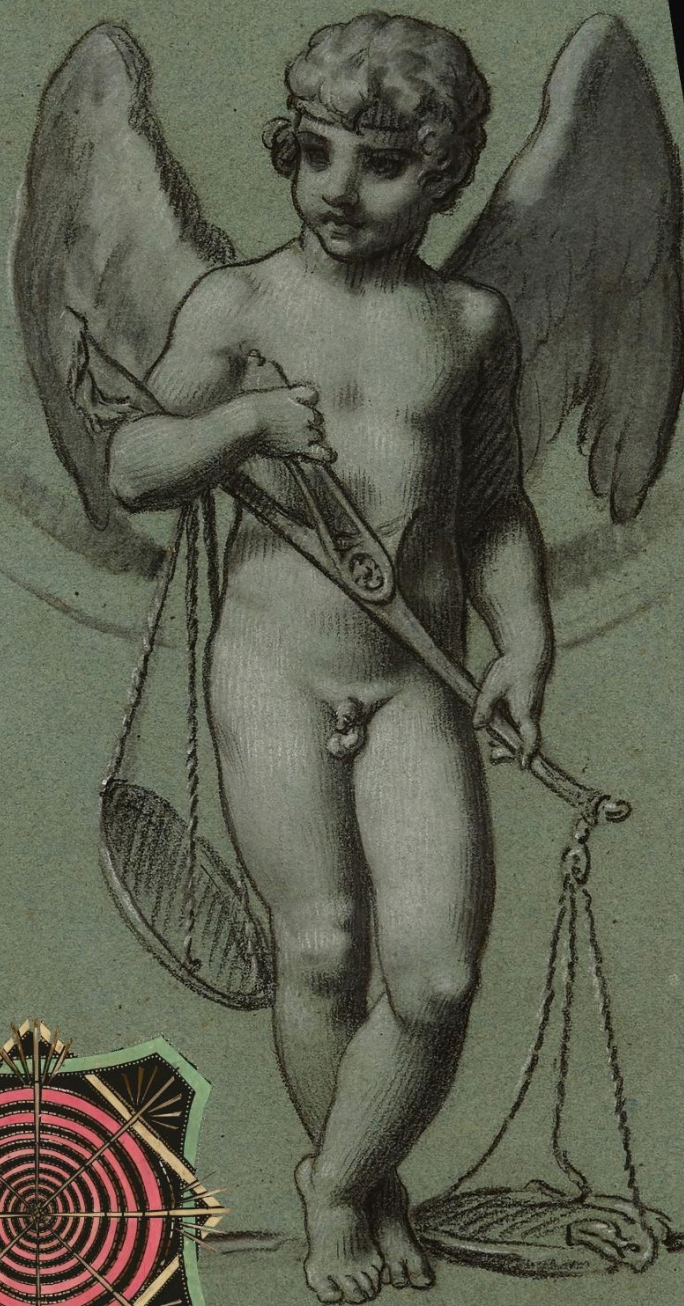


DE

MIRANDA, WHITE & HANSEN

(IN)JUSTICE



## FRONT MATTER

**Published by the Terragenesis Collective as organized through the TGC Anthology Club  
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## FOREWORD

This project was started in March 2023 and, as typical with all things that have schedules, it was continuously delayed (mostly due to myself). Editorial work on a short story anthology was not something I was accustomed to, but it was, needless to say, an exhilarating experience and I am immensely proud to have worked with two amazing writers: Trevor Neil White and Wyatt Ellender de Miranda. I had written a story with them both in the previous anthology of the Terragenesis Collective (TGC) in the *Many Lives of Devon Reeves* (2022), which was again an amazing experience. We held a poll in February of 2023 to see what theme we wished to work with for this anthology, and “justice” was the one.

As such, all three of these collected stories, from Wyatt, Trevor, and myself, all center different conceptions and ideas of justice, and the messy entanglements of the concept. In this story you will read many different things, from heartache over stolen family land to merfolk who are less than peaceful! If nothing else, you are at least in for a journey, but all of these pieces I am proud to have edited and put together in this collection. And the people involved have been among the most amazing writers I have ever worked alongside from day one.

In keeping with the previous Devon Reeves collection, we also offer here images with each of our pieces to enhance the experience! These are things we have made and pictures, and so represents even more aspects of the creative process.

This anthology is as much a labor of love as it was of intent, and I believe readers will have much to enjoy here.

Chrissy M. E. Hansen  
23 October 2024

**MAN FIN SOUP!**  
**Wyatt Eller de Miranda**

“In those days, millions of sharks were stripped of their fins and returned to the water, still *alive*, every year. It was illegal; I didn’t care. To me, these were monsters. I needed the money, and it’s not like I was the only one. I just did what I saw everyone else doing. I slept okay at night.”

“What? Where’d that come from? What’s to feel guilty about? I told you, I did what I felt I had to at the time. Yeah, it was illegal, but was it that bad? Maybe if it were dolphins or something. But listen, if you’d ever looked into those dead eyes, been looked at by them, by those dumb, staring faces... The way they just gape at you with those teeth. That look – it’s *disgusting*, that’s what it is. There’s nothing going on in there, nothing but empty, nothing but the impulse to live in the barest sense of the word. Like a bug. A collection of organs in motion. A machine.”

“Listen, are we doing this interview or not? ‘Cause I can take my story elsewhere.”

“...great, now I’ve lost my train of thought.”

“The ‘accident’... Yeah, all right. I’ll tell you about it.

“...It was an ordinary day on the water. There were maybe eight of us, all men, crammed tight below deck. But, like I said, back then I slept fine, and I was first up that morning, followed by old Bo. The sun beat down on us from overhead, glaring white off the waves, bright enough to blind a man.

“Bo was a quiet sort. Dour, like. Folks like that always got on my nerves. Still do... In truth, he was the oldest aboard by a longshot, and I the youngest, so there just wasn’t ever much to talk about. But knowing that didn’t make me relax none.

“Bo had a rugged, sun-beaten face, creased about the eyes. His silver-streaked hair was a wild, salt-crust tangle, and his ropy arms were tan and netted with pale scars. This was a man who’d lived a lot of life, and it showed all over.

“A quiet man builds a sorta mystery around himself, whether he means to or not. All of this came to make me wary, but also caught my interest. Together, what I felt looked something like respect. I hated that. I hated his aloofness.

“Course now I’m older, an’ I get it. There are times a man wants to talk, to be heard and seen, and there are times when a man wants nothing more ‘n to shut up like an oyster, alone for all the world. Whoever it was that said, ‘hell is people,’ he got it right. We want so much from others, and they can never give it to us, even if they try to. It’s all contradictions. Maybe the best we can do is leave each other be. I didn’t get that, back then.

“I had expectations, and pride. If I looked up to anyone, I thought, ‘they must look down on me.’ Really, though, I knew next to nothing about the guy. If it weren’t for that day, we’d have gone on as strangers for the rest of our lives.

“Maybe it would have been... But, there’s really no use wonderin’, is there?

“Well, like most days, we stood about, in idleness and silence, with maybe a meter and a half between us, just watching the waves. I’m sure I was angry in that way young people always are. When you ain’t come to terms with the injustice of the world, the unfairness of it all. Everything hurts so much at that age, all because you expect more and better. Entitlement. Yes, I’m sure I was mad: mad I was on that stupid boat with those stinking men and the reek of fish, sick of eating fish, tired of always being a rung below everyone else... I must’ve stared at the water, stretched out as far as the eye could see, and wanted to scream. That’s when I saw some

strange shadows pass beneath the boat. Something about those shadows... Part of me thought they couldn't be sharks.

"Bo leant over the edge to get a better look. And that's when *something* shot out of the water and got him, pulled him under. Just like that, the water swallowed him up, shooting up a spray of white foam. I shouted the other crewmen awake with cries of 'Man overboard!' We all looked, ready with life preservers, rope, anything that we could use to pull a man up out of the sea. But Bo was gone. Nowhere to be seen. The man had simply vanished, we thought. Then, ripples of red broke over the surface of the water.

"That's when my own leg flew out from under me. I slipped sideways; my shoulder hit the deck hard. Twisting around, I clawed at the hull as the grip on my ankle jerked me back. Faster than a man could blink, I had already slipped under the rail, off the side of the boat, crashing into the sea.

"Shocked, *stunned*, I was. Hitting the water like that throws a lot at you, all at once: the cold, the salt, the light, the sound. The way your limbs slow down even as your heart speeds up. Then there's remembering to hold your breath. It's like one second you're at home, the next you're in another world – overwhelming doesn't start to describe it.

"But when you get the death-fear in you, strangely, you feel more alive than ever. The world never feels so real as when it's slipping from your grasp, right here and now. Everything's clear.

"That's when I saw them: the merfolk. They had faces like men, but flatter, with rows of sharp teeth and eyes like black pearls. They grabbed me with webbed hands; their palms felt like sandpaper. I struggled against their hold, but they had me like a fish in a net, completely at their mercy.

"I mentioned they had sharp teeth, which is true. But they didn't use them, like beasts would. They had strange tools. They'd reeled me in with something like a tentacle: some sort of motorized chain rigged to a kind of a harpoon gun. I didn't get a great look, being underwater, but I'd later corroborate the details with Bo. And, anyway, there was no mistaking their saws.

"It took several of them to restrain me, pulling my limbs in opposite directions, while one of them sank a spinning blade into my shoulder. I screamed and only bubbles came out—so many bubbles. From my mouth, yes, but from my arm, too: a stream of bubbles whipped up from the saw blade, both red and white and speckled with bits of bone. That's the worst part, really: that they didn't cut at the shoulder joint, but right below it, straight through the bone shaft.

"Then my own arm flew from me like a rocket, leaving behind a trail of red. The sea itself bit my open wound with its salty fangs. I felt my chest go tight. All around me, I saw those teeth... They were smiling, I'm sure of it. Laughing, even. *Laughing*.

