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I don't find myself somewhere I don't remember going

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2015

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Abstract

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The start of a collection of short stories, I entitled my project, "I don't find myself somewhere I don't remember going," after the first story in the collection because the double negative seemed to me somewhat disorienting—You have to think for a moment to understand its meaning—And, even then, the sentence has the opposite of its intended meaning until you read it in the character's mouth, within the context of the story. In other words, you need the sentence's context to know its true meaning. The disorientation you feel when you read it without its context reflects the disorientation of the character with Alzheimer's disease who says it when she begins to lose her memory.

The theme of this collection is the brain and all the disorientations, hallucinations, and mental disorders that can affect it. But, each of these stories is really about the people and their relationships with each other and different parts of themselves. I wanted to explore the mental environments we create and how they change the physical world we share.

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I don't find myself somewhere I don't remember going

Red light leaked through the pine trees as they pulled up to his grandma's house deep in the woods. His mama parked in the dirt drive and got out of their still-running car, leaning against it as an old woman came out on the porch. He got out, too, and squatted next to her, letting the red dirt on the ground run through his fingers like water and breathing in exhaust. He looked up through his hair at his grandma. He had never seen her before. She wore a rose dress, and she looked like his mama, but with gray hair. She strode across the yard and stopped with her hands on her hips in front of them. The two women talked for a long time, but he couldn't hear what they said over the car's rumbling. His mama was leaving him here while she visited her boyfriend in the city. Her stuff was in the trunk. His was on the ground next to him in a trash bag.

Night fell, and fireflies blinked at their knees like radio tower lights. The wind, hot off an old storm, grew in the trees. His mama looked around at the weak light and glanced at her watch. She bent down, kissed the top of his head, and wiped it away with her hand as if she were afraid to leave a mark. He didn't look up in case he was going to cry. She put her palm on his bowed head, got in the car and drove away. The old lady guided him up the sunken steps of the house and through the door. As they stepped inside, she took his hand in her cold fingers and led him to the living room. He sat in a chair, sinking deep into the cushion. Little tables and lamps with braided shades crowded the room. Spider webs like torn bed sheets hung off the shades and swayed in a wind he couldn't feel.

She bent down in front of him. "You look like your mama at that age." She started to touch his face, but he shied away, and she lowered her hand.

He smiled with all his teeth. Adults liked that, he knew.

“Can I call you Grandma?”

She lifted one corner of her mouth, someone who didn't quite believe what she'd heard. She stood up and left through another door. He heard a sound. He got down off the chair and looked under the table. A glassy-eyed bird glared at him from its raggy nest. He reached out, and its open diamond mouth screeched.

She opened the door, and he stood up fast. The porcelain in the room rattled.

“Sorry,” he said as if he had done something wrong.

“Were you going to hurt that bird?”

“Why would I do that? I like birds.” He smiled with his eyes closed.

She stared at him from the doorway with her lips parted. Then she gazed out the window for a time. It was that stretch of night when the woods had gone dark, but the sky was still blue. Nothing moved outside her window.

“Don't you believe me?” he asked.

Her eyes shot to him, glassy in the lamplight.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “Of course, I believe you.” She licked her lips. They stuck together a little as she drew them apart.

“Want to feed the bird?” she asked.

He nodded, and bent down. The bird had laid down its head, and he couldn't see it for the rags. The door closed as she left the room, again. He stood up, looking for something more interesting to do. In the corner was an old television. He punched the buttons, but it was broken. The only sounds for a long time were the metallic buttons and the frogs outside. She opened the door and set a piece of bread on the table next to her.

He didn't like her. Her eyes were off-color, and they followed him too much. They followed him as he crossed the room. He picked up the bread. It was soft with seeds. He glanced at her and crushed it in his fists. The crumbs hit the floor. She didn't get mad. He would've liked that for some reason. He bent down, sliding the bread under the table. The bird couldn't be seen. He nudged the offering closer.

"Tear it into pieces," she told him.

He looked over his shoulder at her. She nodded. He grinned back with effort. Her smile stretched the skin around her ears in a way that bothered him. He tore off bits of the bread and slid them under the table with one finger. Something pinched his knuckle, and he pulled his hand out. Putting his cheek against the floor, he saw the bird stretch out its neck to pick at the pieces. He started to grab the neck, and it screeched again. "That's enough!" she said. His arm came out from under the table.

He watched the animal for a bit, then stood up and looked around. He opened a drawer and glanced at her. She didn't say no, so he began to open all the drawers and cabinets in the room. Inside were all kinds of things: dirty, twist-cap bottles and soft, little dolls with button eyes and faded newspaper clippings of cartoons. She went and sat on the edge of the chair, watching him study the relics, and smiling at some of the things he found. After a while, she opened a drawer and handed him an old picture book. He glanced at it and dropped it on the floor with a clatter.

"I'm hungry," he told her.

She reached for the book, and he flinched. She peered at him as if he were a book with small text. Then she picked up the book and put it back. She studied it a moment in the drawer.

“Your mama was scared of her daddy. He was a bad man.” She touched the cover. “I would read this to her at night. So she could sleep.”

He closed his fists. “That was nice of you,” he said.

She saw his hands and took one of them in hers. She brought him into the kitchen. Rose bushes grew just outside the windows and clung to the sills inside. A yellow and black spider with red legs was on one of the bushes. It had a web with a white zigzag down the middle like a lightning strike. He tried to take it in his hand, but she grabbed him. “What do you think you’re doing?” She didn’t wait for an answer and pulled him to the other side of the kitchen. She opened the fridge still holding his hand. He tried to break away, but she held tight. He bit her fingers, she shrieked, and he ran. She grabbed him from behind and clung on with her whole weight, sinking to the floor while he struggled. He stopped after a minute. She pulled him up to standing. “You remind me of your mama,” she said on an inhale.

