought on from the harrowing event. Exposure therapy was prescribed.

So Mable Paige visited the dig site with her mother chaperoning from a distance. Worming through the crowd of fifteen or so onlookers, she reached the caution tape perimeter. She couldn't decide if the arm was more or less frightening now. It seemed much bigger than when she had first seen it, but she wasn't sure it was the bigness that had frightened her in the first place. One thing was for sure, it was nice to not be alone in seeing it.

Mable was always alone in her nightmares. Even when the arm appeared, it was far off in the distance and it never acknowledged her. The child psychologist had told Mable that experiencing nightmares was an important part of processing her traumas, but she had stopped sleeping most nights.

"It's pretty cool, isn't it?"

Mable was stirred from her thoughts by a voice to her right. She recognized the boy from school, although he had never spoken to her before.

"You know, I high-fived it. I'm the only person in town who's touched it. Even Chief Clements only poked it with a pen." The boy smiled at her, his face flush with the expectation of praise. "Hey, I know you, right? You're Mable? We go to school together. I'm Jeremiah."

The boy, Jeremiah, extended a hand, which Mable tentatively took. Jeremiah had an emphatic handshake.

"Where do you think it's from?" Jeremiah asked. "My dad says it was sent down here by aliens, but I don't think aliens would know what arms look like."

Mable tried to think of something to say in response, but ended up just nodding at Jeremiah.

“You’re really quiet, Mable,” Jeremiah said.

“I’m processing my traumas.”

“Cool.”

The two chatted until Jeremiah was called home for dinner. Actually, Jeremiah did most of the talking, but Mable found she didn’t mind being talked at, in fact, she sort of liked it. As she turned to head home herself, she gave the hand a tentative wave. It remained apathetic. Mable would later tell her mother that she no longer wanted to see the child psychologist, although she would continue to visit the hand.

Liberated Flesh

Adela Aleda couldn't remember the last time she clipped her fingernails. And yet they were so short. She was tidy in the average sort of way—not an impeccable nails sort of way. Yet, it looked as though she kept an untenable manicuring regime.

Adela only noticed this peculiar quality because she had resurrected her childhood habit of stress-induced nail biting. The inherent subordination of childhood had caused her endless worry, but a seamless transition into adulthood seemingly killed the habit for good. Adela knew what had shocked a beat back into the heart of this nervous tick: today was the day she had scheduled the end of her relationship.

She waited to catch the bus to Fort Cunningham where she would surprise Amaya Ma at The Container Store and deliver the news. Each night after work, Amaya took this very same bus into the city to spend the night with Adela. Adela thought it cruel for Amaya to journey to her just to receive bad news, so the midday surprise was a natural solution. Without a nail to nibble, Adela picked at her lip and boarded the bus.

As Adela Aleda pondered the why behind her nails' shortness, the person who knew why pondered her relationship's looming expiration. Amaya Ma worked at The Container Store, although she was hesitant to call herself an employee as she felt that made the store part of her identity. Rather, The Container Store employed Amaya Ma, and had done so since it first opened its doors back in April. The store was the town's second most exciting arrival that month.

If nail-biting were a nervous habit in Amaya's employ, she'd certainly have already chewed her fingers bare. Instead, she was a foot tapper. She tried to time her tapping with the beat of the culturally irrelevant pop song echoing throughout the empty store, but her rhythm had always been terrible. A customer came into the store. He brought an unconscionably large

tupperware to the register. Amaya rang him up. She snipped his receipt off with her pair of register scissors. This was another silly habit. She didn't like the jagged lines left on torn receipts. She preferred a clean break. The man left with his smooth receipt and unconscionable tupperware.

Customer service was mind-numbing in a way Amaya liked. She did the same thing day-in and day-out. A customer brought an unconscionably large container to the register. Amaya rang them up and snipped off their receipt. Her body barrelled through this routine without meaning, dragging her brain along. Her shifts passed like flipping through a catalog, memorable only in the specifics of which unconscionably large containers were salvaged from the aisles. But this routine lost its power some weeks ago.

Amaya Ma was burdened with being a fantastic listener. This skill sourced from a childhood spent friendless and alone. Because she so rarely got the chance to hold a conversation, she would cling to every word that passed her interlocutor's lips. By forfeiting her opportunity to talk, Amaya had hoped to be slightly less friendless and slightly less alone. This did not work, but it blessed and cursed her with an exceptional ear for the truth. And that ear had long ago discovered Adela's intentions. The realization that Adela was leaving her came slowly at first and then all at once. It was in the way she held her, without tension, as though she hoped Amaya might slip away. And then it was in the way she kissed her, ready to pull back at any moment. Soon it was in everything from curt texts to halfhearted goodbyes that whispered of permanence.

In some sense, Amaya had always been waiting for Adela to leave her. That was why she stole from her. She was hesitant to say "stealing" at the start of the relationship, but that was what anyone else would call it. The fine line between convenience and theft was hopelessly

blurred in the blending of their lives. One might say that the first thing Amaya stole was a hairbrush, but that didn't count as stealing until Adela wanted it back. Someone else might say the first thing stolen was a croissant, wordlessly taken from Adela's fridge the morning after their second encounter. But Adela would have let her take the croissant if Amaya had asked. It was hard for Amaya to feel guilty about any of it when everything she took already felt like her own. Adela and her immediately connected with the unambiguity of two matching puzzle pieces. Linked to a person in that way, it was laughable to lead separate lives. By the time Amaya left Adela's apartment with an avocado, an evening dress, and an alarm clock stuffed in her bag, any pangs of guilt had long been smothered by the undeniable rightness of her love. The repossession of Adela's things entwined the lovers in a sense more intimate than physical touch. Adela couldn't leave as long as her chapstick was in Amaya's purse, her favorite book on Amaya's nightstand, and her shoes on Amaya's feet.

This would, of course, imminently prove untrue. The bus turned down South Avenue and Adela could see The Container Store at the end of the street. She could also see the infamous Fort Cunningham arm. She'd seen it before in pictures shown to her on Amaya's phone, but those had done it little justice. In pixels it had seemed so docile. Amaya described it like a tree, a harmless piece of landscaping. Looking at it now, Adela could only think of it as a beast. The road around it was torn apart, like an archaeological excavation had appeared in the center of town. It made the arm look even bigger.

She tore her eyes from the arm as the bus pulled up. She was the only passenger still aboard; it was rare that anyone stuck around to the very last stop. Adela visualized the perfect execution of this breakup. She pulled her hair into a high ponytail so that she could think better. The tension snatched her disparate thoughts into a coagulated whole.

Enter The Container Store. Polite greeting. Friendly greeting, even. Don't ask questions and don't answer them either. "Amaya I'm breaking up with you." It was necessary to get straight to the point. "This relationship has become possessive and I need space. I like being myself sometimes. I don't want to disappear into my partner." Amaya would have a well-conceived retort to that. It was important to ignore whatever she said. She could be very convincing, not in the eloquence of her argument, but in the scope of evidence she presented. That was one of the first things Adela had liked about Amaya. She was always noticing things and she was always bringing them up in surprising ways. She'd noticed on their first date that Adela matched her hair tie to her shoes. For her birthday she'd given her a pair of royal blue pumps and a pack of hair ties to match. The thought of those shoes panged Adela's gut. It'd be easier to end things if things were all bad. She'd come closer to loving Amaya than she ever had anyone else.

Adela's legs reached The Container Store before her mind reached the end of her plan. She'd gotten distracted again. It was easy to do when thinking about Amaya.

Amaya Ma pretended not to see Adela enter the store. The sight of her girlfriend induced an immediate flush of happiness that quickly sublimated to dread. Adela would have only one reason to come all this way on a random afternoon. Amaya fiddled with her receipt scissors as though performing essential scissor maintenance. It gave her somewhere safe to rest her eyes. Only when Adela approached the register did she finally look up.

"Hi Amaya," Adela didn't pause, didn't give her a chance to speak. "I'm breaking up with you." The words dropped like a ceramic dish. "This relationship has become possessive and—"

“Oh.” Amaya cut her off. “Okay. You can keep whatever stuff I left at your place. I’ll text you if I really need something.”

Confused at Amaya’s nonchalance, Adela stumbled over her words.

“I was just saying... I need space. I like being myself sometimes and I—”

“Yeah I get that. It’s fine.” Amaya impressed herself with her own performance.

“Oh, alright,” this was going better than Adela had hoped, yet it felt worse than she’d feared. “I guess I’ll text you too if I need something.”

“Sounds good. See you around.”

With a wordless nod, Adela spun to leave.

Autonomous hands too fast for thought, Amaya lashed out with her receipt scissors and separated Adela’s ponytail from her head with one clean snip. The bundle of hair fell into Amaya’s waiting hand and she stashed it in her pocket. Amaya stifled her foot tapping as Adela paused at the exit. She turned to suggest a backward glance, but her eyes never met Amaya’s. Amaya brushed her fingers through the bundled hair as Adela disappeared down South Avenue.