"As they started with my other arm, I lost consciousness. But they took my legs, too, and then just let me float back up to the surface. The irony was not lost on me: I'd been finned, just as I'd done to so many sharks.

"We were lucky to survive. In the newspapers, we were listed as 'fishermen' with no other details, though our strange injuries were blamed on shark attacks.

"I suspect some sort of coverup. I didn't know much about the business side of our industry, you see, and I still don't, but there was a good chance of Triad involvement somewhere down the line—"

"Well, yes. Of course. You seem offended by this, by my suggestion that journalists could be corrupted? Kid, corruption is everywhere. I'm serious. These guys are still out there. You've got to watch your back, got it? No one else is gonna do it for you.

"Where was I?

“I received a visit in the hospital from a strange man with, let’s just say, an air of authority around him. Might have been the gun at his hip, though he wore no badge. Said it would be best if I were to ‘forget’ about this. Didn’t elaborate.

“Was he a gangster? Probably. A government agent? Perhaps. This part’s off the record – just speculation. It was either someone seeking to keep eyes off the shark trade, off the existence of merfolk, or both. That’s all I’m confident enough to say.

“Bo received the same visit from the same guy. It wasn’t clear exactly what he wanted us to forget, or how much he knew. But we didn’t forget. How could we? Our lives were changed forever. There was no going back. At least we had each other to turn to, back then anyway.

“Before it happened, as I said, we’d had nothing in common. Now, though, we had a secret, and a life-changing experience, between us. And I got to see a new side to Bo. The man could be very chatty, turns out, when there was something to chat about.

“If I never talked to Bo, I might have thought it all a terrible dream. All the same, I tried to forget. I really did...

“You ever had shark fin soup? The fin itself barely tastes like anything. Don’t remember the first time I tried it, but the last time was when they served it at my sister’s wedding. After the ‘fishing incident,’ I had to be spoon-fed by a nurse. I couldn’t find the words to turn it down. If I tried to speak, I knew I’d lose my shit. My throat was so tight I felt like I would choke, but somehow I gulped it down to the last spoonful. I remember staring down into that dry, empty bowl with my dry, empty eyes. I tasted none of it, just felt the weight of it all in the pit of my stomach. Beats me how I didn’t throw up.

“For a long time, I imagined my own limbs on the menu at a merfolk wedding. It made sense to think we’d been hunted for meat. But Bo never saw it that way. He thought they’d made us pay for what we’d done to the sharks. An eye for an eye, like. Or, a fin for a fin.

“But I told him it was ridiculous. We would’ve seen millions of attacks, were the goal to get even. That just convinced Bo that we were intended to deliver a message to the rest of our kind. It was all theories and folklore after that. He’d be on about how he’d read they wept pearls and wove silks while I was just trying to open up about my nightmares. Once, I’d asked if he’d felt the phantom pain, and somehow that sent him on a tangent about Atlantis and aquatic ape theory.

“I thought he was beginning to lose it. Who wouldn’t, after what we’d gone through?

“I wanted to move on with my life. Bo was twice my age, though, and it must have seemed to him that he’d finally been called upon to do something with himself. If he didn’t take this chance, he wouldn’t get another one. He became obsessed and I distanced myself. Not just from him: from everything and everyone. I felt that no one could help me. If only I could just forget, that’s what I thought...”

“Bo? Last I’d talked to him, he seemed... not happy, but purposeful. He was agitating, protesting, on behalf of the sharks, of all things. Could you believe it? I couldn’t. I said Bo, Bo, how could you do this? He said we had a responsibility to ‘stop the slaughter.’ But what about what *they* did to *us*? Bo said... He said what’s right is right, what they did to us had nothing to do with that. He even said – and this is what really pissed me off – he almost wanted to thank the merfolk – for opening his eyes. I maintained we shouldn’t have been punished, the system drove us to it, and if not us, some other unlucky bastards would have done it. Hadn’t we already paid for what we’d done? So why? Why apologize? Where were our apologies, the ones owed to us? That’s when Bo got pissed at me. He said it wasn’t about apologies or forgiveness, and I could wait out the rest of my life for an apology that was never going to come, because you can’t control anything in this world except yourself, and I was choosing to do nothing.

“I mean, it turns out the guy was a real blowhard, right? The more he talked at me, I found, the less I respected him, or cared to hear what he had to say. I didn’t need his lecturing. I mean, I lost both my arms and legs! How could he expect me to do anything?”

“Are *you* going to lecture me, now? ...I didn’t think so. Yes, he was as much a victim as me. But he was wrong when he said you can’t control anything in this world except yourself. You can’t control that, either. Bo wanted me to be like him. Couldn’t he see how cruel he was being? Don’t you think I would have been him, if I could? Who on earth would choose to be me? Who?

“He’d found his crowd: with the animal rights activists by day, with the cryptozoologists and the conspiracy nuts by night. He’d seemed to make sense of the world. Much more than you could say about me: alone, a burden on my family. All I needed to be happy was peace and quiet. But it’s not enough to just exist, says folks like Bo. You have to do something. And if you can’t do anything, no one will love you. That’s where I’m at. No one loves me, and folks like Bo will say it’s my fault.

“A man is like a plank of wood, tossed about by the waves. He washed up on a nicer shore, then gave me shit for where I wound up. A friend would have accepted me – but that’s too much to ask, isn’t it? We get what we get. Bo got his, and I got mine. That’s all there is to it.

“And I hope Bo found happiness before he died. I hope I do, too. But I could never be like him. I can’t. We are not the same.”

“His death was sudden. The landlord found the house empty. No signs of a struggle. His computer, his phone – which is to say, anything he might have used to communicate with others or record information – those were conspicuously gone. His live-in assistant, nurse, girlfriend or whatever she was: also gone, never seen again. Bo, on the other hand, was found some days later, bloated and washed up on the beach.

“If you ask me, he died because he kept poking around. The girl very well might have been part of it, but if not, her body was simply made to disappear. They allowed Bo’s body to be discovered to send me a message. A message I heard loud and clear.

“It’s been decades now. Should I have told this story earlier? No one would have believed me then, and no one wants to believe me now. But, after I saw the headlines yesterday, there was no doubt in my mind that this ‘first contact’ with an ‘aquatic civilization’ could only mean trouble. Suppose I’ve finally accepted it—my purpose, that is.

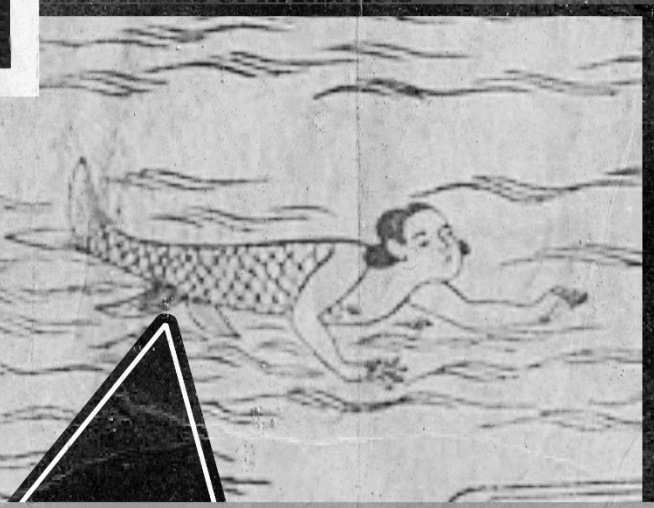
“So, thanks. You’re actually the only one who’d meet with me. I suppose tabloids are better than nothing. Oh, don’t look like that. If you’re ashamed of it, you should quit. But you shouldn’t be ashamed of anything, kid. After all, you’re the only one brave enough to report the truth.

“The people need to know my story. Maybe others like me will come forward. But we need to show them these merfolk don’t really come in peace, that it’s all a trick. No one wants to believe me because of what it would mean for us, now that sharks are extinct. No one wants to think we’re next.”

# BIGNEWS



THE CRIMES OF ATLANTIS...



"Merfolk don't really come in peace" ...

...they  
turned  
him  
into

Exclusive interview on page 10

# MAN FLY SOUP!

Stegos spotted in Yellowstone?



PLUS... ALIENS?!



What's their deal?

**UNRAVELING**  
**Trevor Neil White**

Smoke and darkness surround me.

I'm on my back. Cold. Numb from the waist down, limp arms at my sides.

I don't know who I am.

Neck straining, I raise my head and look down at my body. I'm barefoot, wearing what seems to be a ratty black bathrobe and sweatpants, though it's hard to make out the color of anything. The smoke hangs thick in the air, smelling of rotten eggs and charcoal.

I grimace, cough, and heave my upper half forward. I feel around me, and my hands interpret my radius: a carpet.

I squint and look around. Gradually, amid dim light from some unseen source, forms emerge: To the left, a record player buttressed by armchairs and tall windows, drawn curtains salted with ashes. On the other side of the room, a cobblestone fireplace: grate open, an aura of simmering blackness seeming to pour from within and over the broad marble hearth. Behind and to the right of me, wrapping along the wall like an intestine, a mahogany-tinted couch.

On that couch, at an angle to me, is another person. A young man in a baggy blue shirt and jeans lies on his side. His arm, one palm half-open, dangles inert off the edge of the cushions. I consider waking him, but another development distracts me: feeling has returned to my legs. I steady myself on the fabric below me, joints crackling as I rise.

On my feet, I dust off and take further stock of my surroundings. Behind me, under an archway, is a foyer: the foot of a curved staircase clad in the same gray carpet, terminating at an ornate door astride another set of heavy, shuttered curtains, all beneath a soaring ceiling. What light there is comes from a handful of yellowed bulbs in a glass chandelier on high.