He thought she would yell at him, but she just gripped his wrist and opened the fridge again. The shelves were just about empty: a glass milk bottle and an open fruit can. She took the bottle of milk and a glass from the cupboard. After pouring some milk, she set it on the table. He sat down. She opened another cupboard, empty except for a pound cake, and picked up a slice with the tips of a napkin. He bit into the cake, but he wasn’t thirsty and pushed the glass away. “Drink your milk,” she said and took the glass. He thought she would force it to his mouth and threw up his hands. The glass got knocked out her grip. The milk hit the spider. It crawled to the corner of its web, its rose legs dripping white. The glass hit the floor, and rolled away unbroken. He stood up fast. “Whoops,” she said. “No harm done.” She got up, closed the window and put the empty glass in the sink.

He sat down only after she did. He ate the rest of the cake and watched the spider. He could see it in the dark part of the window. It was still except for the milk drops. The cake fell apart into dust in his mouth. He kept his gaze on the spider. He didn't want to meet his grandma's eyes.

"That's my rose spider," she said. "She protects them."

"From what?" he asked.

"Bugs. Things that want to hurt them." She spoke into his ear. "That's how they grow so pretty."

He leaned away and looked at her from the corner of his eye. The cake was gone. She touched his hand with cold fingers. "Was that good?" she asked. For some reason, he thought of the spider. He moved his hand to his side.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Do you feel sick?"

He shook his head.

"You're tired." Her hand cupped the back of his neck, and his shoulders went up.

She took his hand and led him to a door in the back of the kitchen. There was a narrow set of stairs next to it. "Don't go up there," she told him. "There's just some old furniture and things, but I don't want you to get hurt." The doorknob to the back room clicked when she turned it, and she switched on a lamp. There was an empty bookshelf and a kid's bed in the room. He stood in the doorway and hugged himself. Somehow it was colder in here than the rest of the house. She walked over to the bed and patted the quilt. "Don't be afraid," she said. He followed her into the room. As he climbed onto the bed, his hand fell on a small, black hole in the blanket. It was a cigarette burn. His mama's boyfriend made them on the car seats when he didn't have an ashtray.

“Come here, honey,” she said. She picked him up under the arms and set him against the pillow. She pulled off his shoes. She started to pull his shirt over his head, but he pushed her away. Her eyebrows rose, but she didn’t say anything. She put the folded pajamas at the end of the bed and lifted the covers over him. She kissed his hair, leaving a cold spot. The blankets were heavy, and his eyes couldn’t focus on her face. He could only see up close, the quilt. His head fell toward his chest.

He opened his eyes, and his lungs sucked in as if he hadn’t been breathing. The blankets were wet. He got out of the bed, and his pants stuck to his legs. The ceiling fan drifted his smell around the room. Balling the bed covers up in his arms, he dragged the window open with one shoulder and pushed them through the opening. They fell over a rose bush outside. He shivered in his wet clothes and tried to find the bedroom door in the dark. Getting down on his hands and knees, he ran his hand along the space where the wall and the floor met. Chips of paint stuck under his nails. His fingers finally dipped into the space between the door and the wall. Through the doorway, he saw the bottom of the stairs in the shadows. He crept to the first step and looked up. The air above was empty. He started up the stairs. Each step creaked. Halfway up, he stopped and looked down. She stood at the bottom of the steps. “Come back down,” she whispered. “Now.”

He kept going up. She ran up the steps and grabbed him. She was fast and surprised him. He tripped down, but she held him up by the arm. Pulling him into the bedroom, she shut the door behind them and turned on the lamp.

“I told you not to do that.” She breathed with her mouth.

She reached for him, and he flinched.

She flinched, too. Her eyes crawled over his face as if there were something familiar there. She took him by the wrists and pushed up his sleeves, turning his arms over. Then she lifted his shirt. “That devil. That devil,” she murmured. He tried to get away, but she pulled him against her chest. She kissed his head. Her lips were thin. He could feel the teeth behind them.

She pulled back. “Did you wet yourself, Cheryl?”

He stared at her. “My name is Tommy.”

She didn’t seem to hear him. “Cheryl. You know your daddy’ll whip you again.” She put him on the bed. “For Pete’s sake! Can’t you just hold it like a big girl?” She left the room and came back with a towel.

“My name isn’t Cheryl,” he said.

“Whisper! You want him to hear? He’s just upstairs!”

“Who?”

“Who else?” She wiped the floor where he’d been standing with a towel.

“Cheryl, where are your sheets?” She crossed the room. “You threw them out the *window?*”

She started tugging at the sheets, but they were caught on the bush. Finally, she pulled them inside along with some rose leaves. She balled the sheets up in her arms. “I’ll just stick these in the washer,” she said. “No need to turn it on. He’ll hear. But he won’t find them in there. No, he won’t. The day he does the laundry, I’ll—.”

She left the room, but she was only gone a minute. She poked her head around the door. “Cheryl,” she said, “where are your fresh sheets? Don’t tell me you made another castle with them.” She walked around and around the room, stopping to look under the bed and behind the

bookshelf. “Oh, where could they *be*? You stupid girl. What will he do when he sees you with no sheets?”

She disappeared into the hallway. He peeked around the door. The moon had risen above the trees, and the kitchen was full of light. No one there. He climbed the stairs. It was dark in the stairwell, so he ran his hand along the wall to guide him. There was some light on the second story from a little window. He could see the moon behind the window’s cross. His grandma came through the other door. She had a candle in her hand. The room was full of old pieces of furniture under sheets to protect them from dust. She was lifting the sheets off of the furniture and throwing them over her arms. She saw him in the doorway.

She crept over and whispered in his ear.

“Your father is asleep.”

“There’s no one here.”

Candlelight seemed to come out of her eyes. “Your sheets. Go.”