Adela Aleda didn’t discover she’d lost six inches of hair until she returned home some two hours later. It was in passing, with a peripheral glance to a mirror, that the realization hit. Her first inclination was to look in her purse, but she realized mid-dig just how silly that was. People’s hair fell out all the time, but that was a gradual process of loose strands. She walked circles in her apartment, searching for the half ponytail she knew she wouldn’t find.

The only person who’d seen her that day was Amaya. She was reluctant to reach out but needed someone to tell her she wasn’t crazy. She started with a text, but when that wasn’t immediately answered, she called.

Amaya Ma hadn't stuck around to finish her shift at The Container Store. The bus doors committed Adela to a lengthy inter-city commute, buying Amaya time to pack up and skip town. Leaving Fort Cunningham forever might be irrational but it wasn't unrealistic. She'd only moved here a few months ago. The Container Store was her only commitment. Her parents would welcome her upstate for as long as she could stand them.

Amaya hopped the flimsy fence cordoning off the arm. Cutting through the dig site saved a few minutes on her commute. Amaya wasn't insane because insane people didn't question their sanity. But, a fistfull of her ex-lover's hair didn't make for good optics. If—when, definitely when—Adela discovered her missing hair, it wouldn't be difficult to trace back to Amaya. “Where's my hair?” would entail other questions like “why do you have my scarf?” or “what sort of psychopath keeps her ex-lover's fingernail shavings in a mason jar?”

Amaya unlocked the deadbolt and burst into her apartment. The wall of spices in the cabinet above the stove obscured her deepest secret. Left to right: a mason jar of fingernails clipped in the dead of night, a Ziploc of baby teeth swiped when she met Adela's parents, two tupperware of skin dander, the smaller of the two filled from a nasty sunburn Adela got on vacation, the larger sourced from natural shedding and some scraping, and a cookie jar of hair, previously individual strands, now joined by this fresh clump.

The call arrived just as Amaya got the zipper shut on her suitcase. Adela's voice evoked the comfort and fear of a child facing a disappointed parent.

“Amaya?”

“Hi.” Amaya paused too long. “I wasn't expecting you to call.”

“Me neither, but I'm kind of freaking out.” Adela sounded like she was. “When you saw me earlier, how long was my hair?”

“What do you mean?” Amaya crafted. “I guess it was as long as it always is.”

“Well it’s shorter now. Like half a foot shorter. And I’m worried I have alopecia or cancer or something.”

“Cancer doesn’t work like that.”

“What?”

“Cancer doesn’t make your hair fall out. It’s the chemo that does that.”

There was a pause on the other end, then the faintest of giggles. Adela had always admired Amaya’s thoroughness.

“Okay well I don’t have cancer.”

“Yay! Cancer free.”

“I need you to be less chipper about this.”

“Sorry.” Amaya really was. “I’m just having a little trouble understanding you. Even if you are missing some hair, so what? Not much you can do about it now. This is the sort of world where arms grow through the ground without any rhyme or reason; don’t worry so much.”

“I—” Adela disagreed in her gut, but she couldn’t articulate her intuition. “Sure...Thanks Amaya. I’ll try not to worry about it.”

Adela hung up and worried with renewed abundance. Her head felt lighter. Focusing on anything but the mirror was futile. The shorter cut severed any resemblance to her former curls. This woman wasn’t whom she pictured herself to be. She sent Amaya a photo. She could at least rule out insanity.

Ok, I believe you. A few seconds passed. You pull it off.

Sitting on her suitcase, Amaya thought it was actually ridiculous just how well the short hair worked on Adela. Amaya could pretend it was due to her skills with the scissors, but she knew it'd been a hack job. Adela was just that perfect.

I'm taking the last bus back into Fort Cunningham.

That was bad. Amaya's only way out of town was that bus and she couldn't get on if Adela was getting off.

What?? Why?

Adela didn't completely know why, but she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep without some answers. Maybe she'd find her hair in the cushions of the bus seat or snagged in the sliding doors of The Container Store.

I just feel like I have to. Don't worry about me. I can stay at that one motel by the General Store.

This was fine. Amaya could just lay low for the night and leave in the morning. Not ideal, but a solution; she still wouldn't have to face Adela.

About an hour and a half later, Adela knocked on the door to Amaya's apartment. Amaya was six spoonfuls into her eighth bowl of cereal and two seasons deep into a mindless police serial. The peephole showed Adela's stoic face and the first seven bowls threatened to reemerge into the eighth.

Adela knocked again. She worried this wasn't Amaya's place. Only early in the relationship had Amaya invited her over. Amaya was always far more eager to meet in the city. A retch from the other side of the door proved someone was home.

“Amaya?” Adela reached out. “I’m sorry to show up like this. The motel was closed. Apparently they damaged the plumbing with that big hole in the center of town.” Some time passed. “Can I come in?”

Amaya didn’t know she could run like she did. She hid the suitcase in her hallway closet, the hairdryer in the cabinet, the evening dress in the bottom of her hamper, and the toaster in the window planter. She inhaled sharply to catch her breath, and swung the door open.

“Adela,” Amaya said with careful neutrality. “I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“I’m sorry to impose,”—Adela really was—“especially after earlier today. I promise if I had anyone else to stay with I’d have gone to them.”

“It’s really fine.” Amaya lied in many senses. It was both very much not fine and more than fine. “You can have the couch. Come on in. I was just watching some TV.”

The freshly ex-lovers sat turgidly on the couch. The police in the procedural hunted down a serial killer called the Toe Milliner. He made hats out of his victim’s toes. Amaya had been wondering if she could turn Adela’s toenails into some sort of hat, but it was weird to think about that with her here.

Adela paid no attention to the Toe Milliner. Her hair was nowhere to be found. Not on the bus. Not in the street. She’d thrown a rock through the front of The Container Store and still hadn’t found anything inside. Adela realized that was an irrational thing to do, but she was having an irrational day. She bit at her nail, forgetting its shortness.

“Ow!” Adela drew blood from her finger.

Amaya retrieved a bandage for her ex-lover. She gently held Adela’s finger and wrapped it.

“Are you okay?” Amaya asked.

“Yeah,” Adela lied. “...” Then reconsidered.

“Actually, no, I’m very much not okay. There’s something wrong with me. I’m decomposing. I might be dying. My hair is falling out. My fingernails are too short. I don’t have enough skin to cover my body. If I make one wrong move I’ll snag myself on something and get pulled apart.” Adela’s lungs were too full. “I don’t know how long I’ve felt this way but I want it to stop. I don’t care that my hair is short but I should get to choose where and how and why it looks the way it does. I don’t care if my fingernails are too short but I need to know the reason why; I need to *be* the reason why!” Fast, hard breaths couldn’t force out enough air.

“The short hair looks nice,” Amaya offered.

“I don’t care how it looks!” Anger was a good mechanism for expelling air. “Maybe I want to be ugly! Maybe I want to be a nasty sewer troll with warts head-to-toe. I should get to make that choice. It’s not fair! It’s not fair that my body decided how it looks without asking me first! It’s not fucking fair!” The force of the expletive hammered out the remaining air. Adela slumped into Amaya’s arms. The Toe Milliner fled from the detectives and into the path of an oncoming squad car. He died on impact. The deputy behind the wheel got a medal for his service. Amaya kissed her ex-lover and was kissed back. The ex-lovers wished their embrace could say all that went unsaid.

Amaya Ma and Adela Aleda spent the night like lovers would.

Sleepy limbs entangled beneath Amaya’s bedsheets. A hand at the waist bound the ex-lovers side-by-side. It was always in the dark that Adela fell in love again. It was why she’d struggled to end things with Amaya for so long. In the dark, Amaya was perfect. Her soft breath assured Adela that she was not alone. Her strong arms proved that someone wanted her near.

And the dark waned the need for conversation. The two connected best through physicality and the dark demanded nothing more.

But this time Adela Aleda could not fall in love. There was a tightness to Amaya's arm, like a lock sealed with a bent key, with no intention of loosening. Beneath that weight, Adela wanted nothing more than to be free.

As Adela's spark failed to rekindle, Amaya's long-held flame flickered. Amaya Ma did not want Adela to leave. This scared her. She had already planned to fish the blood-dribbled bandage out of the trash the following morning. This was not healthy behavior. Everything Adela thought was wrong with her was something wrong with Amaya. And neither woman would get better together.

Amaya slid out of bed. "Bathroom," was the answer given to Adela's wordless inquisition. Instead, she crept to the closet and removed her suitcase, wheeling it out to the front door. Adela would question why she was gone so long, but Amaya could lie about an upset stomach. That was practically true anyways.

With Amaya absent, Adela was free to go. She crept to the nightstand, hunting for anything sharp. A silver handle poked out of Amaya's purse, and Adela retrieved a pair of scissors. Amaya would question where she had disappeared to, but Adela could lie about needing fresh air. That was practically true anyways.

Taking opposite routes, the two women made their way to the center of town. Amaya heaved her suitcase over the dig site fence. Adela jiggled the gate, finding it negligently unlocked. The unconscionably-filled containers were easy to retrieve from the suitcase. The scissors were loose and fluid in Adela's hands. Amaya cast the first container into the pit as Adela made the first snip. The soft lock floated into the abyss while the glass jar plummeted. It

did not shatter quietly. Adela looked up, her hair in uneven clumps. Amaya looked up, her secrets aligned before her.