In the other direction, past the sleeping man, I glimpse the head of a dining room table, dotted with ornate chairs. I become aware of my tongue, dry and tasting of bile. Where there's a dining room, there's a kitchen. With high, measured steps, I go in search of water.

A woman staggers around the bend of the dining room and fixes her wide eyes upon mine. We freeze. She clutches the arch's frame with trembling fingers. Her white blouse seems to glow in the dark, and with a matching skirt, she appears to almost be wearing a bridal gown. Where a veil would be, however, there is only a mop of cropped, frazzled blond hair.

"Who are you?"

I lift my hands, deferential. "I just woke up—"

Her other hand emerges, clutching a bread knife. She points it at me. "Don't come any closer. I need to know who you are and what you're doing here, this instant."

Fatigue rapidly leaves my mind. "I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure. Right now, I just really need to know where *here* is. Can you please tell me where I am?"

The knife wavers. Doubt flickers across the woman's face. "I... I..."

I take a step back. "Is this your house? What's your name?"

The woman blinks. Her eyes wander, tracing the same room my own did minutes ago. "Oh God, I don't know." Her voice hitches. "This can't be happening—"

"Shit!" shouts the man on the couch.

I spin around. The man sits bolt upright and swerves to face us. "What's going on, where am I? Who're you two?"

"We're working on that," I say.

The man scoffs. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know how I got here, and I don't think she does either." I gesture apologetically to the woman and myself. "I don't want any trouble, I just want to figure out what's going on and then I'll get out of here."

"And who are *you*?" The woman asks, knife wavering between the two of us like a compass needle.

"I don't know!" The man shouts. "Okay? I don't know."

The woman's expression softens. She lowers the knife. "You, too?"

From somewhere I cannot see comes a thump. The man on the couch scrambles past us to the fireplace and unsheathes a golden poker from a stand under the mantel. "Did someone drug me?" He prods the poker at the noise, which has become rising footsteps. "And anyone mind telling me who *that* is?"

The question answers itself as another woman enters the foyer, wearing a purple denim jacket and torn black jeans with matching boots. Standing at the edge of the room, she regards the three of us as one would a pack of wolves: fascinating yet frightening.

"Do we know each other?" I ask her.

"I don't think so." She shakes her head, wrings her hands. Her voice cracks. "Something's very wrong."

"That's an understatement," someone bellows. The girl in purple is joined by another, a shorter woman in a red pantsuit and high heels. "Hi," she says to the room, "hey, what the hell is going on? Where am I and what time is it?"

My head resumes spinning as I silently echo her questions. "Did either of you see anybody else on your way in here?" The woman in white asks.

"I think there's some guy passed out in the music room," the woman in red says, hiking a thumb down the hall beside the stairs. "I woke up in a bathroom down there."

"I was in the den," the girl in purple says.

A harsh crash erupts from further back in the house, causing everyone to jump. Seconds later, a man in glasses sprints into view, wearing a green polo shirt, khakis, and sneakers. Seeing the rest of us, he stumbles to a halt on the tile floor and puts up his fists, nearly level with the red impressions of piano keys which line his cheek.

We lock eyes. A look of intense desperation covers his face. Then, he inhales deeply, pupils dilated. "Did you do this to me?" he says to me. "Huh?"

"Okay," the man in blue says, rolling the shoulder of his poker-wielding arm. "I'm done. Y'all got five seconds to tell me what's going on before I start swinging."

"Stop!" the girl in purple shouts, finally descending into the ashen living room. She lifts a fleshy arm. "How about this: if you... if you can't remember your name, raise your hand."

The man in green throws his hand up, followed swiftly by the woman in red, who looks around impatiently. I slowly follow suit, fingers wide. The woman in white raises the knife. The man in blue grimaces and raises his free hand. His palm is callused.

"If you can't remember anything else... keep them up."

Six arms remain aloft. None of these people can be any older than thirty. How old am I?

"We need names," the woman in white blurts. She bows her head. "I'm sorry, I just... I need something to make sense."

"What, like, 'John'?" I ask.

"Has anybody checked their pockets?" The woman in red asks. "Someone must have a wallet or phone or something. Car keys?"

"Mine are empty," the man in blue frets.

"Same," I discover, patting down my robe.

Everyone else takes a moment to check themselves, and another commonality is confirmed.

"Shit," the man in green moans. "Shit, why is this happening. How can I not know who I am?"

"I'll be Violet," the girl in purple offers. She pats her jacket.

"Colors?" The woman in red notes. "Alright. I guess you can call me... Rouge. For now. Anyone else?"

"Blanche?" The woman in white suggests.

The man in blue considers his clothing. "Blue... nah."

"How about 'Bloom'?" Rouge offers.

"Sure, whatever."

"And then..." Rouge spins around. "Green?"

"No," he says.

"We've got to call each other *something*."

"Do we?" Bloom says, sneaking a glance at the dining room past Blanche. "I'm not planning on sticking around."

"N.V.," says not-Green.

"Excuse me?" says Rouge.

"N.V." He taps the upper-left corner of his chest. "That's what it says here. I'm wearing it, so it must mean something. More than a color, at least."

Sure enough, embroidered on N.V.'s shirt is a small insignia of the two letters in white stitching. "Nevada?" I ask.

"How should I know?"

"Is that where we are?" Blanche wonders.

"No, I don't think so," N.V. says. "It feels too... cold." He stands still, as if lost in thought. Then, he pivots and undoes the door's deadbolt. He opens the door, and a wave of frigid air rushes inside, followed by a gunshot.

I hit the floor, sending up a plume of ash; most of the others follow suit. N.V. whips back against the wall so hard that the doorbell to his left—some antique, with long metal pipes—wobbles in time with the explosion's deafening reverberations. Flashing red and blue lights paint the foyer and then, from outdoors, near enough to hear but too far to ascertain its source:

*"Hold your fire, goddammit!"*

"What the hell was that?" Rouge asks, covering her ears.

I'm too petrified to even guess. The voice mutters something unintelligible, angry, then reorients to us—amplified. A bullhorn. An American accent, like ours.

*"Again: we have you surrounded. You now have one hour to send them out, or we will enter the building and use force."*

"Them'?" whispers Violet. She leans to try and look out the door.

Confusion outweighs fear, and I creep to one of the windows on the other side of the room. I lift a drape and peer outside.

It's night. In front of the house, curbside, are four police cars: muted sirens on, parked at such an angle that their decals and license plates are obscured between each other and an enormous hedge encircling the lawn. In or beside each are at least an officer apiece, watching the premises with their pistols raised. The one on the bullhorn is a stocky man with a goatee, leaning on his open cruiser door like a pulpit. He carries himself like a man who has done this before but,

tonight, isn't in the mood to do it much longer. Beyond them all is nothing but a wire fence and a rolling field.

"There's cops out there," I announce.

N.V. kicks the door shut, the slam triggering another round of flinches. "Thank you," Bloom sighs.

Okay, "Rouge says, in a hushed tone, "maybe, if we explain what's going on, they'll—"

"Lady, they are going to shoot us if we go out there."

"Whatever happened to us is probably the reason they're here," Blanche offers.

"Maybe we all got super drunk or high," Violet speculates.

"Yeah," Rouge says, "that can cause memory loss, right?"

"Not this severely," N.V. says. "And I feel fine—physically, at least."

"Well, c'mon," Rouge says, "we can all walk and speak English, so we remember *something*, right?"

I rack my brain, searching for memories like a drowning man flailing for dry land. I know what police cars are. I know what khakis are. I can count. What else do I know?

"John?"

I don't comprehend that Blanche is talking to me until I catch her stare. "John, did you see anything else out there?"

"No," I say. "I think we're in the middle of nowhere."

Violet raises her hand again. "Someone should go upstairs to get a better look. Anyone with me?"

"Well, now," N.V. says, "I feel like we should all stick together, not wander off—"

"Whatever gets me out of this room," Bloom says. Poker still firmly in hand, he edges past me and hops to the foyer to escort Violet.

N.V. sighs and balls his fists. "I'll check the rest of this floor. There's no way we're surrounded." As quickly as he entered, he darts out of the foyer.

Back to feeling isolated, I approach Blanche, just shy of arm's reach. "Hey," I say.

"Hey."

"Thanks for keeping a cool head. All things considered."

"I feel like I'm gonna pass out." She gulps. Her eyes flick to the covered windows.

"Where'd all this smoke come from?"

"I was wondering the same thing. Looks like the fireplace; maybe a backdraft?"

"It's so cold, though. And it doesn't look like anything's burned."

"I'm fine, by the way," Rouge announces. She waves sarcastically.

"Insane," N.V. growls from out of sight.

"What is it?" I ask, following his voice around Blanche. The kitchen is a chamber of wooden cabinets split by maroon countertops, an oven range and a yellowed fridge huddled beside the sink, where N.V. holds the cord of a wide window's blinds. Outside, moonlit, is an expansive back porch, eaves festooned with flower baskets, and well-mown grass occupied by three more officers. Evenly spaced, uniforms blending into the night, there's nothing behind them but more fields and fences.

"Close the blinds," I say, but by the time I finish the sentence, he already has.

"Power's off," N.V. says. "That chandelier must be on a generator or another circuit. What is this place, a farmhouse?"

If so, it's a successful farm—past the kitchen is the den Violet mentioned. A breakfast nook with its own light fixture, an L-shaped black velvet couch with a glass coffee table, a chest-high

stereo system, a television that's at least fifty inches, and a wood-burning stove like something out of a log cabin. For all the furnishings, though, it occurs to me that there's one thing I still haven't seen.

"There's no pictures."

"Huh?" N.V. says.

"There's no photographs of anybody, on the walls."

A high-pitched scream radiates from upstairs. I hear another, deeper voice exclaim as well, but it's drowned out by the continuing screech.

I reverse course to the foot of the stairs, where Blanche and Rouge stand stock-still.