She pushed a wad of dusty sheets into his arms.

The stairwell fell away behind him. He looked back at his grandma. Orange light licked underneath her nose, the cords of her neck.

“Grandma?” he whispered.

“Grandma’s dead, Cheryl. How can you not remember that?”

“Go! Before he wakes up!” She pushed him.

He felt the air below him and screamed. He lurched back into her stomach. The candle fell out of her hand, missed the sheets, and snuffed out in the air. The stand clattered down the stairwell.

“Tommy? Tommy? Is that you?” She felt his face and shoulders. “It’s so dark! How did we get here?”

He ran past her into the room, found a desk with a broken leg and hid under it. He hugged his knees. His pants had gotten stiff. They smelled like pee.

The floorboards creaked. “Tommy?” she said. “Where’d you go?”

He closed his eyes.

“Don’t be scared.” Something groaned as she knocked into it. He heard her stumble. “For Pete’s sake! There’s no light in here!”

There was a sound like a small flame going out as she lifted up a sheet. Then another one. She got closer and then farther away.

“I was afraid of the dark when I was your age, too, honey. But there’s nothing to fear,” she said as she searched. “I hid just like you. Under the bed sheets. All curled up in a ball.”

She kept talking like that. “I was afraid of monsters. They were under my bed during the day. Came out at night. Then I grew up and got married. And, I *met* a monster.”

She had stopped searching. He opened his eyes.

“Only he was a monster who came out in the daylight, too. Me and your mama were afraid of him. For a long, long time. But he died.”

She whispered. “Your mama—Is she one of them? A monster?”

He lifted up the edge of the sheet. He could see a shadow against a chair.

“Carl,” he told her.

The shadow turned toward his voice. “Her boyfriend,” his grandma said.

It didn't rain at all that week. His grandma's house had a creek behind it, and everyday he caught crawfish, which they cooked for dinner. In the woods, he was a soldier, who'd lost his battalion. He found the old barn while he was playing. It was pretty empty: a pile of tires, a motor carcass, some oil-stained tins and buckets. But a rusty bike was leaning against the back wall. When his grandma's neighbor drove over with groceries, he said he'd help him fix it. They worked on it all week.

On the last day, he was riding it around the yard when his mama's car pulled up. When she got out, he thought she looked just the same. She bent down, and he threw down the bike and ran to hug her. He buried his head in her neck. He could hear hooting owls and the front door opening. His grandma came down the porch steps and crossed the yard. She put her palm on his mama's head.

His mama stood up. "Thanks for watching him."

"I know about Carl."

He looked up at his mama. The pines soared above her head.

"You know we're engaged?"

"I want you to stay here, Cheryl."

"We're moving to the city." She put him on her hip. Opened the back door of the car, and set him in.

"Are you crazy? Don't marry your daddy."

"You don't know anything." She buckled his seat belt, closed the door and opened her own.

"Tommy told me. Are you calling him a liar?"

His mama shut her door and turned the key in the ignition. His grandma opened the door again.

“I’m going, Mama.”

“Wait, Cheryl—Cheryl. I’m sick. I’ve got the old people disease.” She put her hand to her head. “Hardly a day goes by where I don’t find myself somewhere I don’t remember going.”

His mama stared at the steering wheel. She ran her fingers over the silver crest.

“I’ll stop at Ray’s. Ask him to come out. Check on you more often.”

“Leave Tommy here. He’ll take care of me.”

“He belongs with me, Mama—Where’s Tommy?”

He had crawled out of the other side of the car and run across the yard when they started yelling. They went looking for him in the woods, but he had gone toward the house and crawled into the space between the rose bushes and the siding. The shiny leaves had stuck his arms and legs. Now he had his back against the house. The sun was a hot bath on his neck and shoulders, and the dirt he’d stirred up earlier stuck in his nose. The wind picked up, and he looked above him. The rose spider swayed on its web.

She had a lot of rumors

Henry was caught pacing in the car headlights pulling into the clearing in the woods. The engine cut out, and it got dim under the trees again. Diane climbed out of her mom's old Buick, the cold immediately filtering through her coat.

"Let's do this in the car," she said.

"What if somebody finds us? Parked. At the clearing."

"Charlie wouldn't care," she said.

"No, but he might try to have fun with us."

"True."

"Everyone already thinks we're dating, you know." He glanced at Diane. It was hard to make out her expression.

"Everyone is an idiot." She avoided his eyes. "Come on. I'm cold."

"My cousin says you can have it, but you're going to have to drive down there." Henry chewed his lip. "Listen. I think I know *why*. But why a gun?"

"It has to look like a murder."

"Okay, but—"

"Like Charlie killed me."

"That'll never work," he said.

"Are you going to go with me or what?"

"Sure. Why not," he said. The branches shook in the wind, and Henry looked around.

"You have to help me with something," Diane said.

"I guess," he said.

"Let me borrow your phone. It's a smart phone, right?"

He pulled it out of his pocket, but held onto it. “What do you need it for?”

She grabbed it from him. “I just need to record something. I’ll give it back to you tomorrow. Then, after I’m dead, take it to the police.”

“You’re freaking me out.”

“*Don’t* freak out.” She kissed him.

He swallowed. “I don’t want you to die.”

Her face got hot where he breathed on her, and then colder.

The detective was on his sofa. The right side. Where he got lucky the first time. And then his girlfriend had an aneurysm afterward. Normally, he’d be dead attracted to this woman.

“I like Charlie,” Mr. Lindsey told her. “He’s one of my best students—You really think he did this?”

“Detective Walsh already cleared him. But, I get paid to double-check these things,” she said.

“Hmm. Yeah, okay. Okay,” he said.

He’d heard that after the police declared it a cold case, Diane’s parents hired a private investigator. He crossed his legs. Who was he kidding? The morbid circumstances weren’t turning him off.