Across the ravine and through the murky dark ex-lovers locked eyes. Together they cast their burdens into the pit to be swallowed by fresh earth. The arm did nothing, but both women took comfort that it was between them.

III

On the whole, Fort Cunningham had come to accept the arm. Fewer and fewer onlookers returned to gape at the strange sight. Instead, passersby offered friendly waves. The arm was the topic of much pleasant conversation. The local patisserie sold cookies in the shape of a gray hand. People left handprints in the newly poured cement covering the ex-dig site, surrounding the hand with smaller replicas. The students of Fair County Middle School practiced their persuasive writing by crafting essays arguing to give the arm an official name. Popular choices included “Army McArm,” “Mr. Hand,” and “Steve.”

Mable Paige’s own essay argued that the arm shouldn’t be given a name, because it might already have one, and it’s not fair to just rename something without asking first. She received a C- for not following the rubric.

Despite her lackluster grade, Mable Paige did find a spark of inspiration in the assignment. She began to wonder what the town could do to officially acknowledge the arm. Surely if her school could suggest new names for it, someone like the mayor could do even more.

For a long time now, Mable had harbored a growing suspicion that the arm was incredibly lonely. People talked about it and waved at it, but only rarely did anyone spend any real time with it. Mable made a point of sitting with the arm for a few minutes every day on her walk home from school. There was still a small caution tape perimeter, but she got as close as she could and sometimes would scoot just beneath the tape if she was feeling bold. Even if the arm never did anything to thank her, Mable knew it would mean a whole lot to her to have a friend if she were alone in an unfamiliar place. But Mable couldn’t always be there, and she

didn't want the arm to get lonely. So Mable put together a proposal to designate the arm a historical landmark.

This was a big undertaking for a kid her age, so Mable swallowed her anxiety and went about recruiting help. Jeremiah Brown had continued to talk to her, having small conversations in passing in the halls of Fair County Middle School. He had even beckoned her over to his lunch table once, but he sat surrounded by talkative kids Mable didn't know, so she pretended not to see him. Jeremiah demonstrated an interest in the arm rivaled only by Mable's, so he was the logical choice to help with her project.

Mable tracked down Jeremiah during their mutual gym class, which he always spent repeatedly trying to dunk a basketball into a hoop hopelessly too high for his stature. Even when Mable got him to sit down and talk to her, he wouldn't stop dribbling the basketball.

"So you're talking to people about Mr. McArm?"

"Basically," Mable said. "I want to write about why everyone should care about it, so that it can be happier here."

Jeremiah tried to spin the ball on his finger but it immediately fell off and bounced over to Mable. She did her best to bounce it back.

"What can I do to help?" Jeremiah asked.

Mable explained that she wanted him to write about his experience high-fiving the arm. The next week she received a manila folder slightly stained with apple juice that contained an extraordinarily long account. Jeremiah detailed everything from the texture of the arm's skin to a hypothetical drawing of what he thought the arm's home might be like (he theorized it came from the Earth's core where a species of sentient arms lived together).

Jeremiah's was one of several personal accounts Mable was able to collect over the next few weeks. One of her most compelling pieces came from Georgio Clements. The Fire Chief had nothing but positive things to say of the arm and Mable found herself greatly enjoying their conversation. Mable worked on the proposal in every moment she could spare. In the back of her math class she transcribed her interviews, one earbud furtively in place. At Sunday school she hoarded the expensive construction paper, sliding reams of it into her bag when no one was looking. While her mother tended the counter of the Fort Cunningham General Store, Mable worked on her own narrative in the back room. She exercised every vocabulary word she had so copiously memorized for class. When her mother popped her head in from the front room, Mable would lie about doing schoolwork. She completed her proposal with a hypothetical imagining of the park that she hoped would be constructed around the arm. It used her best colored pencils, and she'd blended three different shades to get the arm's pale skin just right.

After rereading the proposal over and over to polish each and every single detail, Mable finally ventured over to Fort Cunningham city hall and placed it gingerly in the mayor's mailbox.

The Hollow Boy

Lester Boone had again beaten the sun to its morning rising. The darkness outside his window was as calmingly unchanged as ever. He threw aside the threadbare sheets he had slept on for longer than he could recall and shuffled over to the corner of his shack recognizable as a kitchen only by the presence of a hot plate and minifridge. Lester retrieved one of the many cans of baked beans stacked atop the fridge and popped it open with his can opener. When the hot plate had enticed steam to rise from the can, Lester scooped it up with his calloused hands and grabbed his one spoon on his way out the door. He ate this breakfast, the same he had eaten for as long as he could remember, as he watched the sunrise over the only horizon he had ever known. This was the one moment of indulgence he allowed himself each day, and he immediately got to work once the sunrise's gradient had stretched past the canopy of his fingers shielding his eyes.

Fair County's smallest dairy farm supported five cows—and would soon welcome its sixth—as well as a small crop of corn and hay and one lonesome farmer. Lester spent the morning feeding and milking each of the cows. Paula-Anne was always delighted to see him. Maisy and Daisy dosed out their typical amount of sass, but in their own endearing way. Braxton was shy as ever, but melted beneath the soft scratches of Lester's fingers. And Mama remained stalwart and strong, her rotund belly containing the weight of her calf. It was so unlike Lester to lose track of the important details, but he couldn't for the life of him remember exactly when Mama had gotten pregnant. He knew the month, but he struggled to pin down the exact day, and the longer he thought about it the less he was sure he even knew the year. The calf must be due any day now, because Mama had been carrying it for the longest time, yet the specific date and

time escaped him. He got lost so easily in his well-oiled routine that the colors of each day blended into one unchanging canvas.

Because it was a Wednesday, Lester loaded his pails from throughout the week into his truck and began the journey into town. He'd recently added a new stop to his supply route and was headed into the small town of Fort Cunningham. The old dirt road passed by the dilapidated orange groves of a rundown farm, a bulletin board advertising a distant surf shop, and long, long stretches of absolutely nothing. Lester was completely isolated out on his little patch of land—just the way he wanted.

As Lester finally hit the outskirts of town, he turned onto South Avenue and continued toward his destination, the Fort Cunningham General Store. The shop sat just a few blocks ahead. Lester's mind wandered as he drove. He was still hung up on the date of Mama's pregnancy. He had known cows to take the better part of a year to give birth, but he could have sworn it had been longer than that. Far, far longer. How hadn't he noticed before? Lester's thoughts were interrupted by a previously unseen obstacle in his path. He swerved his wheel hard to the right to avoid hitting the massive gray arm in the middle of the road. The vehicle grazed just past it and the force of the turn sent the car swerving into a fire hydrant, which crumpled the front bumper and sent a persistent jet of water into the air. Lester stumbled out of the car and looked incredulously at the interloper that had interrupted his travels. The limb was eye catching, so much so that he had no idea how he could have missed it moments ago. In the General Store's front window, he saw the concerned expression of a little girl, although her eyes were trained not on Lester, but the limb. Distant sirens made it clear help was on the way. Lester allowed himself to collapse into the pavement.

The next few hours passed in snapshots. Someone in medical garb shone a bright light in Lester's face and helped him to his feet. A fireman wrangled the erupting hydrant under control. A tow truck pulled Lester's car off the sidewalk and down the street. Before he knew it, Lester was riding in the passenger side of a fire truck, heading home.

"You got any other way to get into town?" asked the burly fireman behind the wheel.

Lester shook his head in the negative.

"Well I can tow your car down here once it's fixed up. You gonna be alright on your own out here for a few days?"

Lester nodded his head in the affirmative.

A few moments of silence passed.

"What was that thing?" Lester asked.

"What thing—oh, the arm?" The man sounded surprised Lester was asking. "I take it you don't come into town too often then. Nobody's really sure what it is, although plenty of people have asked. I spent some time trying to figure it out myself. Most everyone has accepted it as part of the town."

"You just let that thing sit in the center of town?" Lester's tongue stumbles over each word. He was still immensely shaken up.

"Not much else to do about it."

Lester turned and watched the orange trees roll by for the remainder of the ride.

When the truck arrived, Lester silently hopped out and shambled over toward his trailer. The fireman shouted some sort of goodbye after him, but it couldn't reach Lester's ears through the fog clouding his head. He pushed into the trailer and slumped into his bed.

Lester awoke after an indiscernible amount of time. The sun had gone down outside. His head was somewhat clearer. This was the first nap he could ever remember taking. He bolted to his feet. The cows hadn't been fed.

Lester hustled over to the barn. He was prepared to fling the door open and get to feeding, but he found it slightly ajar. This was strange. Lester always closed the door to ensure the cows wouldn't catch a chill. It had been an unusual afternoon, but Lester was last in the barn this morning, so there was no reason he would have overlooked such a thing. He tentatively nudged the door open and was greeted by a horrific sight.