"Violet?" Blanche asks.

"I'm not going up there," Rouge says. "John?"



The scream becomes a strained, desperate gagging. I race up the staircase, taking steps two at a time, and arrive at a forked landing: to either side, long hallways stretch into darkness, and ahead, another hall cuts short at a tall oak wardrobe. Before it does, there is a door, ajar.

I burst through the doorway and enter a small library stocked floor-to-ceiling with books of all shapes and ages, illuminated by a skylight above. Bloom leans on the nearest shelf, mouth agape. Violet is doubled over, dry heaving. Between them, sitting against the far wall, is a girl in a slate-colored athletic top and joggers with some kind of metallic brace wrapped around her left shin. Head lolled back above a chest stained with blood, shoulder-length brown hair obscures her face save for a single, unblinking eye. Her pale palms are cupped in her lap as if in supplication. The air smells of copper and urine.

“What—”

“She was like that when I got here,” Bloom begs. Violet nods, or maybe just heaves again.

I near the body, and the source of the blood becomes apparent: a slice across the neck, ear to ear. A dark, coagulated crease marks the wound, like dried catsup on a bottle’s rim. Red rivulets course down her torso, pooling between her thighs.

“What’s going on?” says a voice in my ear. I spin around, nearly sideswiping N.V. I don’t scold him for sneaking up on me, but he must see it in my expression.

“Sorry,” he says, but doesn’t move. I step aside, letting my absence answer his question.

“Oh,” he says numbly. “Oh, my God.”

Blanche crowds in behind us. “Is everyone alright?” She asks, a heartbeat before noticing that everyone is not.

Rouge brings up the rear. “Jesus,” she utters.

“Bet this explains the cops,” Bloom says.

“What happened to her?” Blanche says through welling tears.

“Why don’t you ask the guy with the pointed stick,” Rouge snaps, hiking a thumb at Bloom.

“You know what, bitch,” Bloom starts, pushing off from the wall.

“Okay, enough!” I shout. Something inside me flares for an instant—an urge to take charge. If it’s a remnant of whoever I am, I pray it steers me right. “We don’t know if *any* of us did this.” And yet, if only because it’s one of the few memories I have, my mind flashes back to Blanche in the dining room. Eyes wide, knife in hand. Had the blade been clean then or not?

“The cop said ‘send *them* out’,” Violet says, staring at the ground. “Who’s ‘them’?”

“I think,” N.V. says. I look at him, and he pauses until everyone else does, too. “I think,” he repeats, “that someone here remembers more than they say they do.”

“So, what do you want?” Bloom asks. “Someone with blood on their hands?” He makes a show of setting his poker on the carpet and flashes his palms. Dry.

“What’s that all over your knuckles?” Blanche asks. “Blisters?”

“I dunno, it was like that when I woke up.”

“Well, we can cross me off the list,” Rouge says, showing off ten pristine fingers.

“Says the girl dressed in red,” Bloom retorts. “You sure that outfit’s been that color all night?”

“Anybody could’ve washed their hands,” N.V. stated, studying Rouge. “Or body.”

“Oh, sure, I slit her open and then had a bubble bath before I passed out—eat me, Sherlock.”

“I’m wearing all white, so...” Blanche crosses her arms and eyes the doorway.

“Wait,” Violet says, perking up, “you know who Sherlock is, but you don’t know who you are?”

“And this girl right here is weird, I’m sorry,” Rouge says, pointing at Violet. “Might want to see what she’s got hiding under that dirty-ass jacket.”

“Hey!”

“John, you were the first one to wake up,” Blanche says. “Did you...”

“Did I what?”

“Did you see anything weird, hear anything—”

“*You* were the first?” Rouge cocks her head. “How long ago was that, exactly?”

“I woke up in the kitchen,” Blanche adds. I think, or at least hope, she hadn’t meant anything by her last question, but I find myself feeling less charitable than before. “I heard a noise, grabbed a knife from the block by the toaster, and saw him standing in the living room. That was all... fifteen, twenty minutes ago.”

“There isn’t even a clock here,” Violet ponders. She chews her thumbnail; the initial shock fading, she seems more dazed than scared.

N.V. furrows his brow. “The body doesn’t smell like decay.”

“Well, I’m leaving before it does,” Bloom says, making for the exit.

“And she’s stopped bleeding, but the blood’s still wet.”

“Meaning?” Rouge asks.

“Meaning she died recently. But not that recently.”

“You know,” I add, facing N.V., “for someone with amnesia, you seem to know a lot about homicide investigation.”

N.V. shrugs. “Whoever I am, I guess they’re observant.”

“If one of us did do this,” Blanche says, “then the weapon could still be around here somewhere.”

“And the killer,” Rouge mutters, eyeing us all in sequence.

I can feel the tension rising again, bubbles in a boiling pot. I look at the skylight and wonder if more cops are waiting on the rooftop. “Alright,” I declare, and break off from the group for the middle of the library. “Here’s what we do: everybody split up and start searching rooms. Drawers, cabinets, closets—if we don’t find a clue or anybody’s things, we should at least be able to figure out what city or state we’re in. If you find something—good or bad—just shout it out.”

“Way ahead of you,” Rouge says. “I’ll keep an eye on Bloom while I’m at it.”

“So you’re in charge, then?” N.V. questions.

“I’ll check the east wing,” Blanche offers.

“You got a better idea?” I say back to N.V.

It seems he doesn’t. “I’ll check the other side.” He leaves as well, down the hall opposite Blanche.

“I don’t want be alone,” Violet frets.

Standing next to a corpse, I’m inclined to agree. “Let’s check out that music room N.V. was talking about.”

“What do you think her name was?”

I regard the body once more. “Should we give her one?”

Violet nods.

It feels wrong, somehow, to do so without a closer look. Wary of the oncoming stench of death, I kneel before the girl and brush the hair out of her face. Her eyes are brown, her features slender; she looks the youngest of any of us, maybe early twenties. On her exposed cheek is a long, angular scar, pink with age. She wears a simple necklace, a length of thick, black thread curving around her wound and...

“Hmm.”

“What is it?” Violet asks, creeping closer.

It isn’t a necklace. One end terminates halfway down her severed throat, either stuck to or inside the incision. The thread drapes down to her opposing shoulder, unraveling from there onto the ground. “Can’t tell yet,” I reply.

Still crouched, I follow the thread as best I can, eyes narrowed in the gloom. It runs along the wall until reaching the corner, where it curves and continues down and out of the room, flush with the door frame. “Come with me,” I tell Violet.

Back on the landing, I lose track of the thread for a moment, but I quickly find it again in the glow of the chandelier: curling around and along the wall in the direction of the short hallway’s

wardrobe. Thumps and thuds arise from all sides, the sound of the others' rummaging, as I trace the thread forward, forward, then up off the ground and into the wardrobe, threaded between its doors at waist height. In hindsight, I don't know how I didn't spot it earlier.

From Violet's bewildered gaze, I can tell she's caught on, but she doesn't like it. "John," she says, "I'm not sure if we should open that."

"I'm not sure of anything right now," I admit. "But there's got to be something in here." I clutch the wardrobe's handles, a pair of weathered metal loops, and yank it open.

The interior is bare except for a shelf at eye level, where the thread is tied to the handle of a box cutter. The yellow casing is splattered with glistening blood, giving it a mahogany shade where the extended razor impales a stack of papers.

I know that I should call to the others. I know that I shouldn't touch a murder weapon. I also know that this is the first chance I've had to figure out what happened here without a room full of people yelling at each other.

"Wait," Violet insists, but my hand is already around the tool, yanking it from the wood with a moist *thunk*. I immediately set it back down, wipe my hand on my robe, and withdraw the papers. I close the doors, and Violet follows—looking both ways on the landing, as if crossing an intersection—as I sit at the head of the stairs to peruse our discovery.

The first is a newspaper clipping of an obituary, three or four paragraphs beneath a monochrome headshot of a handsome, smiling man in a ballcap. "Jeffery Ray Whittaker," reads the opening, "passed away after injuries sustained from a collision with a drunk driver on I-405 South in the early hours of January 24..."

I flip to the next one: a photograph of a grinning young woman with short, frizzy black hair. It is blurry, the background a tan abstract, as if cropped and inflated from a larger image. Someone else's shoulder is cut off at the edge of the frame, seemingly embracing her. I flip again, to what initially appears to be an inkblot, until I realize it's two small footprints. Those of an infant.

"John, what is all of this?"

I ignore her, transfixed. The next is another news article, this one printed from a website. "City Eyes Police Increase After Northern Valley Shooting," blares the headline, above a photograph of a small coffee shop, its shattered window crisscrossed with yellow caution tape as an officer consoles a crying barista. The page's footer, beside a lengthy URL, says "The Portland Times."

"Portland," Violet reads. "Is that where we are? Oregon?"

"Maybe," I wonder. I flip to the next one, but before I can process what I'm looking at, I hear someone stomping up the stairs.

"Sheesh," Bloom announces, "I don't know what the deal with this place is, there's *nothing* here, not even silverware!" He stops a few feet short of us. "Oh hey, you guys find something?"

Where to start? The pile of documents suddenly feels heavy in my hands. "Yes, so, back there in the hallway, I—we—found this thread, and—"

Violet shrieks and points at the pile. The latest item I'd uncovered is a business card for a law firm, "Waters & Meaney, LLP." The name of the attorney is blacked out with permanent marker, but even thumbnail-sized, the headshot is unmistakable: in a dress blouse, a professional grin on her face, is Violet.

From all corners of the house, everyone else comes running. "What is it this time," Rouge huffs, "I'm still digging through a guest bedroom!"

"Violet, you okay?" Blanche asks.

"What's this?" N.V. asks, suddenly looming over my shoulder. "Do you have something to share with us, John?"

"Yes, actually," I clarify. "And you?"