“Tell me about Diane. She was dating Charlie?” the detective asked.

Did she just lick her lips?

“What? Oh, yeah. Honestly, I didn’t even know they were together—It’s funny I didn’t know. I’m usually pretty in-tune with the kids. Poor girl.”

“How was she in your class?”

“Sweet kid. I think she had some—trouble—with the other girls. Bullying, you know. Because of Charlie. He was popular with the ladies. Not so popular anymore, I guess.”

Small joke. She frowned.

“Who was bullying her? Which girls?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Sarah Filmore. Becca Fields—Fields the main one.”

“And why didn’t you stop it?”

“There was a rumor she was cheating on Charlie.” He shrugs. “People like him.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Watching her lips, he flashed back to his high school girlfriend biting his neck. Then, he saw her again, white lips parted; eyes open in shock.

“Is it normal for teachers to know all the gossip?” the detective asked. She leaned forward.

“Sorry, what did you say?” he said.

“What was your relationship with Diane?”

“I’m her teacher—Was.”

“That’s it?”

“What are you implying—You should go. I need to get to work.”

A student was standing behind the school’s front desk when the detective walked in.

“You’re the class president, right?” she asked her. “Becca Fields?”

“Yeah.” The girl slammed her pen down on the counter, and the sound made her jump. She recovered and shuffled the papers in front of her.

“You probably know a lot about what goes on here,” the detective told her. “All the gossip?”

“Not really.”

The detective leaned her elbows on the desk, bringing the space between them to less than a foot. “I heard a rumor that Diane was dating Charlie. And some people didn’t like that.”

“She had a lot of rumors about her.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t talk about people.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

Becca fiddled with the stapler on the desk, sliding the cartridge opened and closed. She set it down between her and the detective.

“Maybe she deserved it,” the detective said, opening the palms of her hands.

“What do you mean?” Becca asked.

“The rumors were true?” She slid the stapler out from between them.

“I guess so.” Becca looked to the side.

“In my experience, they usually are.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t know.” She turned around. Opened a file drawer without taking anything out, then closed it. She opened another one.

“I heard she was cheating on Charlie.”

The girl looked over her shoulder. “That wasn’t even a rumor. That was just the truth.”

“What else about Diane was true?” the detective asked.

Becca didn’t notice her hands were closed in fists. The file drawer hung open.

“She was a liar and a manipulator and just—a *victim*,” Becca said. “But, Charlie wouldn’t believe me.”

“So, you killed her for him.”

“What? No—No way!”

“You started all those rumors about Diane, but he didn’t care. He dated her anyway—”

“He *liked* it.”

“Liked what?”

“He’d tell me *things* about her, okay? So, I’d tell everyone else.”

“He started rumors about his own girlfriend?”

“He liked to tease her about it. Got a kick out of the whole thing.”

The detective nodded. “That’s all I need,” she said and stood up to go.

“I heard they found her in the woods,” Becca said. “I won’t tell anyone. I just—”

She looked down at the girl. “She was shot in the back of the head. Never knew what happened.”

“How did you know to talk to me?” Henry asked.

“I didn’t. Until you said that,” the detective said.

They were standing in the hallway outside the classroom. The detective could hear the kids in Diane’s homeroom discussing their visit from a private investigator behind the door. She noticed the way the boy in front of her held his books. His eyes were red. None of the others had red eyes.

“Diane and me—were—friends.”

“What about Charlie?”

“No.”

She waited. His fingers worked over the book spine. They were in the small space between lockers and the doorway, and he was hunched over like he didn't want to be seen. She leaned closer, putting her shoulders between him and the window on the door.

“Diane used to hide in pictures. Like, she was in the picture, okay? But you couldn't *see* her. Like she didn't want people to know she was there.”

“Was she depressed?”

He met her eyes. “Charlie made her feel bad, I think.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. She came over to my house—crying—and I was, like, trying to hug her—to make her stop. She *kissed* me.”

The bell rang, and the kid disappeared in the oncoming crowd. The detective studied the hallway tiles. The kid just gave her Charlie's motive.

Charlie's mom held her head between her thumb and finger as if she were shielding her eyes from the detective across from her. The sunlight coming through the west-facing window reflected off the glass of her coffee table. She rearranged the old newspapers on it with her other hand without seeing them.

“I always gave him what he wanted,” she said.

“Isn't that bad for children?” the detective asked.

“He was happy. How can that be bad? He had this *laugh*. It was like—like a deranged clown or something.” She sat back in her chair, watching a spot above the detective's head.

“You know, I'm *terrified* of clowns,” she said. “Saw a movie. I was just a kid.”

“Are you terrified of your son?”

“That would be *weird*.” She shifted in her seat. “He’s just, you know—he’s only a kid. Right?”

“A kid who murdered someone.”

“You don’t know that.”

“The police found his DNA at the crime scene.”

“That’s just because—Well. Okay, fine. He’s a scary guy. Actually, can I—I’m just going to go grab some water. My throat, you know. Feels like a—feels constricted. Excuse me.”

Mrs. Morgan sat down again. The detective asked, “Have you ever seen Charlie violent?”

“*No*.” She shook her head. “Well. Maybe. To tell you the truth, there was this one—*thing*—I don’t even know what to call it. He was a toddler.”

“Even if it was small, I need to know, Mrs. Morgan.”

“Fine. I understand.” She stared at her shoes. “Charlie had a brother,” she said. “And I—To tell you the truth, I was afraid to even leave the baby alone with him.” The woman glanced up.

“He has these kind of *dead* eyes. Have you noticed? The way he looks at you. Like—I don’t know—Like I’m a wall or something. Just a wall. Not a *person*. Not his *mom*. And, so, I didn’t want him near it—the baby. But, one night, I heard something from upstairs, and—”

“Take your time.”