Mama lay prone in the center of the barn, the door to her pen busted open from the inside. From the damage to the door and surrounding space, it seemed she had burst out in a fit of flailing. Lester knelt over her and found she was breathing faintly. Her exposed udders were bright red and raw. Lester sought a blanket to cover the injured cow and only then did he realize there was considerably less heft to her body. Her calf had finally come. Lester quickly checked on the other cows, ensured Mama was comfortable, and, remembering the ajar door, went in search of the calf. There was theoretically enough time for Mama to have gone into labor and given birth in his absence, but it would have been a rushed and exceptionally dangerous process without him there. The calf was likely injured and in need of comfort.

Lester found no immediate sign of life outside the barn doors aside from the constant hum of countless insects. He took a few tentative steps around the barn, trying not to spook the calf. As Lester passed by, something darted through the corn crop, moving too fast to be a newborn calf. Fearing it was a preyful bobcat looking for an easy meal, Lester gave chase. The creature increased its speed, outpacing his pursuit. Lester burst through the other side of the corn field, spying his quarry a few yards ahead, atop a slight incline. The creature was no bobcat.

It vaguely resembled a young boy, no older than ten, but it was evident that this creature was no simple child. Its skin was a pasty gray and, in most places, hung loose like there was nothing inside. The top quarter of its head was completely missing, as though it had been sawed right off, providing a generous view into the hollow abyss inside the creature's fleshy skull. Its mouth hung open, as did its eyes, which seemed to lack lids entirely, further exposing the complete nothingness within. Its arms hung limply at its sides, empty tubes of flesh. The neck possessed the same limp quality, causing the head to loll to the side. Only the legs stood erect and seemed to contain substance beyond the flesh, although they were lumpy and ill-proportioned, like poorly stuffed sausage. The entire creature resembled a pile of hastily folded sheets, weakly constructed and likely to collapse at any moment. Held by its head in the creature's mouth was a small rabbit. Its legs kicked desperately. A grotesque sucking sound emanated from the creature, and the rabbit's legs stopped kicking.

Lester was paralyzed with fear. He kept a shotgun in the bed of his truck, but that was of no use to him now. The creature turned and fixed its eyes on him. It was physically smaller than Lester and seemed far flimsier, yet it struck in him the fear of God. Straightening his spine, Lester tried to take a confident step forward. As he moved, the creature's head swiveled away, and it bolted into the dark, faster than Lester could ever hope to follow.

At a tentative pace that heightened to a sprint, Lester retreated through the corn and back into the barn. He threw shut the lock, slid a rake between the door handles, and shoved a heavy wooden table on its side to act as a barricade. Lester collapsed at the back wall, panting in equal parts from panic and exertion. From a rack on the wall he wrenched a cattle prod. The old device never saw any use and as a result had no charge, but it was the best he could do to arm himself. Lester struggled to wrap his head around what he had just seen. Whatever that creature was, and

as impossible as it seemed, Lester battled a growing fear that Mama had birthed it. The wounded cow still lay in the center of the barn, her chest rising and falling with inconsistent rhythm.

Lester moved to sit alongside her, fixing his eyes on the door. He stared at it for an indiscernibly long period, fear mangling his perception of time.

Lester found himself sitting no easier despite his temporal distance from the creature's emergence. It could've been minutes or hours after sitting down that he heard a fleshy slap from outside. He took a sharp breath. The sound returned intensified and Lester's attention snapped to the barn door. Folds of pale skin flapped beneath the door's crack, edging in and out of it as though to heave its way through. Lester scampered to his feet to stop the creature's intrusion, but one heavy smack signified its entrance. The creature slid beneath the door feet first. The little bit of substance that had originally amassed at its legs was distributed throughout it such that the creature was pressed thin. As it righted itself, its interior contents appeared to slide and pool again at its legs. It stood ever so slightly sturdier than when Lester had seen it before.

Overtaken by galvanizing terror Lester lunged forward and drove the cattle prod into the creature's head. It collapsed weightlessly beneath the impact, but seemed to suffer no injury. As Lester fell atop it, the creature shifted around him with baffling agility. Its loose skin put no weight on Lester, but its wrappings coiled so tightly as to constrict his movement and render him unable to stand up. The creature latched its loose mouth onto Lester's arm and the horrid sucking sound began to emanate from it again, now accompanied by Lester's agonized scream. The creature's gullet sucked all the way up to the elbow. The pressure increased, as did the pain. Lester watched the entire grotesque spectacle from the hole in the creature's head. He could feel the creature grow heavier as the pain became so intense he no longer experienced the sensation at all. Lester flailed against the creature with the cattle prod. From deep within its failing battery

surged the last dredges of its charge, sending the hollow boy scampering backwards. The last thing Lester saw before falling unconscious was the creature unfurled from his body, fleeing beneath the barn door, its body a little less hollow and Lester's left arm ending just above the elbow.

To say Lester awoke would be to diminish the agony that haunted his restless sleep. Rather, the dam of Lester's unconscious state finally collapsed beneath the weight of his insufferable pain and thrust him from rest. Sunlight flooded the barn. Lester couldn't recall the last time the sun had risen without his observation. Now, its light was more adversary than companion, illuminating in full the vacancy below Lester's left elbow.

There was no blood, no exposed bone, no gruesome display. His arm simply stopped at the elbow. The remaining stump continually ached as though the hollow boy were still latched.

Lester lay on the ground for several minutes until he could muster the willpower to right himself. The barn was largely unchanged. At some point in the night Mama had returned to her pen. She stood upright now, breathing steadily. Seeing her improved condition brought Lester some small relief.

The pain in Lester's arm was joined by a pain in his hollow stomach. He couldn't remember ever having missed a meal, especially his breakfast. In fact, he was well behind on his entire day of work. By this time the cows should've already been fed and he should be well into his second milking. Hustling to the barn door Lester paused for a moment. The creature was still out there. He had no phone. No weapon that could mount a useful opposition. No way to get into town until his truck was returned to him. Save for his five cows, Lester was completely alone. And all Lester wanted was to fall into the comfort of his daily routine.

First peeking his head out the door, Lester crept toward his shack. There was a trodden stretch of field leading away from the barn that looked to be the path of the creature's flight. Hopeful it had not returned, Lester quickened his pace to the shack and slipped through the door. As his proximity to his breakfast increased, so did his hunger pangs. Only once he planted the can opener on the baked beans did Lester realize the difficulty that lay ahead. He needed one hand to squeeze the apparatus and another to crank the opener itself. Lester tried extending his one hand to perform both functions, but his fingers were hopelessly short. In a fit of frustration Lester bashed the opener against the can, sending it flying off the counter. A few beans spilled onto the floor from the small slit the opener made. Lester sank to the floor and picked up the spilled beans, eating them one-by-one. He then held the can to his lips and sipped at the small hole. He ate his breakfast in this way, occasionally making an attempt with the opener to widen the hole.

The remainder of Lester's day was full of compromise. He tried to blanket himself in the shelter of his routine but found it irrevocably shorn by his newfound disability. Milking took twice as long with half as many hands. The ladies seemed confused by his difficulty. Daisy and Maisy sniffed and kicked the ground in frustration as he fumbled with their udders. Braxton watched Lester with sad eyes. Mama still seemed uneasy and Lester decided to give her the day off. When the work was done, Lester found himself unable to even lift the milk pail. Not only was the pail too heavy, its handle was designed with the expectation of two hands and lifting it with one would send the milk spilling over the barn floor. With a sigh Lester sank to his knees. The gentle life he had carefully built for himself was lost. It wasn't just his missing limb, though that certainly prohibited his work; it was the undeniable strangeness of the past 36 hours. How

could he persist in a quiet existence when hands sprouted from the ground and cows birthed hollow boys? He had no desire to understand these things, just a need for them to end.

From the barn's roof hung a system of pulleys Lester would occasionally use to suspend heavy farm equipment. The pulley's crank was rusted and out of use, but Lester applied enough torque to get it moving again. He hooked up the milk pail and was able to crank it up to the rafters. Lester retrieved his remaining supply of baked beans and spent the rest of the day slashing the cans open one by one and emptying their contents beneath the hanging pail.

Throughout this he set the cattle prod to charge in his shack. Lester then walked each of the ladies from the barn to his shack. The cows stood with scarcely room to breathe, but they would be far safer here, away from the site of his trap. The ladies could feel the tension in the air and a sense of timid fear settled in. Not even Paula-Anne made a peep. With weapon in hand and the evening sun sinking lower, Lester withdrew to the barn's annals and hid where he could reach the crank.

Lester couldn't be sure how long he waited, but his focus was undeterred with time. When darkness was well set over the evening, Lester again heard the awful squelching noise from the night prior. Bits of flesh, looking lumpier than before, emerged from the other side of the barn door. The hollow boy pushed its way through and shambled to its feet. It was undoubtedly steadier now, its insides thinly distributed but substantial. The creature leered and turned its head, empty eyes scanning the empty pens. Lester's remaining hand gripped the crank, ready to drop the pail at the slightest indication of bean-ward movement. Yet the creature seemed to have no interest. It paced around the space before turning again toward the door. Lester thought of the ladies in his shack. What if the hollow boy found them? In a fit of frenzy Lester

bolted out of his hiding spot, planting himself in the middle of the beans and shouting at the beast.