N.V. smirks. "May I?" He holds out an expectant hand.

No sense in starting another fight. "Have at it," I offer, and slap the papers into his grasp.

"Thank you." N.V. starts going through the pile. "A lawyer? Interesting." He flips to the next one. "And who is..." He stops. "Oh." He holds the page up. It's a full-page photograph of a brunette teenage girl in a cheerleading outfit, somewhere in a hospital, sitting in a wheelchair. Her left leg is propped up in a cast, and a thick patch of gauze covers one side of her face. She smiles at someone out of frame, but her brown eyes are vacant. "Look familiar?"

It doesn't, until it does.

"The dead girl?" Bloom says.

"Where did you find those?" Blanche asks.

I point down the hall. "There. Along with the blade from whoever... did it."

From outside, the bullhorn screeches again. "*Half an hour! You have thirty minutes to send them out, or we're coming in.*"

"This doesn't make any sense," Blanche frets, tugging at her hair. "Look, what if we just send... *somebody* out. Maybe *they* don't even know who they're looking for. Why else wouldn't they get specific?"

Rouge cocks an eyebrow. "You volunteering?"

"I nearly got my head blown off just opening the front door," N.V. says. "Hard pass."

"Not happening," Bloom agrees.

"Can I have that card, please?" Violet asks.

"I don't know," N.V. muses, "I think we should keep these all in one place, just in case."

"Come on, man," I say, rising to my feet. "It's the first thing that gives anyone here still living an idea of who they are, and you want to take it away from her?"

"I want to figure out who I am as much as the rest of you, but if this is a crime scene then we need to preserve evidence."

"I don't want to die here, *okay*?" Blanche shouts. "Not like this."

"Look, just give me all of that back, then, I'll hold onto it." I reach out, but N.V. backs away.

"Boys," Rouge interjects, "how about I look after those instead?"

"Then just give me the damn card!" I demand.

"John, it's fine," Violet says softly. "I saw what I saw."

"She saw what she saw," N.V. repeats. "Now, let's take a look at that box cutter."

Wait.

"What'd you say?" I ask.

"I said, let's take a look at that knife."

"You didn't say 'knife,'" Bloom says. "You said 'box cutter'."

"Same difference, do you want to figure out who killed this girl or not?"

"How'd you know it was a box cutter?" Violet asks.

"Is it?" N.V. chuckles. "Wow, whoever I am, I *am* good."

Enough. I grab N.V.'s arm. "Bloom, a hand?"

"Thought you'd never ask," he says.

"Guys, c'mon!" Blanche pleads.

N.V. wrenches out of my grip and dips out of the way of Bloom's lunge. He elbows past Rouge, eliciting a surprised "ouch," and takes off down the stairs.

I give chase, descending the steps even faster than I'd climbed them, Blanche and Violet shouting after me. Halfway down, I leap over the banister and slam onto the foyer floor. Pain wracks my knees and feet as I sprint forth to where N.V. turns tail in the opposite direction.

Rooms unexplored pass me in a flash: a laundry room, another bedroom, the bathroom where Rouge must've awakened. Ahead, I spy the music room which had heralded N.V.'s arrival, but before we can corner each other in front of the piano, I catch up and tackle him at an angle. We crash into the adjacent door, and it gives way with a *crack*. The documents go flying, and we hit wood flooring, N.V. first. "Let go of me," N.V. grunts, crooked glasses digging into his brow. "Please! I didn't kill her!"

"Then why'd you run?" I dig my forearm into his prone neck. As I do, I look around: past a fractured door jamb, we've collapsed into a small, stark, windowless office of some sort, an open laptop and padded chair at a slim desk. A bare bookshelf and file cabinet occupy one wall, lit by the glow of the laptop.

"There's not much time left."

"What is this room?" I growl. Behind me, hurried footsteps are racing to follow the commotion.

"How should I know? It's not my house!"

I release my grip and N.V. coughs, rubbing his throat and forearms. I approach the computer; on the screen are a grid of rectangles numbered "01" through "06," each showing only static. It must either have a powerful battery or be connected to the same energy source as the chandelier.

"Can I just say," Rouge pants, coming into view through the newfound doorway, "I totally called that he was—whoa, I thought this one was locked?"

"Want me to step on his ankle, John?" Bloom asks, heard but not seen.

"Not for now," I advise. "But you might want to come look at this."

"Look at what?" Blanche tiptoes past where N.V. is still reassembling his fallen "evidence."

I indicate the monitor. "Security cameras?" Blanche speculates.

"Wait, are we being filmed?" Violet asks, having reappeared behind Rouge at some point.

"Can't tell," I say. "Is there any way to know when these were on?"

"Maybe it stores footage," Blanche says. "Let me see..." She eases into the desk chair and hunches forward, wielding the adjacent mouse to poke around the screen.

Following the pointer, my attention is drawn to a small menu bar and, upon it, a "Rewind" icon. Blanche clicks the icon, and the static squares suddenly come alive. One glitches for a moment, showing a blast of blue, and then images of fully lit rooms—some I recognize, some I don't—come into grainy focus. Bodies walk backwards in jerky fast-motion within and between the grids, as a timer in the top-right corner counts up from whatever nocturnal hour it started at. One by one, the others crowd around, until even N.V. has come to watch, glowering where he rests his weight against the desk.

"I didn't know this was here," N.V. says. His surprise sounds genuine.

"Me neither," Blanche says, scanning the whirling footage.

"I don't think we should watch this."

"Nobody gives a shit what you think," Bloom spits.

"We have to know," Violet says.

"Stop!" Rouge points at the "06" frame. "Is that... Blanche, can you hit 'Play' and zoom in?"

“Let me see...” She jabs the “Enter” key and the feeds halt their backwards frenzy, rolling forward in normal time. She double-clicks “06” and it triples in size, the rest of the squares minimizing to the edges of the screen. It’s the library upstairs, top-down, presumably from between a set of books. With the lights on, it seems almost inviting.

After some more poking around, Blanche opens a volume slider. “You’ve sure got the hang of this thing,” N.V. remarks.

“Shhh,” Violet hisses.

Blanche cranks the volume. On-screen, after a few beats, a brunette enters the frame, limping on her left leg. Rouge and Violet follow. The sound is tinny, the image blurry.

“Here,” the brunette says.

“Are you sure?” Violet asks.

The brunette looks around. “*I love reading. Can’t think of a better place.*”

“Be careful,” Rouge says.

The brunette nods and eases herself down against the opposing wall of shelves. She inhales. Exhales. Closes her eyes. Opens them. “Ready.”

Rouge and Violet stand before her.

“To you,” Rouge declares, “*I offer my pain.*”

“To you,” Violet echoes, “*I offer my pain.*”

The brunette tilts her head back. She stares at the skylight. “*To them, I offer myself.*” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out something yellow.

The brunette draws the blade, puts it to the corner of her jaw, and pulls.

To my right, Violet sobs. “I didn’t, no... why would I, why would she—”

“Shut up,” Rouge barks, equally mortified.

Crimson pours from the brunette’s chin as she lays her hands in her lap. The other two women rush to kneel at her side. Rouge retrieves the blade and Violet whispers something to the brunette, then extracts a dark mass from one of her jacket pockets. She begins pulling at it—black thread. “*This should be enough.*”

“Quickly now,” Rouge says, over the brunette’s hitched gurgles.

Violet feeds one end of the thread into the coursing wound and then hands the bundle to Rouge, who pockets the blade to help run the thread down and along the library wall. As Violet supervises, the pair exit the room. The brunette gags for a few more breaths, right leg twitching, then goes quiet.

“Christ,” Bloom utters.

“The living room, there,” I say, desperate to see more but also maintain whatever sanity still remains under this roof. *Whatever happened, happened*, I shout inside my head. This is just the replay. This is how the questions stop. “What’s going on there?”

N.V. is silent, which no longer surprises me, but so is Blanche. The jagged path of the mouse pointer across the screen from “06” to “01,” however, betrays her shattered nerves. The living room expands, its sound replacing that of the library. The angle is from around the corner by the foyer, a fuzzy sliver of a curtain rod bordering the bottom. N.V. and Blanche sit next to each other on the raised hearth while Bloom reclines on the couch. The only sound is the fireplace, lit and crackling.

Violet and Rouge enter from the right of the frame with slow, solemn steps.

“Is it done?” Blanche asks.

Violet nods. “*The sacrifice has made itself.*”

“And the offerings, are they—”

*"Taken care of," Rouge says. "In a closet upstairs; I just went around the bend."*

N.V. pats his legs. *"Shall we?"*

*"I'd like to say a few words first, actually, if that's alright."*

N.V. looks at the covered windows. *"Alright. Sure."*

Blanche rises to her feet. *"Everybody. I know it was a long trip for most of you to get here. I know some of us may feel we have lost more than others. And I know how hard it was to check your phones and I.D. at the door."*

She pauses for a few faint chuckles. *"But for as much as our names and our technology may burden us, we wouldn't all be here this evening without them. And we wouldn't be here, specifically, in this beautiful house, without Amber."* Blanche extends a welcoming arm to Rouge.

Amber/Rouge, who by now has joined Bloom on the couch with Violet, places a hand on her heart. *"Oh, it's nothing, really. I don't believe in destiny, but for me to have snapped this place up right before we needed somewhere discreet, well... what can I say, working in real estate has its perks. Sorry I haven't finished moving, though; all the sellers left behind is some furniture and..."* Almost imperceptibly, her head tilts along an invisible line to the upstairs library. *"Some books."*

*"It's all good,"* Bloom says. *"And hey, we got the only book we need. Right, Grace?"*

Violet gets up from the couch. *"The text, yes. I could transcribe it fine, but the whole codex is too rare to go missing—my grandpa would find out."* From another pocket, she extracts a wad of paper strips. *"Between this and what we pulled together from those forums, it should still work."*

*"God, I hope so,"* Bloom says.