“I don’t know *how*. I mean—I don’t know how he would—*could*—could do it. When I saw—When I found it—he was *four*. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She ran her fingernails up her face.

“Let’s take a break.”

“No! I—To tell you the truth, I feel like it would be good to talk about this—him.”

“Okay. Does Charlie make friends easily?”

“Yeah. Other people really like him.”

I can't stop thinking about it. When Mom's talking to me. While I'm in the shower. When I watch TV. The world around me fades away. And I start to think about a nice, long *nap*. One where I don't wake up. Where I just—forget. Told Charlie. Didn't want to, but he seemed to know already, anyway. Now he never misses a chance to bring it up.

We were making out in his car at the clearing tonight.

“Stop—*Stop*. I can't breathe,” I said.

He hates being told to stop. He backed up, mad.

“I heard a rumor about you.”

“Stop, Charlie.”

“Don't you want to know?”

“They talk about me. Whatever.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Stop *laughing* at me.”

“I'm not. I get it.” He put his hand on my leg. “What do you think dying's like?” he said.

I took his hand off my knee. “I told you. I don't think about that anymore.”

“Sure.” He smiled.

I stared at him for a second. “I want to go home.”

“You always want to go just when things get interesting.”

I didn't say anything.

He leaned back in the seat. “I heard you made out with Henry. Everyone at school’s talking about what a cheating—”

“Take me home!”

“Whatever, cheater.”

Before we started dating, I always thought Charlie seemed so happy. He was always reaching out to touch people, just real light, real quick. Like a signal: I like you. With everyone, he was like that. Like a glimpse of sunlight. And I thought, when he asked me out, maybe he could outshine some of my darkness. But he makes it worse. I never used to think about it this much. And sometimes it seems like he wants me to do it—No. Like he wants to be the one to *make* me do it.

Charlie sat in the library with the detective standing across from him. The principal had left the room.

“I want my parents here while you talk to me.”

“Your mom’s on her way.”

She leaned against the table with her back to him. She was going to do the right thing. Exactly what he didn’t want.

“Open the window,” he said.

She looked at him.

“It’s hot in here.” He smiled.

The detective shrugged. She walked across the room and opened the window.

“So when a girl gets killed, do you always accuse the guy whose girlfriend she is?”

Charlie asked.

“If that’s where the evidence points.”

“Evidence?”

“You have sociopathic tendencies,” the detective said.

“So, you’re discriminating against me because I’m a sociopath.”

The detective opened her cellphone. He started to yell.

“People *like* me. People *like* me. They *like* me.”

She stared at him. He laughed. This was fun.

“Ask them. I’ve never done anything wrong,” he said.

“I read her diary, Charlie.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“She was suicidal.”

“Not my fault.”

“She wrote about you.”

“So?”

“You knew she was cheating.”

“You’re talking about Henry? They kissed like *once*.”

“According to her, you were pretty angry.”

“At first. Of course. But I forgave her.”

“Your DNA is at the crime scene.”

“So is everyone else’s. Lot of kids go there.” He sits back. Throws his hands behind his head. She crossed her arms.

Finally. He had her attention. “Maybe I should help you.”

She sniffed. “I’ll bite.”

He leaned almost out of my chair. "Henry did it."

"Why?"

His smiled one-sided. "She loved me. Not him."

The car pulled up next to Henry on his way home.

"Hey, Henry. Need a ride?"

"That's okay."

"No, look. It's raining. I'll drive you."

Henry waited a little too long. He couldn't think of a reason not to. He got into the car and stuffed his bag at his sneakers. He leaned into the right side of the seat, away from the driver.

"Do you live near here, Mr. Lindsey?"

"Pretty close. Cottonwood Drive. You know it?"

"No."

Henry fiddled with the key chain on his backpack. It was a rubber peace symbol.

"You were pretty quiet in class."

Henry bit his lip. "Diane's funeral was yesterday."

Lindsey's fingers gripped the steering wheel. "Of course."

The rain picked up. Lindsey flipped on the wipers.

"Make a left," Henry said. "You missed it."

"I'll turn around up here."

They were behind the school. The brick could be seen between the trees.

"This is where Diane was killed," Henry said. He dropped his head, curling into himself.

Lindsey glanced at him. Put the car in park and turned off the ignition.

“What are you doing?” Henry asked.

They were alone in the clearing. Lindsey opened his door and got out of the car. He looked down. There was a strip of yellow police tape half-buried in the dirt.

Henry got out of the car, too. He crossed his arms and watched Lindsey.

Lindsey looked around at the trees. Kicked a rock.

“What are we doing here?” Henry asked.

Lindsey shrugged. “Diane was your friend, right?”

“Yeah.” Henry’s mouth twitched. He bit his lip.

“She told you things?”

“Things?”

“Secrets.” Lindsey was now on the same side of the car as Henry.

Henry took a step back. He looked everywhere but at his teacher. “I—don’t know.”

“I heard you talked to the detective.”

“I’ve got to go now, Mr. Lindsey.”

“Hold up.” Lindsey gripped his upper arm. “What did Diane tell you?”

“She told me about Charlie.”

“Just Charlie?”

Henry jerked his arm free. “Only Charlie.”

“Okay.” Lindsey let out his breath. “Sorry.”

Henry opened the car door and got in.

Lindsey leaned on the door. “Look at me.” He grabbed Henry by the shirt. He stared at Lindsey’s collarbone. “Don’t tell anyone about this. Got it?”

The detective came over to his house a few hours after Lindsey dropped him off. She came up to his room. He put his cellphone away.

“Hi, Henry,” she said. His mom left the door cracked behind her. She sat forward in his desk chair, resting her elbows on her knees, fingers interlocked. “I want to talk a little more if that’s alright.”

He was on the bed. He pulled his knees up to his chest and nodded.

“Charlie said you killed her,” the detective said.

“He’s lying!”