The hollow boy's head swiveled and it again made its guttural suckling noise as it lunged forward. Lester stumbled backwards, hurling the cattle prod at the crank's release mechanism. The pail sloshed milk all the way down as it plummeted directly atop of the hollow boy mid-leap. The trapped creature wriggled and flailed, producing increasingly frantic sucking sounds. The pail had it firmly pinned amongst the beans, now strewn across the entire barn. A divot formed in the creature's chest where the pail parted its interior contents. Lester jumped at it with the cattle prod outstretched. He jabbed it over and over as the creature squealed in agony. The initial attack was fueled by pure bloodlust. As the creature's screams became less guttural and more purely anguished, Lester slowed his pace. Despite the creature's boyish form, Lester had never thought of it as human. But its screams sounded like a child's.

The hollow boy lay silent and motionless. Lester was suddenly faced with the very real possibility that he had killed it. The realization elicited equal parts relief and horror. But a telltale flick of the leg betrayed the creature's continued life. It gurgled faintly and Lester had to restrain himself from prodding it again.

Regaining its faculties, the creature hopelessly scraped away at the ground again until its faltering strength gave out. It twisted its neck almost entirely around such that its empty eyes were fixated right on Lester. It expelled another wave of horrid suckling, all the while staring at Lester who for the first time regarded the creature contemplatively. The shapes of its utterances, they didn't form words exactly, more that they revealed the spaces where words could fit.

"Can you... speak?" Lester asked tentatively.

The creature's growls were largely unchanged, yet intoned such that Lester convinced himself he could divine meaning from them. It felt much like augury, constructing an unclear meaning from an unclear signal in such a way that the entire thing could be the work of imagination.

Speech. The inevitable surrender to compulsion. One such as this. Cannot be silent.

“What—” Lester started to speak again, but was cut off by incessant gurgling.

One such as this. It speaks as one such as you must breathe. Consonants. Syllables.

Pallid walls cannot contain. One such as this. It speaks not in meaning. Not in words. In the escape of fervent air from hollow lungs.

“What do you mean? You're speaking in words right now.”

In response, the hollow boy sputtered and slurred empty noises, the sound of dry heaving a stomach full of gravel. There was such eloquence to its perceived words that Lester struggled to reconcile what was said with what he was hearing now. It seemed entirely possible he'd fabricated its speech altogether.

“What do you want from me? What even are you?”

One such as this. Is nothing at all. Empty space folds around an empty center. A stomach so empty it digests itself. To say that one such as this is at all. That is to define a divisor of none.

One such as this. It wants for anything. Anything that is not nothing.

The creature punctuated each line with expulsions incomprehensible.

“I'm going crazy.”

Lester's statement was punctured by a surge of nonsensical stutters from the beast. Cattle prod in hand, he could end the agony of the past two days right now. He stood at attention ready to lay into the creature again. The prod dropped softly into the dirt. The creature evidently

couldn't move. Leaving it overnight wouldn't hurt. The ladies could sleep in Lester's shack. He could stay here to keep an eye on it. Another night in the barn wouldn't hurt.

On the third day after his car accident, Lester awoke at the same time he always did in a place he often did not. There was but a faint trickle of sunlight slipping past the horizon and through the barn windows, but it was enough that Lester could see the hollow boy. He appeared to sleep, though there were no eyelids to tell for sure nor any breathing to indicate rest. The milk pail still pinned the boy to the ground and it appeared it would do so until Lester made efforts to remove it. Again Lester was faced with the task of completing his regular routine under starkly irregular conditions. He had no beans to eat for breakfast unless he wanted to compete with the ants gathering them from across the barn floor. Yet a facsimile of his routine could still be constructed.

The ladies seemed none too pleased to have spent the night in Lester's shack. Daisy and Maisy practically bowled him over when he opened the door. He escorted each of the cows to the barn, giving the sleeping boy a wide berth. He would be unable to reach any of the cows in their pens, but Lester still didn't want to take any chances. As he was bringing in Mama last, the boy stirred and again twisted his head grotesquely to look at Lester, empty eyes tracking his movement across the room.

Nature abhors a vacuum. One such as this. Is the most abhorred of all. One such as you. Distinct from all that is natural. It abhors absent reason.

"You ate my arm," Lester stated. "I reckon that's reason enough alone."

To eat is to indulge. One such as this consumes. Consumption is inevitable.

Lester was quickly realizing that, words or no, the hollow boy only spoke in nonsense.

“Well, that’s dandy,” Lester said. “I’ve got quite the to-do list to catch up on and—” Lester motioned to the space where his arm once was “—I’m operating at half speed, so I’m going to get to work if you don’t mind.”

Lester spent the rest of the day carrying out his routine modified as best as possible to accommodate his lost arm. The pace was undeniably slower than he was used to, but he still found a rhythm of productivity. Whenever he flitted in and out of the barn the hollow boy greeted him with incomprehensible speech. Lester could pick out words if he wanted to, but the hollow boy seemed more intent on being heard than listened to, so Lester incorporated the droning into his rhythm. At mid-afternoon Lester was out in the fields checking a pipe in his watering system when he spied a tow truck winding up the road toward his little farm, tugging behind it his own truck.

Delight erupted as Lester realized his marooning was over. Yet the sentiment fizzled as he ran to meet the truck. How would he explain anything? Or, in a town inhabited by a disembodied arm, would anything need explanation? Lester wasn’t sure which was worse: failing to explain the inexplicable or surrendering to the impossibility of a sufficient explanation. As the truck pulled up Lester saw two figures inside: the same fireman who had driven Lester home and a woman dressed head to toe in cyan.

The fireman got out of the car first and opened the door for the woman who adjusted her feathered hat and stepped out. This was the first time anyone in a pantsuit had stepped foot on Lester’s farm. He waved to them with his remaining hand and they responded in kind.

While the fireman began to release Lester’s truck, the woman approached and offered a gloved handshake.

“Mayor Valexia Doubleday. Nice to meet you Mr. Boone,” she said.

Neither the mayor nor the fireman seemed to notice Lester's absent arm. He wondered if politeness prohibited them from bringing it up, but it seemed unlikely such a drastic change would go unremarked from the fireman.

"Nice to meet you ma'am," Lester replied. "To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the mayor?"

"I wanted to extend the most sincere apologies on behalf of the entire town of Fort Cunningham. The unfortunate circumstances of your accident are not representative of our community and I am personally working diligently to ensure the issue is resolved."

"What issue? You mean the arm?" Lester asked.

"Yes..." there was a hesitancy to the mayor's speech, she seemed to dance around calling the arm an arm. "I'd prefer to think of it as a piece of debris, one which I am intent on removing as soon as possible."

"Oh," Lester pondered. "Like tearing it out of the ground?"

"Don't worry about the means Mr. Boone, just rest assured your concerns about the safety of our town will soon be put to rest." The mayor turned and addressed the fireman loudly. "Chief Clements! How goes the delivery?"

The fireman had successfully unlatched Lester's truck. He approached the group, also extending a hand to shake with Lester.

"Thank you for your patience sir, I'm sure it was lonely stuck out here."

"No it's quite alright," Lester said. "I had the cows to keep me company."

"Is there anything I can help you out with before we head back into town?" The fireman asked. "I'm sure it's been terribly inconvenient not having your truck, so if you need something towed or just an extra set of hands—"

Lester's mind snapped to the hollow boy trapped in his barn. He should ask the fireman for help. He should get his shotgun from his truck and end the problem for good. He should let the mayor tear the arm from the ground and buy a 256-pack of canned baked beans and nestle back into the same day he had comfortably lived for as long as memory served.

"Don't worry about me," Lester said. "You two have a pleasant drive back to town."

When the truck had disappeared down the road Lester returned to the barn and sat down across from where the hollow boy was pinned.

"What will you do if I let you go?" Lester asked.

The boy unleashed a series of gargled gasps, but one word materialized throughout them.

Consume.

"Consume what?" Lester asked, looking at where his left elbow ended.

The satiation of an empty being.

"And what will happen... to whatever you consume?" Lester asked again.

The hollow boy seemed for the first time to contemplate what Lester said.

In the vacuum of vacuums. There is vacuum that abhors nature in return. The darkest of empty spaces. It rends a spiral of consumption. That which is consumed. Is not forgotten. One such as this knows not what it means to be infinite nor finite. One such as you will know both.

Lester's hand trembled as he pushed over the milk pail. Mama, Daisy and Maisy, Paula-Anne, Braxton, all five cows mooed and stomped their hooves and flailed in their pens as the hollow boy latched onto Lester's remaining arm. For just a moment Lester mistook the initial shock for pain, but there was no pain this time. Lester did not resist. He allowed the hollow boy to consume. It didn't stop at his arm. The boy suckled higher and higher until his maw expanded

up over his shoulder, around his head, and down his torso. Inside was darkness. Lester closed his eyes.