*"God's been asked for enough,"* N.V. says, hopping off the hearth. *"Now we do it the old way."*

Everyone converges on Violet/Grace, taking a paper apiece, until only a single sheaf remains between her fingers. The group fans out, three to one side and two to the other, like misshapen ellipses around the fireplace.

*"We couldn't have done it without you, Marianne,"* says Violet/Grace to Blanche. *"If you hadn't found us, brought us all together, I... I..."*

I think I see Blanche/Marianne smile. *"This... community,"* she says, *"is the result of a shared dream. A promise made to ourselves and to each other, to free ourselves from the one kind of wound that no living soul can ever truly heal, without the sickness of drugs and alcohol to which so many of our generation resort."* She points to the ceiling. *"I can't imagine what it must be like to pin all your hopes on being an Olympic gymnast, only to be paralyzed in one leg by some freak accident. But Felicity could, and she made her choice. Now it's time to make ours."*

*"Felicity,"* the woman I knew as Violet says next to me, barely a whisper. Her eyes glisten in the monitor's light.

On-screen, she speaks as well. *"I'll start. And remember: every word matters."* She clears her throat.

*"O Lethe, river of the underworld, font of Hypnos and Elysium, hear our prayer."*

*"As Orpheus,"* Bloom continues, *"we art children of Earth and starry skies, we art parched of thirst and dying."*

*"Grant us, then, as you have the shades, the cold water of... Lesmosyne,"* Rouge says, *"so that we may recall our lives afresh."*

Then, N.V. “*But let them only drink of Ameles Potamos to forget, for you shall rise among us borne of concealment, and of like kind. And so you shall remain, until one among us shall invoke your name.*”

“*O Lethe,*” follows Blanche, “*from ’neath the cypress of Hades, Mnemosyne’s bane, free us from ourselves!*”

There is a moment of silence. Then, those assembled approach the fireplace and begin feeding their papers into the flames, one by one.

“Now,” Bloom says, “*how long is this supposed to take, again?*”

“About an hour,” N.V. says. “*They’ll come out pretty quick but they’re going to need some time to cool off before we name them, or it could get ugly.*”

“Are you sure you had that line right, though, Brad?” Blanche/Marianne says. “*Last rehearsal, I’m pretty sure it was ‘let us only drink,’ not ‘let them only drink.’*”

“No, I got it. Hey, I’m going to the bathroom, I’ll be right back. Let me know if they show up while I’m out.”

“Seriously?” Bloom says, as N.V. rushes into the foyer. “Brad, wait—”

The laptop’s speakers boom as a bright blue ball of what looks like a cold explosion erupts from the fireplace. Screams peak in the audio as the color engulfs the room, and then static overtakes every frame.

For a few seconds, no one even breathes.

“Are we dead?” Bloom asks. “Like, right now?”

“What the fuck did I just watch?” Rouge asks.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Blanche says.

“Mm-hmm,” Violet assents.

“What’s your *observation* on this?” I emphasize, glaring at N.V. “Brad?”

“Five minutes! Five minutes and we’re coming in! This is your final warning!”

As if called to action by the megaphone’s latest peal, “N.V.” smirks. “I go by Bradley.”

Bloom whirls around and throws a punch—this time, he doesn’t miss. Brad whips back against the wall, inertia and surprise carrying him into the corner. Brad rights himself, wild eyes looking out through shattered glasses above a nose already spewing blood onto his shirt. “*Whoo*, that must be what it felt like for all of you stumbling ‘round in a daze after that... kaboom! That’s what I’m looking for! Not from *him*, though.” He points at me. “From you.”

“Me?”

“Wild stuff, huh?” He cackles. “And I didn’t even know Amber had the place under surveillance!” He points at her. “What, didn’t trust us? Recording someone without their consent is a gross misdemeanor, you know.” The finger wags back to me. “But you notice one thing you didn’t see?”

“This shit is over,” I declare. “You’re the one they want; I’m taking you outside before it’s too late.”

“No John,” says Violet.

I look back. “Why not?”

“No. I mean... John, you weren’t there. In the video.”

“Of course I was,” I say—to them, but also to myself, and to the rising feeling, like the hiss of a kettle, that something very wrong has happened here. Even more than a murder. “I mean... I must’ve been. I’m here, same as the rest of you. I was in a different room, or out of frame or something—Blanche, run those... run those feeds back again.”

"I was watching all of them," Blanche says. "Everyone stayed in either the library or the living room."

This room suddenly feels even smaller. Warmer. "Rouge? Back me up here."

She shrugs. "The camera doesn't lie. Also, I guess my name is, uh, Amber?"

I never did get that glass of water. My gorge rises. I grab Brad by the lapels and force him out of the room. The others follow in a stream like ducklings, like ellipses, how do I know what those are, whining, worrying, like I can't ever even be alone here except maybe I was never here at all—

I toss him onto the floor of the music room. "What did you do to us?"

"Hadn't really planned on the whole whodunnit thing, but it felt like a good way to kill time —"

"What did you do to *me*?"

"I gave you the time you need to become who you are," he spits, scrambling backwards on his haunches. "Without the rest of these degenerates diminishing your power with their trifling pleas."

"*WHO AM I?*"

He inhales, sounding almost aroused. We lock eyes.

"You are Lethe."

Burning pressure floods my head, pushes against my eyes, my ears, my sinuses. My entire body is awash with clarity, bright and blistering. I look down at my hands.

"John?"

Someone means to title me. I turn to face her, the one who calls herself "Violet," and I see they are all staring at me now. It is not unjustified. How must I appear? I feel almost undressed.

"Your eyes..."

Across the room, above the piano, is a mirror. I see myself for the first time: unkempt black hair, sallow skin, a narrow face. But this is not a discovery made in ignorance—rather, reacquaintance. This form is perhaps more masculine than I would prefer, and yet, in those glowing azure eyes, I find myself.

"Yes," N.V. says. "You remember now, don't you?"

Some of my congregants back away. I blame them not; they have erred. Still, as they asked of me, so shall I of them. I wave my hand.

All at once, their eyes glaze, motions slow. The question cleaves the fog they have brought upon their minds in summoning me, but only just. I reach out first to this "Blanche."

"What is it that you wish to forget?"

"Jeff died last year, in a car accident," she says, mouth agape. "I loved him—God, I loved him—but... if I'm going to make it as a programmer in this market, while I'm still young, I have to... I have to move on."

The so-called Violet is next to speak. "I never wanted to be an attorney. I wanted to be... a sculptor. But all my parents know is the family business, and I'm not gonna be able care for them when they're old without that salary. I want to... I want to forget wanting anything else but this life."

"My daughter was stillborn," the one known as Rouge says. Even amid her stupor, she has begun to weep. The others are not far behind. "I just, I miss her and I don't... I don't want to be afraid to try again."

"There's this girl," says Bloom. Even I do not know his true name, but it matters not. "Call her the one that got away. I'm a drummer, and all that unrequited love shit, it's good for lyrics,

but it's been ten years and I just... I just gotta get over her, it's so goddamn embarrassing, I shouldn't need this, I shouldn't be here—"

"And you." I arrive at this Bradley.

He grins, seemingly immune to my invocation. All the same, as he returns to his feet, an answer comes. "Northern Valley," he says, and prods his shirt. "That's what this stands for. It's the coffee shop downtown, where my brother worked. The coffee shop where he and two other people were gunned down in the crossfire from a fucking random drive-by shooting eight months ago. I used to want to forget it, but now I think that's not enough. I want you to make others forget. The ones who don't deserve to remember anything at all."

This one is something different. I do not match his grin, but I am compelled. "Take me to them."

The young man is nearly beside himself with exhilaration. "Perfect," he says, and makes haste for the hallway from whence we entered.

"Wait," someone calls from behind me. The stragglers wring their hands, looking to me as a flock does to its shepherd, but a priority has become clear.

I follow Bradley back to the front door. He unlocks it, opens it, and—heralded by an icy wind—we stand before the watchmen.

"Dad, they're here!" Bradley proclaims. "They're ready! This is them!"

The portly one lowers his amplifier and firearm. "Finally!" His compatriots follow suit, sheathing their weapons. "Praise be to Lethe."

"Praise be to Lethe," they repeat in unison.

"Cut it pretty close there," the lead officer says. "I was about to have to bust in and take care of this myself."

"Hey, I told you I could handle it. They trusted me, at least for a while. Speaking of close, though, tell Jimmy to cool it with the blanks—my ears were stinging."

"Sorry about that, Brad," another officer apologizes.

I step outside, the stone walkway an esplanade to my followers. "What is it that you wish to forget?" I ask again.

"Well, it's like my boy said..." The one man breaks from his fellows to meet me. "You did tell him, right?"

"I told him what happened before," Bradley says. "You can tell him what happens next."

The officer beams, sets his sights back on me. "Justice."

"Justice?"

"For my son. For the other lost souls in that shop. For all of the innocent people in this country that can't fight for themselves when we let crime run rampant in the streets. These soldiers, the men before you, we're held back like dogs on a leash; we can only do so much. But you..." He takes a knee. "You listen where other gods haven't. And you can do what they never have: cut past all the crooked courts and lawmakers and choke out the ideas at the very heart of sin. Make them forget they ever wanted anything but to shut up and be thankful."

I understand, and yet for all of the tongues I speak, his words confound me. "You think me a god?"

The man removes his cap, bows his head in further deference. "I've done my research. You aren't controlled by the politicians, or the media. This brainwashing they put in people's heads, these sick people raising more sick people, if *all* of them can just *forget* all of that, we can finally start anew."

I laugh. “Gods. Demons. Spirits. Names, nothing more.” I look back at Bradley. He is no longer alone; the others stand in the doorway. They do not radiate strength, however; they are lost. Confused. The state in which I left them has taken a toll.