“I know. But I think you know something.”

He looked out the window.

“Diane trusted you, right?”

He shrugged.

“I think there was something else. Other than Charlie. Something she only hinted at her in diary.”

He ran his fingers through his hair.

“What was it, Henry?”

“Diane’s parents are jerks,” he said. “They used to just leave and be gone. Without even telling her.”

“Be there for her, then—Help me, Henry.”

He bit his lip.

“I was going to take this to you guys. I just didn’t—” He took out his cellphone and played the recording for the detective.

“Mr. Lindsey threatened me today,” Henry told the detective after the recording ended.

“He thought she might have told me about it. I don’t think he knew she recorded him.”

“I’ll make sure he can’t get to you. He’s going to jail for this.” The detective stood up.

“You think he killed her?” Henry glanced at the detective, then down. His fingers gripped his right side.

For a second, she looked surprised. Then she suppressed it. “Yeah.”

Henry let out a breath. The detective studied him.

“Why didn’t you give this to the police?” she asked, holding up the phone with the recording.

Henry crossed his arms. “I was scared of Mr. Lindsey.”

“He threatened you before today?”

“No—Diane told me about him. He’s scary. Violent. I’m not surprised he murdered her.”

The detective stared at him. She called the police to pick up Lindsey.

“It’s cold tonight, baby. Don’t you want to go back to my house? Cuddle on the sofa?”

“I want to show you something.”

“Don’t shove me, Diane. Come here.”

“Mr. Lindsey, let go.”

“I hate it when you call me that.”

“I just want to show you something.”

“Isn’t this where you go with your boyfriend? This isn’t sexy, babe. What the—Don’t shoot—Now, listen. Just listen. I’ve been nice to you.”

“Yeah, right. But I’m not going to kill you.”

“Then put the gun down.”

“I want you to shoot me. In the back of the head so it’s clear I didn’t kill myself. Then get rid of the gun.”

“I’m not going to jail for murder.”

“You won’t. They’ll think it was Charlie. This is where we always go.”

“I’m not doing this, you crazy—”

“I’ll tell everyone about us.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“They will if I kill myself.”

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“Shoot me. Right here. Tonight. Or they’ll know you like teenage girls.”

“I can’t *murder* you, okay?”

“*Don’t* lower your hands!”

“Give it to me.”

“No, stop!” “Come here.”

“Why’d you chuck it, stupid?”

“It’s out in the woods now. You want to go look for it? You’ll be out there all night.”

“Get in the car.”

“That’s all that happened,” Lindsey told the detective.

“That’s the stupidest lie I’ve ever heard,” she said.

“Look, obviously you know I was doing her. It’s on tape. I can’t deny that.” He swallowed. The interrogation room was hot. She was only a P.I., but the cops seemed happy to

let her do their dirty work. One of them leaned back in his chair in the corner of the room, paper cup in hand, like he was watching a show.

“I can’t deny that.” He didn’t know what’s coming out of his mouth next. He was remembering—he couldn’t stop—that night in the woods when, for a moment, he thought about what it might be like to be alone with a dead girl. How fast would her lips have turned white?

“We searched those entire woods. There’s no gun. There’s nothing to help your story.”

“I don’t know—She went back and got it. I was doing her, alright? But I didn’t do anything else.”

Could Diane have planned her own murder, the detective wondered as she walked toward her rental in the station parking lot. She was killed between midnight and three a.m. According to his neighbors, Lindsey got home at two. She would’ve had to find the lost weapon in the woods and then meet with someone else to kill her all in that last hour. More likely was what the police had decided the first time: a stranger came into town, killed her, and took the weapon with him.

She thought she’d check with the parents, anyway, and pulled out her cellphone. No, they didn’t own a gun. They were a couple of hours away at the coast to escape the stress, and her calls to them never lasted more than a minute. They only hired her to ease the guilt, she knew. She checked their alibis before she came into town. Bartender confirmed they were drinking at a place near the marina. She could use a drink, she thought as she climbed into her car.

She rubbed the folded business card in her pocket between two fingers. Her sponsor gave it to her, but she’d never used it. The edges were soft threads from all the rubbing, though. She

hated cold cases. There was never any evidence and no one wanted to hash it all out again. Truth is, people just want to forget these things. Even the family.

Everything pointed to Lindsey as the culprit. That's what she'd tell the parents.

She watched Henry walk up to the car. It was late. She couldn't really make out his face from here, but his head turned to look behind him a couple times as he made his way down the driveway. Like he was thinking he shouldn't have left the comic book or video game or whatever he was doing on a Sunday night to go with her. He opened the passenger door, but didn't climb in yet.

"What happened with Lindsey?" His voice was weird. Like he'd been crying. She looked at her hands on the steering wheel as if it were her fault.

"I'll tell you on the way," Diane said.

When he got in, she handed him a flashlight.

"What's this for?"

"Lindsey tried to grab the gun. I had to chuck it."

They searched the woods around the clearing for a good hour before they found it in the leaves. They were lucky. The naked branches let in a lot of moonlight.

They didn't get into the car. Instead he sat with his back against the front tire, and she huddled next to him. She set the gun down on her other side.

"So are you going to stop now?" he asked.

"Stop what?"

"It's insane, you know."

She twirled his shoelace in her fingers.

“Have you ever wondered why you’re alive?” she asked.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Not like I have.” She put her head on his shoulder. Everything was still.

“Why don’t you just break up with him?”

“It’s not—”

“Break up with him. Give Lindsey’s recording to the police. Forget your parents.”

“How do you break up with someone who’s killing you?”

He kissed her. It was cold.

She shook her head and buried herself in her knees.

He stood up. “I want to help,” he said. “But I don’t want to do this.”

It started flurrying. She could see the snowflakes through the gap under her arm.

“I’m so tired,” she said. “I’m so tired.”