Lester awoke uninterested in the time. His left arm was dead asleep. He stretched both arms above his head and felt the blood pump through his body. He looked across the shack to where he usually kept his canned beans, only to remember he was all out. It was no matter though, he didn't feel the need to eat at all. He set to the day's work, taking his time when he felt like it. The ladies were as excited to see him as ever and he gave Mama an extra scratch behind the ears. She was already starting to produce more milk post-pregnancy.

On Wednesday, Lester drove his milk into town. When he had unloaded his pails and signed off with the General Store, he strolled over to the intersection of South Avenue and North street. The arm was there, entirely unchanged. Lester held up his left hand, such that the two limbs were overlaid. They didn't match up in the slightest.

Lester drove home and finished his work for the day. The next day he did the work he needed to do and some of the work he didn't need to do. Some days he did nothing at all. Lester watched the sunrise start to finish and often watched it long after that. And when the sun went down he might sleep. He did what he had always done, but never quite did he ever do anything the same way again.

IV

When Mable's proposal made its way across Mayor Valexia Doubleday's desk, she crumpled her face into a sour expression that smeared her cherry lipstick. Fort Cunningham was a small town, but a small town with heart. That heart would not be replaced with some errant limb. She had poured her entire professional career into building the town's reputation. She had overseen the construction of the new library. She had saved the Ragtime Cinema through clever use of zoning laws. She had personally restored the Fair County Memorial Garden to health. No. Mayor Valexia Doubleday wasn't one to be outdone by a simple limb. The arm would have to go.

The next morning, an early print edition of the Fort Cunningham Shouter made the announcement public: the arm was to be cut down. The news spread across Fort Cunningham like a great conflagration. It made Jeremiah Brown feel hollow in a way that he couldn't quite explain. A compulsion that was altogether foreign to the preteen urged him to run as quickly as he could to the intersection of North Street and South Avenue. Mable Paige's mother threw the newspaper away so that her daughter might never see its contents, but Mable, tantalized by the promise of forbidden knowledge, fished it out of the recycling bin.

Fire Chief Georgio Clements never had the opportunity to learn the news from the paper. At 7:00 AM he was awoken by the rapping of a deliberate hand on his front door. Mayor Valexia Doubleday stepped into his foyer without invitation and produced the hatchet that she had already retrieved from the fire station. She explained her intent from outside Georgio's bedroom door as he dressed. The idea of cutting down the arm as if it were an overgrown tree sickened him. Yet, the Mayor was so insistent that she must be right. A town like Fort Cunningham couldn't have an arm growing at its heart, it was simply too strange.

All this Georgio rationalized to himself as the Mayor started up her car. When she turned the corner to South Avenue, Georgio's heart sank to the tip of his rubber boots. Amassed there was a crowd of citizens, many of them treading on the newly replaced asphalt and breaching the perimeter he had so carefully laid. And, as always, the arm remained.

Mayor Valexia Doubleday parked as close as she could to the gray limb. She intended to remain in the safety of her car, but she unlocked the passenger side door to allow Georgio to get on with the deed. Georgio steeled himself by clenching and unclenching his jaw six times and running his fingers along the length of the ax handle. A medley of faces watched him exit the car. Concern, glee, confusion, and the occasional glint of despair played across the crowd. A lump formed in Georgio's throat. All of a sudden he very much did not love his job.

Like a school of fearful fish, the crowd parted to allow Georgio access to the arm. But, as his path slowly formed, one figure stood obstructing it. Jeremiah Brown was again made all too aware of the difference in stature between him and the Fire Chief.

"Step aside kid." Georgio was similarly cognizant of the optics of the situation. A big lumbering man. Equipped with an ax. Facing down a child who was just cultivating his first chin hairs.

Jeremiah stood in a fashion that he hoped looked indignant. He dug his heels into the ground to prevent his legs from shaking. They trembled nonetheless.

Fire Chief Georgio Clements took a step forward. Jeremiah remained rooted.

Georgio approached in a methodical fashion, planning to simply sidestep the child. But, just as Georgio moved, Jeremiah scampered backward and latched onto the arm. He scurried upward with a newfound desperation. Finding purchase on the smooth skin was difficult, but Jeremiah muscled his way to the top. The oversized hand was just large enough to cup

Jeremiah's undergrown torso. The arm remained as passive as ever. Perched atop it, Jeremiah felt it was no more aware of him than an oak tree would be a squirrel. With the crowd below looking at him expectantly, Jeremiah confronted the reality that he had acted with very little intention and hadn't the faintest bit of a plan.

Below, Georgio felt a wave of relief. With the kid bunkered atop the arm, he surely couldn't chop the thing down.

"Well?" Mayor Valexia Doubleday had rolled down the car window. "Get on with it."

"I can't ma'am. The kid's up there."

"It's a short fall. He'll be fine."

Jeremiah Brown's eyes widened as principle mingled with duty in Georgio's mind. He took a meager step toward the arm and raised the ax, but his shoulders slumped mid-swing and he dropped the ax half-heartedly.

"I'm not gonna hurt the kid ma'am. Surely we can wait 'til tomorrow to chop it down. It's not causing any harm."

Only now did Mayor Valexia Doubleday emerge from her car, gingerly placing her red clipboard atop it. She slammed the door shut with purpose, sending a shiver down Georgio's spine.

"Chief Clements, I'm disappointed."

The Mayor picked up the ax. Its red head complemented her rosy beret and slick-cut pantsuit. One look sent Georgio stepping out of her way. With an unpracticed hand, the Mayor lugged the ax up over her shoulder, garnering all her strength for a hefty swing. The crowd drew a unified breath. With a wobbly motion that threw her off balance, the Mayor struck into the arm.

For the first time, the dull gray of the arm's flesh was interrupted by a growing patch of crimson. The deep red slit looked like the first cut into a summer watermelon.

One swing alone hadn't sufficed to fell the minatory limb. Although the exertion of the strike left the mayor panting, she reeled the ax back with gumption for the denouement. She shifted all of her weight backward as she lifted the axehead high, mustering the strike that would finally cleave the dreaded limb. Suddenly, the ax became much heavier in her hands, too heavy, and she was flung backwards head-over-heels.

Seized by an unfamiliar confidence, Mable Paige had emerged from the crowd and sprung herself upon the ax in the Mayor's hands. The weight of her tiny form was just enough to offset the Mayor and land the two in a sprawling heap. Mable found herself still clutching the ax, its blade making the tiniest of cuts into her forearm. As red blossomed from the cut she scampered to her feet and did her best to drag the ax alongside her. The Mayor righted herself as well, still developing her understanding of the situation. Mable placed herself between the arm, Georgio, and Valexia, menacing them with the ax as best she could. Above, Jeremiah still clung to the hand. The crowd had yet to release its held breath.

Taking stock of the situation, Mable could see Jeremiah was struggling to remain in his lofty perch.

"Would you like to come down, Jeremiah?" Mable said quietly.

"Yes, very much," said the boy. Initially delicate, the climb ended with a drop that would certainly leave a bruise. The Mayor watched Jeremiah's descent wordlessly. As the boy scampered to his feet and stood alongside Mable, the Mayor's entire demeanor changed, her posture shifting to appear genteel as she stepped forward.

“Put down the ax little girl.” The honey of her tone failed to mask the malice of her intent. “You might hurt yourself.”

“Stay back!” Mable had never shouted at an adult in any fashion and here she was threatening one with an ax. In the crowd, she spied her mother, aghast. She must have followed Mable after she slipped out of the house.

“The arm, it’s...” Mable trailed off as she failed to force words past the lump in her throat. “It’s not hurting anybody.”

A murmur passed through the crowd. People seemed to agree that the arm was, in fact, not hurting anybody. Mable’s mind raced, trying to find some way to make salient the thoughts jumbled in her head. In a moment of inspiration, she thrust her arm up into the air, parallel with the limb looming behind her. Her skin was stained red from her ax wound.

“Look! It bleeds just the same as any of us.” Mable shouted as loudly as she could. “And even though you’ve hurt it, it’s still not doing anything to you! We might not understand where it came from or why it’s here, but who ever said we have to understand everything?”

Mable found herself gasping for breath as anxiety bubbled throughout her body, but she continued nonetheless.

“The arm hasn’t asked us for anything. It just showed up one day and decided to stay. It’s a visitor in our town and it deserves as much kindness as any other guest. I don’t want to hurt it, and I don’t think anyone here does either. ”

The passion of this fervent plea slowly spread outward from Mable and throughout the gathered crowd. Mable looked toward her mother once again and was surprised to find a hint of pride in her eyes. Mayor Valexia Doubleday however, was not so easily convinced. As Mable

raised her arm, the Mayor sprung forward to grab the ax, but found her path interrupted by Georgio. He placed an arm on her shoulder with a gentle, yet firm grip.

“Ma’am, we’re not hurting that thing any more.”

Georgio extended a hand to Mable, gesturing for the ax. Tentatively, Mable released it. Relief washed over her the moment it left her hands.