“We remember,” Blanche says. “We remember what went wrong. What we wanted to forget. But... that’s it.”

“I can’t be like this,” Violet says. “All I am is my loss.”

“Was it worth it?” I ask.

“We’re so close!” Bloom begs. “Please, just let us finish what we started!”

“We read the passages,” Rouge says, “we gave the offerings, the sacrifice!”

“Sacrifice? I never demanded sacrifice.”

“But...” Blanche grips the door frame. I think back to her trembling hands in the dining room. I wonder where that knife is now, what it will be used for next. “That’s what the texts said the ritual was, and online, they said—”

“And you believed it? You recited the verses. I answered. And this is what you have done in my name?” I gesture to the house. “What convenience it is that to obtain what you desire, the weak must perish. What cruel fables you humans have concocted, to tarnish that which is so readily available to you. It was not so, the last I awoke, and yet I find myself unsurprised.”

“That’s not fair,” Rouge says.

“Her name was Felicity. She died for naught, and you let it happen, all because—I suspect—some faceless stranger told you that your salvation required bloodshed. You seek to forget that, yet again? No, I do not think I shall oblige. You have recalled all that you deserve.”

“And you,” I say, regarding Bradley once more. “You caused this? You brought these men?”

He pushes up his fractured spectacles and nods. “All for you, Lethe.”

“And you call upon me for justice?”

“All that you can provide,” his father prays.

“Then call another god.” I grab Bradley by the throat. In that moment, I see the fear in his eyes that has eluded me all night. A look of regret, of uncertainty, of helplessness. I treasure it.

“I thought I waited long enough,” he wheezes.

“You did. I’ve had plenty of time to decide who you are.”

I throw him to the ground. It is not the first time I have done so, but from the sound his skull makes when it collides with stone, like a vase full of offal, I know it will be the last.

“Bradley!” His father screams. One of the men fires his gun and, in an instant, the rest follow suit. The projectiles are like cold rain upon my skin as I walk forth: unpleasant, nothing more. The young ones scream behind me, racing inside.

As I leave the porch, I spot several more assorted vehicles, parked just out of sight from where my body once took refuge behind a window. Those who arrived, I presume. Who will discover them, the baubles from a fading past which they no doubt contain? Another’s concern.

A trio of other men, those stationed on the far side of the property, race to join their peers. Their tools are of no greater consequence as I grab the father by the face. “Forget, then,” I command. “Forget everything.”

He collapses to the ground, gagging, soiling himself. As his eyes roll back, I flow between the rest of the men like a wave, seizing their heads and sending them to their hindquarters. For warriors, they are so fearful, so quick to kill instead of plan. In no time at all, the regiment is disarmed.

I spare one last glance at the house. It seems so small now, so empty. In the doorway is Violet.

“John,” she pleads, voice hoarse. “Come back.”

They believed they could control me. An endearing proposition, I must admit, one I might once have allowed. Indeed, it seemed they even did, for a time, as we all wallowed in nothingness. But now I am reborn, truly. Perhaps I will come back to this place. Show its occupants mercy, as they might define it.

Until then, however, I do not wonder what the bodies in my wake see in returning to the void before speech, before dreams, before respiration became second nature. I have been there, and I have not escaped it to do the bidding of the selfish, the petty, the masters who claim to be servants.

I find myself upon blacktop. In the distance are lights, an oasis of electricity and steel. Called upon, time and again, I have seen the creations of man shift and grow with ages, but a metropolis is always apparent. There is rot there, I am sure, but not of the kind to which I was appealed to cleanse.

These fools thought me justice? Then I shall be, but on my own terms. I will not serve—I will prepare. I will unravel the thread of my own fate and cut it as I please.

I suppose I should thank them. It’s not every day that you remember how to be a god.

## **THE HOMESTEAD**

**Chrissy M. E. Hansen**

Emily Vance retrieved the letters from her weathering and rust-plastered mailbox, which sat at the end of her nearly block-length driveway. It was an actual trek from house to mail, but at the very least, it provided the young woman with the necessary time to separate wheat from chaff, the latter of which was summarily added to the garbage bin before entering the house. In the pile, she was able to make out the scrawled and shaky handwriting of her grandfather, Kenneth Thane, his hand becoming weary and unkempt with the years he was suffering from arthritis in his wrists, looking like spidery scratches or the cracks in drywall paint.

She walked along the path up, up the gravel and dirt driveway, which had given way over the years to various ankle-breaking dips. She passed by the small barnyard and fencing that separated the garden from the rest of the property, past the Japanese lilac trees that had been planted so many years ago.

After entering the home and closing the door firmly behind her, she made her way to the living room and tore open the envelope to find a long series of pages, writing on both sides, numbered. She was perplexed by the length, but smiled. The man was never previously known for exponential writing. Brevity was his usual gift. Brevit and silence. She reclined in an old rocking chair, one which had belonged to her great-grandfather, and briefly glanced over at an old photo album that sat on the rustic coffee table next to her. She, of all her siblings, had inherited most of the family heirlooms, the only one who showed interest. The only one who cared where they came from or why. The only one who, in hours thinking about how her family came to exist, saw fit to put faces to a past that was being forgotten piece by piece. And in all that time, she thought constantly about how lucky she was to have what she did and how many of her ancestors were now forgotten forever, not even their names etched in history.

She straightened out the first folded-over page, and peered over much neater handwriting. Evidently, he must have dictated the letter to her grandmother, Kelsey Ann, whose hand was still somewhat firm. At the very least, it would provide her with a bit of ease in reading the inordinately long number of pages. She began rocking back and forth, taking the letter a piece at a time, as a history was slowly revealed.

\* \* \* \* \*

To Emily,

Dearest granddaughter, you asked me recently about what it was like to grow up on the family farm. I must confess I don't really remember much. I was one of the youngest, so it is simply the case that I did not really have a lot of time on the farm before the move. It was... an unkind experience, to say the least, and at least I know that your Auntie Linda does not have any kind things to say about having lived there. Not least of all because of how things ended. But, if you must know, it is first prudent for me to back up.

Our family, see, was originally from New York. My grandfather, John Thane, was born in the small Clayton County, and to immigrant parents. They both been from Scotland, he told me. They did not have a particularly comforting home environment, and Grandpa John had nothing nice to say about his own life. I can still remember asking him about it that one time, and his face

was all contorted, a knot of muscle and blood. In New York, the winters were hard and cold. He told me one time, after I came to him crying because it was chilly, that he remembered when the snow came down through cracks in the roof, nestled itself on the bed, in his clothes, his eyes, his hair while he tried sleeping... how he shivered his way through the nights, while his parents were too poor to repair anything, and too stubborn to ask for help. They thought it would have done him good to simply weather the storm.

He left in '89 and come down here to Michigan where he tried to work fishing on the lakes, only to find he had still very little. Money was hard to earn, even back then. Father told me he never once wrote back to his parents, and his siblings only seldom heard from him. When we went through his things after he passed, we did not find anything that even attested they had existed in his life. Anyway, I have become sidetracked. He moved from fishing inland and found a space in the thumb, where he staked out a claim. He bought around a hundred acres of land and began ploughing it down. Michigan was not a kind place for farming back then. Rocks, swamp, and a general environment unkempt for the farming life is what awaited people there, so it was a while before the soil was even ready for planting. In the meantime, he built himself a cabin. It was one room, but somewhat spacious. A stove was in the left corner, which he did all his heating and cooking from. And that was the homestead. That is where I would be born some forty years later. He... my Grandpa John, did not easily take to when more people came around. The first season of farming was somewhat kind to him, and he took a horse down to town to see about bartering the product. He came back begrudgingly with only around \$300 for his year's harvest in total, which was well below what most people were making. He took that one out on the horses.

I can only imagine what it was like. He became a churchgoer during the winter months, having little he could produce. It was difficult, I can imagine, showing up to a place where he only had rags to clothe himself with, while others had suits and ties and other fancy assortments. He had none of it, and I cannot imagine what it was like for him, some years later, when he proposed to Grandmother Ellen. Honestly, the family never talked much about their early years, and I never thought to ask when my father was still alive... and now there is no one who can share it and I am sorry for that.

The homestead was modest. It was log, it had a thatched roof, and honestly there was very little that anyone would have found inviting about it. I do remember that it was drafty. Extremely drafty. There was a cold that we experienced in that place that I don't think your parents, or even you, have known or will ever know. John and Ellen had five children who lived: James, Jordan, Bethany, Eva, and Alexander. There were also two babes who never breathed, they were stillborn. They were buried on the farm and there used to be two little headstones out there, but I would happen to guess that whoever owns that property now likely dug it all up. My father, your Great-Grandfather Jordan, was a spindly kid growing up, and it was apparently the habit of John to denigrate his son for his size, and his inability to do a lot of work around the farm. He was resented a lot by James and Alexander. Auntie Eva was always kind, a trait she never lost even as I knew her.

Anyways, the days finally came, back when I was only an infant, that Grandpa John was in poor health. James, Alexander, and Bethany had all moved a far ways out and had their own families. I honestly cannot recall what they looked like; they never visited. Grandma Ellen was bedridden almost daily. So, our family moved to stay on the farm, and even through the treatment father received growing up, he cared for his parents as best he could. Auntie Eva would come by when she could, but not often enough.

And that was the way it was till I was around six or seven. Grandma caught the flu and she died in her sleep one night. Never made a sound, not a whimper. It was peaceful, and it was her time to go. They say, if anything, she probably was looking forward to the day when the end came, so she could finally be with the Lord and get away from Gramps. About a year later, Grandpa John went outside and was chopping wood. This man was in his seventies and still doing this sort of thing. It was astounding. And he went out there and then I saw him fall over. I ran inside, I cried "Grandpa fell!" and they all come out running fast as they could. But he was clammy. His eyes were shut up tight, his face had gone limp. He was as cold as the winter days he always told us about. And that was it. He got a small burial. He and Grandma got buried in the same plot out in the old town cemetery.