She looked up. No one seemed to be there.

Fables

A soldier returned home to find his village invaded by roots that cracked garden walls and doorposts. They entered the houses through doors and windows and from beneath floors, and their ropy ends snaked around his sleeping neighbors' throats. In the heart of the twisted mass grew a tree. The soldier crawled through the roots, slashing out with his knife, and coming to the tree at the center, he saw an old man high in its branches.

“Tell me three fables, and I’ll release your town,” the old man said.

“Set them free, or I’ll kill you,” the soldier replied.

The old man dropped from the tree without a sound. He bounded through the roots toward the soldier, his wild hair glowing like a star, and sang.

“Sleepless one, you dream of war, while you are awake. In the day, you freeze as if foes were by your side. At night, you scream. Dream your dead friends’ names. O sleepless one, I want to hear a story from you. Tell me three fables. Just three. I’ll destroy your home before you can kill me.”

The soldier chased after him, but a root moved and tripped him. He looked up from the ground at the old man dancing away. “I don’t have any fables. Only nightmares.”

The old man flashed a gapless smile. “Perfect,” he said.

The soldier looked up at the stars that seemed to be woven within the tree’s branches. He sat up, twirling his knife in thought, and began.

The Soldier and the Crow

A soldier on guard duty amused himself by throwing pebbles at a crow’s nest. Finally, the nest smashed to the ground and the wind took up the pieces. The crow returned and said,

“You have destroyed my nest, so I’ll destroy yours. I’ll tell the enemy the position of your camp.”

With that, he flew off above the trees. The soldier chased him through the forest, shooting at him, but he swung back and forth on the wind and evaded the bullets. The crow flew down into the enemy’s camp, while the soldier hid in the bushes.

But, the enemy commander believed crows foretold death and shot him before he could speak. The soldier went back to his troop and told his commander the camp’s location. That night, they ambushed it.

“What’s the moral?” asked the old man.

“There is no moral.” The soldier studied the edge of his knife in the moonlight. “It’s not a fable.”

The old man laughed and squatted next to the soldier. “All stories are fables,” he said. “All stories have morals.”

“Even if it’s not visible in your telling,” the old man continued. He held the soldier’s gaze. “Cruelty always damages.”

“You must be very damaged then,” the soldier said. He slashed out with his knife.

The old man leaped to the top of the tree. “I haven’t harmed your family yet,” he yelled down.

“Then let them go.” Even though he hadn’t yelled, the old man heard him.

“Not until I get my fables.” The old man jumped to the ground. He plopped down with his back against the tree trunk.

The soldier grunted. He walked back and forth, picking his way through the roots and thinking. He glanced at the town fountain. One of its walls was smashed, and the water pooled beneath the roots and broken cement.

“Fine. I’ve got another one,” the soldier said.

The Enemies and the Water

Two wounded soldiers lay on a battlefield, and they were enemies of each other. Gunfire came from the distance. One was bleeding from his leg, propped against a tree. His friends had set him there and promised to return. Their side was advancing. The other was on his stomach. The one on his stomach moaned and asked for water. The one against the tree looked over and then away. He drank from his water pouch. Water, moaned the other one. The other started to drink again and realized the pouch was empty. He glanced at the other soldier. There was no more sound. The one against the tree started to sob, and the water pooled in his hands. When he saw that, he dropped to the ground and dragged himself toward the one on his stomach with his elbows. He poured the water from his hands into the other’s slack mouth.

“Don’t forget your humanity,” the soldier said. “That’s the moral.”

“And have you forgotten yours?” the old man asked. They were both sitting with their backs to the tree, one on either side.

The soldier still held his knife. He twisted around the trunk and brought it to the old man’s neck.

“Release my village, or you’ll find out,” he said.

The old man laughed. “I’d rather hear the final fable.”

The soldier pressed the knife closer. “You’ll never hear it,” he said.

“You have one,” the old man said. “Why not tell it to me? Either way, I have to let your family go now.”

The soldier let go of his breath. The old man smiled as it blew through his hair.

The Two Wolves

A wolf ran through the trees along the highway’s edge, avoiding soldiers and searching for food. Rib bones stuck through his fur. He encountered another wolf in the forest. It had been shot in the leg by a patrol. He came closer and sniffed the air. It snarled and cracked its teeth at him, but he crawled toward it on his belly, whimpering. It ripped forward with a growl and then yipped in pain and turned to lick its wound. He licked it, as well, ignoring the low growling of the other wolf. They slept together that night for warmth. The other wolf couldn’t walk. He hunted for them both. They needed to move on, but the leg never healed enough for the other wolf to run. So he stayed with it and hunted and avoided patrols. They slept and ate together as friends for many warm days. Then one morning, he found the other wolf would not wake. He licked its ear and howled.

“Endure with your friends in hardship,” the soldier said. He had dropped the knife to his side in the telling.

“And where are your friends?” asked the old man.

“Why should I tell you? So you can trap their families, too?” He held the knife up to the old man’s neck again. “Now, set my town free.”

“They were never prisoners,” the old man said, and the tree roots disappeared. The streets and houses were undamaged.

The soldier stood up and looked at the old man, who now had his back against the fountain wall. The tree was gone. The water sparkled behind him.

“Where did it go?” asked the soldier.

“The roots are still there,” the old man said. “Tying us to our ancestors. The roots of the family tree.”

The former soldier looked down. He picked up a loose stone off the street.

“My ancestors never did the things I’ve done,” he said. “Do I still belong in the tree?”

“Rely on your family,” the ancestor said. “Nothing can uproot you from it.”

Everyone knows who they don't love

“Well, the age is right.” I frowned at the dead man on the table. Then I surveyed the embalming room as if one of the other bodies might be more interesting to me. A female corpse made eye contact from the next table. Her face was half-made up: blue eye shadow and painted fish lips. I looked away.