The next few days were a blur for Mable Paige. The Fort Cunningham Shouter took to her with a renewed interest, plastering her across the front page of the special Sunday edition. Mable’s mother grounded her for the remainder of her life, a sentence that struck Mable as surprisingly lenient. The whole incident didn’t particularly change Mable’s situation at Fair County Middle School. Other kids started to take notice of her, but in a way that seemed sheepish. They would watch her walk through the halls, only to turn away as soon as she caught them staring. That Monday, she left school at 3:10 PM as always. However, as she turned to make her way down South Avenue, she found Jeremiah Brown waiting for her.

“Hey Mable,” he said. “Is it alright if I walk with you?”

Magpie

The Magpie sisters were having a party. It was the sixth party they had thrown this year, even though Patriarch Magpie forbade such things. When the patriarch was not trapped in the attic there were to be no guests, no music after 6:00 PM, and no food outside of mealtimes. So it was with great delight that Lena Magpie turned the stereo louder as the clock ticked past six.

The act of tacit rebellion did little to quell her boredom born from anticipation. Mary Magpie, chopping a leek, bumped Lena with her elbow. The insubtlety of the act reminded Lena that, though she was not worth acknowledgement, she was still very much in the way.

“Sorry Lena,” Mary said a beat too late. “There’s just not much room in here!”

While true in technicality, this observation omitted Mary’s role in the space’s clutter. Dirty dishes settled in the sink, refuse of chopped vegetables littered each counter, and Mary herself stirred across every inch of the space.

“I could help with the stew,” Lena offered. “If I’m helping I won’t be in the way.”

“If you want to help you can start by not sitting on my counter tops.”

Lena scooted off the counter and was immediately replaced by a bag of potatoes.

“Can I help for real now?” Lena asked.

But in leaving the counter Lena had left Mary’s mind. She now engaged with a bubbling broth and a fresh-fetched potato. Lena tugged at Mary and she caught up to her sister’s question.

Scrutinizing the potato in hand, Mary said “if you really want to help, you can get me a fresh bag of potatoes from the cellar. I don’t like the look of these.”

This obvious trap gambled on Lena’s fear of the basement. But Mary overestimated her sister’s fear in contest to her obstinance.

“Sure,” Lena said. “Can I help stir when I get back?”

“Maybe.”

The cellar wasn't that deep or even particularly dark. What Lena feared about it was that it locked from the outside. Whenever she crossed the threshold, she whispered a prayer that the door would not close behind her. In reality, Lena knew she could never be locked inside for long, that when little girls go missing they are found. But the recesses of her mind harbored a nagging certainty that no one would look for her.

Lena started her prayer as she moved down the steps, but the telltale sounds of rummaging told her she was not alone and no prayer was necessary. From an igloo of canned goods emerged the head of Maggie Magpie.

“Lena,” Maggie said.

“Hi Maggie,” Lena replied.

In the time since locking the Patriarch in the attic, Maggie's worst tendencies had swept across the cellar. Smashed cans and a hammer indicated she had spent some time smashing cans with a hammer. The sculpture of dented cans suggested she had then piled the cans together into a sculpture. And the freestanding igloo proved Maggie had gotten quite good at can artistry.

“Do you know where the potatoes are?” Lena asked.

“Oh yeah,” Maggie gestured. “They're by the hammer. I was gonna try smashing some of them but I thought that might be wasteful.”

“I don't think it's wasteful if it's fun.”

“Well then leave me a couple and I'll give it a try.”

Lena brushed aside some cans and discovered the potatoes. She turned back to Maggie as started up the stairs.

“Are you coming upstairs for the party?” Lena asked.

“Nah. It’s Elena’s big night, no reason for me to get involved.”

“Okay.” Lena continued up the stairs to give her brain space to think, but she wasn’t done talking.

“Are you worried?” she asked.

“About what?” The conversation had almost lost its grasp on Maggie as she had again retrieved the hammer.

“You know...” Lena looked up in a way that meant, “About our father whom we trapped in the attic.”

“Oh,” Maggie seemed to genuinely contemplate worry for the first time. “Nah. Once you’ve thrown one of these things they stop being a big deal. You get used to it.”

Fears addressed but not assuaged, Lena completed her mount of the stairs.

She delivered the potatoes to Mary and successfully bought her way into helping with the stew. Mary ensured her contributions were meager, but it was a pleasant diversion until the guest arrived.

At half past six, Elena Magpie gathered the Magpie sisters in the foyer. Just as the five prior eldest sisters had done, Elena oversaw the production of the party top to bottom. Elena wrote each shopping list, cut each decoration, crisped the fold of each napkin, and even added the final pinch of salt to Mary’s stew. She had compiled the guest list, consisting of exactly one name chosen at random from the Fort Cunningham phone book. And most importantly, she carried the attic key, hanging from a string of twine around her neck. Elena now addressed her sisters at large, her calm words suppressing their rising anxiety.

“For many of you, this will be your first party.” Every part of Elena’s body had a different bend to it. She was built like a wire hanger. “Do not allow that to cause you worry. You need only enjoy yourselves; the responsibility of the Patriarch is mine alone.”

Lena sat with the younger sisters on the stairs. She had positioned herself high and to the right so she could eye the living room window. The patriarch had long ago sealed and blackened the windows, but the paint wore thin at the edges. In the shifting of shadow, she could tell the guest would soon be arriving.

Mertle Biech seethed in the sun-ripened age of 92. In her plentiful years there was little she hadn’t done. She’d been to every known continent and then a few more. She’d learned half a dozen different languages and created some of her own. She’d had long hair, short hair, no hair, and other people’s hair. She liked to tell young people she had a wrinkle for each heart she’d broken, but she probably didn’t have enough wrinkles for that to be true.

Fort Cunningham wasn’t a town for retirees and that’s why Mertle Biech had decided to die there. She was a post-arm arrival, and the allure of the mysterious appendage was what enticed her to stay. In the time she had left she wanted to still believe there were discoveries to be made in the world.

Mertle’s life of adventure had left no time for family rearing. She’d accepted the fact she wouldn’t die surrounded by loved ones, but that didn’t seem sad to her as long as she died doing something she loved. Staring out at the arm from the place she’d bought and wondering what other mysteries had escaped her scrutiny didn’t seem a bad way to go.

This whole party business was a real wrench in that plan. Mertle did not want to go, but not going would be an admission that she was no longer fun. It would be an admission that her

days of adventure were over. And if Mertle thought about that too long she would realize how deeply unhappy she was.

She of course was apprehensive about the whole affair. Her invitation had come in a phone call from one Elena Magpie, a woman she'd neither met nor heard of. Having no acquaintances in town, it was peculiar that Mertle was known to Elena at all. Perhaps the Magpies were simply overzealous in welcoming new arrivals. Then again, Mertle had been here long enough that "new" was a generous descriptor. Nonetheless, she mounted the Magpie stoop at half past six.

When Elena opened the door, Mertle was hit with the undeniable age of this woman. Ninety-two was no modest accumulation of years, but Mertle carried them with the carelessness of a bindle. Elena's years swallowed her like a set of armor. She creaked and groaned as she welcomed Mertle inside and showed her to the living room. As the women spoke, Mertle was further convinced there was nothing to this woman but her age. The years that encased her were filled with very little of note. It sounded like Elena's life had never expanded beyond her front door. Eventually, Mertle resorted to the arm, the one thing that got everyone in this town talking.

"That business with the arm sure is crazy." This softball from Mertle landed at her interlocutor's feet. Elena Magpie let the statement hang in the air long enough that Mertle felt the need to elaborate. "The mayor and that ax, certainly strange business."

Elena finally bit. "We don't pay much attention to all that." She gestured to the painted window. "Really none of our business."

Mertle had of course noticed the windows, but had been too polite to ask. Her cordiality now waned under the pressure of stilted conversation.

"May I ask why you've blacked out all your windows?"

Elena looked at the nearest window as though just realizing its opaqueness was strange.

“Well our father did that. He says there’s no reason to be looking at the arm.”

Mertle cocked an eyebrow. Her own father was long dead and, if he were still alive, would certainly not be allowed to dictate her window visibility. She was about to press further when Elena’s tone sharpened.

“Questions make me tired. Can we just enjoy the party?”

This question, posed rhetorically, was proving difficult to answer. The “party,” as Elena called it, consisted of a communal stew and soft music. The stew was quite good, but nowhere near good enough to balance the evening’s flaws. There didn’t seem to be any other guests. Mertle at first thought some of the many women were fellow outsiders, but they all demonstrated a familiarity with one another and the house, and a reluctance to engage with Mertle. In fact, she felt like a zoo animal tended to by Elena as the other Magpies watched.

Thinking much the same thoughts as Mertle, Lena Magpie furtively eyed the two old women in the sitting room. She whispered to Mary, who was savoring a bowl of her stew in the kitchen.

“When do you think Elena’s going to do it?”

“I dunno.” Mary shrugged. “The stew needs more coriander next time...Don’t be so impatient. The last party took all night.”

“How many parties have you been at?” Lena asked.

“This is my third. But they’ve all been pretty similar. The biggest difference is there are way more of you kids around after the last one.”

Lena looked back to where her sister chatted with their guest. Mertle looked too bored for someone in as much danger as she was. With the caution of a forklift, Elena extended up out of her seat, hand clutching toward the key at her breast.