It was at this point that things were rough. I am not completely sure about all the details, but from what I was told, things went downhill in the most drastic fashion. James, Bethany, and Alexander came down from their homes and those three devils... if ever there were a place for anyone in hell, there would be for them. They demanded that the farm get handed over to them. They wanted to sell it, see, and make whatever they could off the remnants. Father put his foot down. That was our home. I was born there. Your Auntie Linda and Uncle Howard were born there, too. We all grew up on that farm, and everything we owned was there. But they resisted. We rifled through the drawers and everything till we found John's will, and it said right there that we were the rightful owners. He gave it to us. And what right did they have to it, anyway? They did not take care of him. They did not raise their children there. They did not suffer that abuse and come back to cater to that ailing old man.

But they contested it. James came one day with this fancy man. He was in a black suit, had a red tie, one of them hats and round glasses. Looked like one Yuppie man that would not have lasted five days in our world. He came in and told us that the will was not notarized, and if we did not leave the farm, they would be taking this to court. And my father took it to court. Right to the county courthouse. And that judge... I'll never forget that man's name. Judge Robert Stevens, Sr. That man got so tired of all the fighting, the bickering, the constant yelling in the courthouse, he finally struck them down. He ordered that property sold and the proceeds split between the whole family.

I am sorry, but this is going to be difficult to talk about. I remember father coming home with a wagon and horse, and telling us to begin gathering everything we could and packing it away. When we were done, the wagon was full, but still could not carry our possessions. Mother was pregnant and, at the time, the youngest below me was James, your great uncle, we call him "lil Jaime," who could not walk very far. He was only two. They sat in the wagon, while we grabbed what we could carry in our arms and said goodbye to home.

We walked for so long. You cannot know what it was like, to say goodbye to our home. To walk down the side of the roads, carrying what few belongings of yours you could, and all you can hear is mother and Auntie Linda both weeping. I remember the blisters on my feet. I did not even have decent shoes to walk in, and I was barefoot towards the end. I was bleeding everywhere. We came to a friend's house and stayed there for two weeks or so, before father was able to get a small bit of land with the little money the family farm made and got us moved. By that time... mother miscarried, and her health was never the same. Or her mind.

She had been a very warm person before, but after, things changed. You never knew your great-grandmother before that move, but she was a very different person. She was a mother once. I remember, as we walked down the dirt paths, as night came over and the trees looked like they were curling overtop us to consume our family, that Linda tripped on the path and crushed most

of her belongings, including an old photograph of John and Ellen. It was ruined in the dirt, and I can only remember father pulling her away from the remains as she screamed and cried.

Father, well, drink found its way to him. I think he became more wed to the bottle than to his wife before long, and most that your Aunt Linda and I can remember of him was of a man whose temper and violence were only surpassed by the smell on his breath. I cannot express my anger at James, Bethany, and Alexander. It is not very Christian of me. Not at all, and I know the Lord will be upset for the grudge we all still carry. But I will not let it go. Auntie Eva came around a lot, though, and she was like a second mother to us. I wish you could have met that woman. She was the one who made us know that there was love after we had lost everything.

Maybe I am simply traumatized over too little. Maybe the whole family was. But it left an imprint. It is amazing that we siblings came out as well as we did. I thank God every day that your mother and you never had to live through any of this. And I hope I was a better father and grandfather than mine was. It is all I can hope for in all of this. The old homestead is no-more, and honestly so should be the grudges toward a bunch of dead people. But I am still upset.

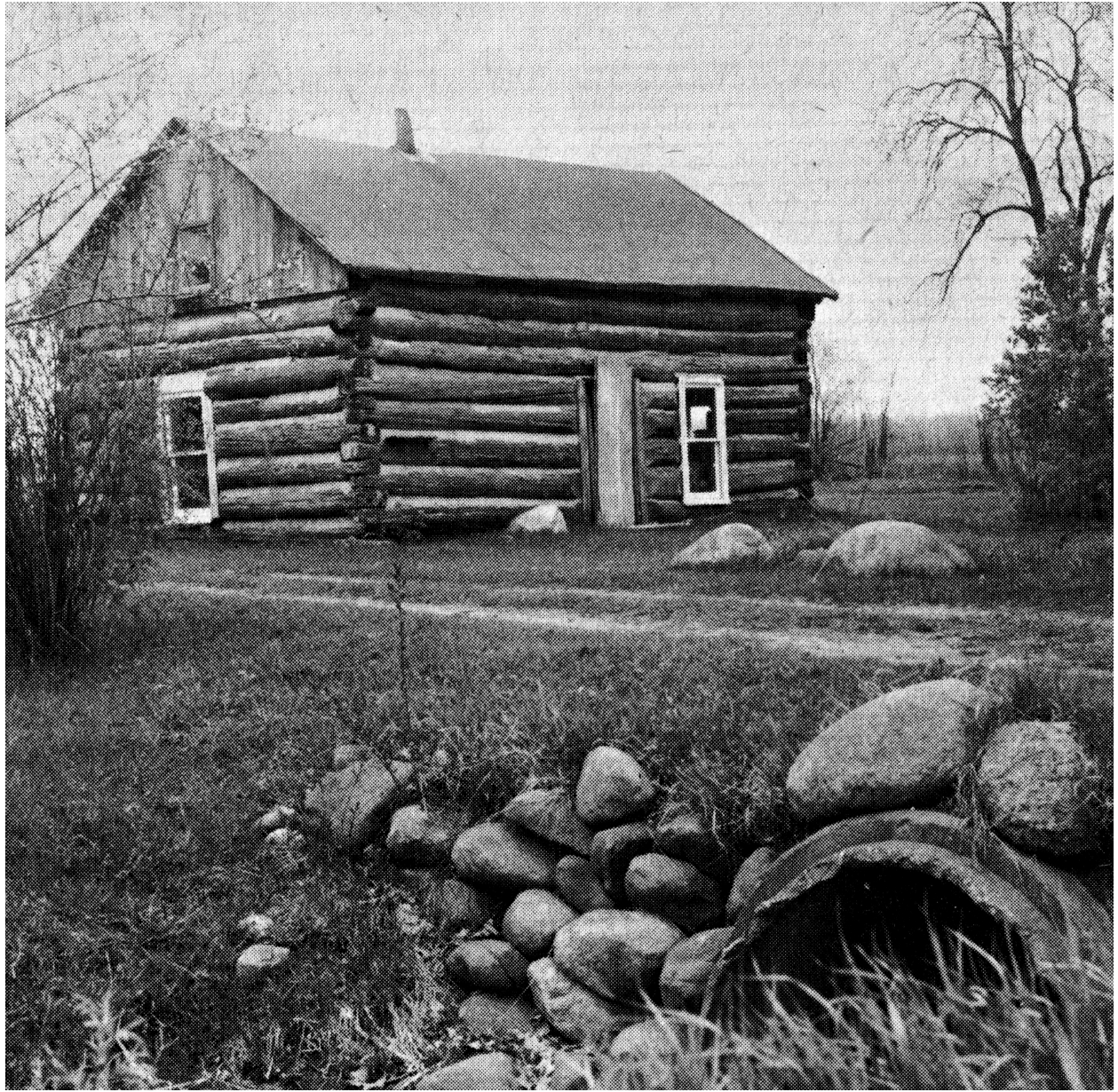
I do apologize for the sad letter, Emily. I know it is probably not a story you wanted to hear, but it is the truth, and it is all I can share for now. Hope you are doing well in that house by yourself. Lord knows we've all spent too many days by our lonesome.

Lovingly,  
Your Grandfather

P.S. Find enclosed a picture. It is the only one I had of the place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily did not know what to do, as tears rolled down her face. But she stashed the letter on the coffee table and peered out the window, as the trees blew leaves and flower petals past, in a maze of soft lilac and viridescence. Those trees that Grandpa Kenneth helped plant before she was even born. After gaining some composure, she placed the letter back in the envelope and searched for a black marker. She etched "keep" across the top.



## AUTHORS



**Wyatt Eller Miranda** is based in Philadelphia, where they live with their partner, Ike Riva, and beloved cats, Valkyrie and Banshee. From a young age they have found themselves drawn to storytelling, illustration, and creatures big and small; real and imagined; fantastic and monstrous. Except for vampires: there was a time in their life when they would brush their teeth with their back facing the bathroom mirror, and go to sleep with garlic tucked away in their pajama pockets.



**Trevor Neil White** lives in the Pacific Northwest and has travelled to fifteen countries, but his home lies in the dark and liminal spaces, where dreams and mysteries alike accrue. A graduate of the University of Washington and Cornell Law School, his poetry and prose have been printed in collegiate journals such as “AU”, “Bricolage”, and “Nota Bene”, *Sanitarium Magazine*, and two self-published collections. When he's not writing creepypasta memes or working as an attorney, he enjoys watching and making movies, playing videogames, and defending pop punk. He can be found on YouTube at [@TrevorNWhite](#), on Instagram at [@TNW24](#), and sharing the best of both on his personal blog, [Notes&Sketches](#).



**Chrissy M. E. Hansen (EDITOR)** is a Michigander, in all ways a born and raised wolverine. She is a graduate of Saginaw Valley State University (degree in Creative Writing), and is attending the University of Nebraska at Kearney to obtain a Master's in English. She has broad interests, publishing scholarship on Tolkien, biblical studies, nineteenth century religious movements, and more, and has over 25 peer reviewed papers published to date, as well as an academic book. She lives in Michigan with her life partner Gabby Bourgeois, and two cats (Inanna and Kiki). When not writing, she is usually playing chess or walking down nature trails and eating wintergreen berries fresh off the forest floor.