“Scheduled for cremation.” My friend drew me back to the body laid out in front of us. “He’s too pretty, though—Don’t you think?” She showed me her pointy teeth.

Without thinking, I rubbed the cold place on my arm where she touched me. I knew her from my days at the lab. Shiny and as bloodless as the bodies she treated, she sold cadavers from the funeral home.

I considered the dead-looking face. My head tilted to the side. The eyes reminded me a little of Don.

“In love?” she asked.

I hadn’t told her why I wanted the body. Let her think that.

“Let me give you a discount,” she said. “Old time’s sake.”

Next to each other, they looked even less alike. I positioned the light between the bodies and double-checked the skulls’ measurements. The tarp I’d hung from the basement rafters swayed in the air conditioning, and Don’s hair felt cold against the inside of my wrist as I ran the tape measure across his forehead. I don’t have any romantic ideas about life after death. After Don’s passing, his presence couldn’t be felt in our house or in the ball caps and soft jackets he used to wear. I didn’t feel him next to me at night. Don was one of the smelly, discolored bodies lying on the Ping Pong table in my basement. And his personality was in a brain that I *might* be

able to reanimate. But, only if I could transplant it into another cancer-free body in the next 24 hours. I rolled up the tape and ran my fingers through his hair.

Hours later, the eyes blinked. I leaned over the second body to hold Don's brain. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to me until now. It might not be him. It might be whoever this guy used to be: a fatter, taller person with curlier hair who had lived about 50 miles away from us and who we'd never met. The eyes were brown, though. Like Don's. I watched the pupils shrink as they became sensitive to light. I said his name. The muscles around his mouth twitched as if he was trying to say something. His eyes focused on me. No recognition. They dipped to the left. He saw the dead body on the table next to him. He squinted, and then his eyes grew big. His nostrils sucked air, and he let out a yell. He jumped up and pushed me into the wall. I hit my head. He screamed around the room, trying to tear down the tarp and escape. I shouted at him from the floor. He stopped. The Ping-Pong table collapsed on itself, the dust curling in the air around the other body. The light swung back and forth.

His eyes careened around the room. He saw me and fell to the ground. I thought his heart had stopped. I crawled over the mess and shook him. Finally, he opened his eyes again.

"Don," I said. "Stay awake. Don."

"Let go of me." He slurred his words.

I released him. He breathed in. "Water."

"In a minute." I felt his forehead. I think I was just happy he was alive. I breathed in and cupped his face with my hand.

I gave him water in little sips. He managed to sit up with my help.

"Who are you?"

“You don’t remember?”

He stared at me.

“Don, you know me.”

He didn’t say anything. His gaze went to the trashed basement.

“What happened here?”

“I brought you back to life.”

“What, I almost *died*?”

“You did die—Don?”

His eyes rolled back. He started falling back against the floor. I helped him down.

It wasn’t what I was expecting. There were complications—No—*a complication*. I was so worried about the connective tissue—the brain stem, the spinal cord—I didn’t think there might be damage to the brain itself. I read up on amnesia. It could have happened during surgery. It’s not temporary either—an effect of the shock—like I’d hoped. Nothing jogged his memory: not showing him photographs, not talking about us. Months passed. He didn’t remember being a janitor at the lab, him mopping the floor and me doing my research at night because of my unbearable colleagues, how he talked at the wrong time and made me burst the well of my electrophoresis. He didn’t even remember my name. When I handed him his Oilers hat and explained about amnesia, he didn’t put his hand on my head like he used to when I said something he couldn’t comprehend, fingers overspread as if he could absorb knowledge through touch. Instead, he glanced at the body on the floor behind me and crushed the hat between his palms. Eventually, I gave him a notebook and told him to write down what he *did* remember.

She told me to write in this notebook. She's Marie. Her glasses were on the very tip of her nose, almost falling off into my face, when I opened my eyes. She kept calling me Don. I didn't know who she meant at first. Sound had gotten soft, not right. My mouth was dirt, and I was starving. I turned on my side and saw the guy on the table next to me, and he was dead. I don't remember anything after that. Later, she showed me photos, his old clothes. She said I was this guy, and I couldn't say different. I didn't remember being Don. Now, I didn't feel like him. But, I didn't feel like anyone else either. It takes time for memories to come back, she said. She seemed to know a lot about it. She must be real smart if she did what she said she did—body-switched me with the dead guy.

I forgot to mention. She said she's my wife. Maybe this body doesn't like her, though. Because I don't think she's pretty. She's rail thin, and her glasses make me think of satellite dishes. When she touches me, I have the urge to shake her off. If she tries to kiss me, I think I'll be a nice about it. But I won't let her. I'll just say, "Ma'am, I appreciate you taking a working brain and a working body and putting them together just so I could live and breath—I really do appreciate it—But I cannot kiss you." Sometimes folks don't know who they love—They're not sure, and that's alright. But, everyone knows who they don't love.

Apparently, she read what I wrote yesterday. I didn't know she was going to invade my privacy like that. When I said as much, she said, "You never used to have privacy." What kind of man never had privacy? Where did this Don guy take a leak, then? The kitchen sink? She wasn't amused by that, she said. Then she started crying, so I had to go and hug her. Maybe that's how I ended up married to her. Boo-hooing like that—her little body rattling like a scarecrow—it'd break anybody.

I stared at Don after he made that stupid comment about peeing in the kitchen and thought, “I don’t like this Don.” He has a lot of things I remember. He’s a slow talker. He likes to sit at the kitchen table and watch the clock. But, he doesn’t remember me. He doesn’t *look* like Don. Even though I know better, I look at him sometimes and catch myself thinking, “Who is that?” And, of course, he doesn’t love me. I was surprised when he gave me that hug. It’s not enough, though. I need to start over. But first I’ve got to get that brain back.