Mertle stood to leave along with Elena. The night had not gone on long, but it was long enough.

“Oh my,” Elena said with practiced surprise. “I almost forgot to show you the oculus.”

“That’s quite alright, I’ve seen plenty of windows.”

“No no, you must see the oculus,” Elena insisted. “It has a delightful view of that arm you were talking about.”

“Isn’t it blacked out?”

“Oh no, it’s our father’s personal window. He wouldn’t want it covered.” Elena paused to smile at Mertle. “You really can’t leave without seeing it. It’s the treasure of the house.”

Mertle acquiesced. Her departure would be swifter if she played along. Plus, she really wouldn’t mind seeing the arm from a higher vantage.

The two women climbed the stairs, Elena at a pace that agonized Mertle.

Lena peeled away from Mary. The sisters had been told to leave Elena alone when the time came, but Lena needed to see what would happen. After all, she would be in Elena’s position soon enough.

At the summit of the Magpie house was the attic, but one rickety staircase below was a landing bathed in moonlight from a floor-to-ceiling ocular window. The view enshrined the arm, which stood as impassive as ever. Mertle soaked in the view. The arm really was spectacular. In her many years she’d never seen anything like it. She wondered sometimes if she was the only person who grasped the true majesty of the thing.

Elena had crept up the stairs, leaving Mertle to stare out the window. As she turned her key in the attic lock, she could feel the weight of the patriarch on the other side of the door. It was best to stay hidden once the door was open. The patriarch lost himself when he grew hungry. He would eat anything in sight. Elena flung open the door.

Lena could see the patriarch in silhouette at the attic stairs. He lumbered into the light step by step. A black robe concealed his body, but his long arms extended out past the sleeves. His knuckles were bony and sharp, threatening to pierce through the skin. As his face passed the light it reflected off his pale skin. The patriarch licked his thin lips, so thin they were barely there. Lena had seen the patriarch many times before. She knew he did not look like other fathers. But now, he did not look like her father either. Childish intuition overcame ritual.

“Psst.” Lena called to Mertle soft and sharp. The old woman spun around, unable to see the attic stairs from her position. Lena glanced over to the attic and gestured for Mertle to approach slowly. As she crossed the room, the patriarch completed his descent. Lena had never realized quite how tall her father was before. He towered over Mertle.

Quietly but with panic, Lena whispered, “Run.”

The patriarch barreled toward Mertle. He plowed through the space where she’d just been and slammed into the wall. Lena then Mertle sprinted down the stairs. Only now when she demanded her body exert to its fullest did Mertle feel old. The stairs behind creaked with the weight of whatever had lunged at her. She could not outrun that thing.

Breathing harder than she could remember ever breathing, Mertle reached the bottom of the stairs and made for the door. Lena tugged at Mertle instead pulling her toward the basement.

“He will follow you into the street,” she said. Then, calling ahead, “Maggie!”

The patriarch neared the bottom of the steps. Elena was not far behind. This was an unprecedented disaster. She snapped at a few of her shocked sisters to stay out of the patriarch's way. He could not be trusted until he had eaten.

The descent into the basement was now welcoming. If the patriarch followed them down, Lena and Mertle would only need to sneak back upstairs to seal him away. More cans had been smashed alongside the potatoes Lena left behind. Maggie sat against the back wall, idly jamming the hammer between bricks. She jolted up in alarm at her sister and Mertle's sudden entrance.

"Are you okay Lena?" Maggie eyed Mertle suspiciously. "What's going on?"

"Father is loose," Lena panted.

On cue, lumbering footsteps sounded at the peak of the basement stairs. Mertle, Lena, and Maggie sought shelter in the canned igloo.

"That *thing* is your father?" Mertle whispered.

"He's only like this when he's hungry," Lena said. "He's usually very kind."

"The way he looked at me...that is not a kind creature."

All three quieted as the final stair creaked. The sound of heavy breaths filled the room. The patriarch crushed a can underfoot. Maggie tightened her white-knuckle grip on the hammer.

The igloo of cans came toppling down. Lena screamed as the patriarch loomed over her. Saliva dripped from his shiny white teeth. His pupils swallowed the rest of his eyes. His long fingers encircled the three, boxing off any escape. In terror Maggie swung with the hammer, clocking the patriarch in the left ear. He stumbled aside as Mertle led the charge up the stairs.

The door was locked.

“Elena!” Lena begged and pleaded against the door. Mertle reeled back to give it a kick, but her legs had long atrophied beyond her days of breaking down doors. Maggie left a dent in it with the hammer, but not a big enough dent to carve her way out.

“Please Elena!” The patriarch had recovered and was moving toward the stairs. “Please, we’re your sisters! You can’t leave us to die.”

It was a simple calculation for Elena. If the patriarch were free to roam the house he would devour the entire family. If he were allowed to starve, the family would die out with him. The sisters needed the patriarch just as much as he needed them. But Lena’s cries did pull at Elena’s heart strings.

Mary Magpie listened to her youngest sister’s pleas and was aghast at Elena’s stoicism. In fact, all her sisters seemed content to stand back. Feeding the patriarch was essential to their continued existence, but it wasn’t worth doing if it would tear them apart.

Mary pushed Elena out of the way and flung open the door, shutting it as soon as Lena, Mertle, and Maggie had emerged. She threw the latch and pressed her back to it as the patriarch collided with a heavy thud. Another thud. And then another. The patriarch hurled his weight against the door to no avail.

When the thudding lessened in pace, the various Magpie sisters looked awkwardly around the room, unsure to whom to turn for guidance. Mertle finally spoke up.

“Could someone explain what exactly is happening here?”

There was another pregnant pause.

“That man is our father,” Elena said. “The patriarch Magpie. He’s not always like this. In fact, he’s not usually like this at all.”

The other sisters looked at Elena sympathetically. It was so rare that they put their plight in words.

“On the day the arm arrived, he became insatiably hungry. All the food in the house couldn’t keep the hunger at bay. So he ate our mother. The next day he came downstairs with a new baby sister in his arms. It was a long time before he got hungry again, but when he did we locked him in the attic. He begged us to let him go, but we were scared of what he might do. So we invited someone over and he ate her instead. The next day he came downstairs with two new baby sisters. The work we did for him took its toll. I haven’t been this old for long. To keep the family alive we need new, young Magpies.”

Elena hung her head in shame. The patriarch again slammed against the door to no avail.

“You’re sick.” Mertle spat at Elena’s feet. “This whole house deserves to burn.”

“I only ask that you leave peacefully,” Elena said. “We will keep the patriarch contained until we find another way to feed him.”

“Oh, I know how we’re going to feed him.” Mertle flung open the basement door. The patriarch burst forth, wrapping his jaw around Elena. The Magpie sisters scattered throughout the house, strangely avoidant of the front door. Terror and chaos erupted. The patriarch lunged toward a group of sisters in the living room.

With the Magpie sisters falling one-by-one at the hands of their father, Mertle sauntered to the front door. Her last look at the house revealed Maggie Magpie dropping her hammer beneath the patriarch’s strength, Mary running away with her stew in hand, and Lena, meeting Mertle’s eyes with a knowing look. Mertle left through the front door and returned to her room overlooking the center of town. She took one last glance at the arm.

Mertle Biech died peacefully that evening, eyes shut.

V

The arm itself remained unchanged for months, and then years. Like all benevolent things deemed intolerably strange, the passage of time waned its strangeness and made it tolerable. Sensing which way the wind was blowing, Mayor Valexia Doubleday seized this opportunity to rebuild her public image. Mable's proposal was approved and, in no time, the intersection of North Street and South Avenue was occupied by a lush park. The Fort Cunningham Historical Society was put in charge of the park's maintenance. The arm's hatchet wound healed in time, leaving behind a fading scar.

The park proved a popular local destination, but, in the next general election, incumbent Mayor Valexia Doubleday's passion for public works couldn't hold up against Fire Chief Georgio Clement's record of service. Valexia attended Georgio's swearing-in ceremony wearing all black. As he left the stage following a rousing speech, she handed him a black clipboard.

"I suppose I won't be needing this anymore." The Mayor spoke with a sincerity that was unbecoming of her typical self. "I hope you can put it to good use."

"I'll do my best Ms. Doubleday," Georgio said.

Mable Paige didn't live in Fort Cunningham for the rest of her life. She eventually went off to school and traveled the world and grew up and fell in love a few too many times. But, no matter how far she strayed, Mable always found herself drawn back to her hometown. In her later years, she finally returned to the town in full.

Mable would visit the arm regularly. On occasion she was accompanied by Jeremiah. Tourists from out of town would regularly fill the park, posing for photos and gawking at the arm's size. Many questioned the story behind the local legend, but Mable was happy to correct

any doubters. One day, a child no older than nine sat down beside her on the bench she was occupying. The little girl looked up to the arm wide-eyed, with just a hint of fear.

“It’s pretty cool, isn’t it?” Mable asked.

“Uh huh,” the kid said.

“But it’s also a little scary.”

“Uh huh,” the kid said again.

Mable didn’t feel the need to say anything else.