

Penpal

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Chapter One

Footsteps

This is long, so I apologize for that. I've never had to tell this story with enough detail to actually explain it all the way, but it is true and it happened when I was about 6 years old.

In a quiet room if you press your ear against a pillow you can hear your heartbeat. As a kid, the muffled, rhythmic beats sounded like soft footsteps on a carpeted floor, and so as a kid almost every night – just as I was about to drift off to sleep – I would hear these footsteps and I would be ripped back to consciousness, terrified.

For my entire childhood I lived with my mother in a fairly nice neighborhood that was in a transitional phase – people of lower economic means were gradually moving in, and my mother and I were two of these people. We lived in the kind of house you see being transported in two pieces on the interstate, but my mom took good care of it. There were a lot of woods surrounding the neighborhood that I would play in and explore during the day, but at night – as things often do to a kid – they took on a more sinister feeling. This coupled with the fact that, due to the nature of our house, there was a fairly large crawlspace underneath filled my mind with imaginary monsters and inescapable scenarios which would consume my thoughts when I was awoken by the footsteps.

I told my mom about the footsteps and she said that I was just imagining things; I persisted enough that she blasted my ears with water from a turkey baster once just to placate me, since I thought that would help. Of course it didn't. Despite all the creepiness and footsteps the only weird thing that ever happened was that every now and then I would wake up on the bottom bunk despite having gone to sleep on the top, but this wasn't really weird since I'd sometimes get up to piss or get something to drink and could remember just going back to sleep on the bottom bunk (I'm an only child so it didn't matter). This would happen once or twice a week, but waking up on the bottom bunk wasn't too terrifying. But one night I didn't wake up on the bottom bunk.

I had heard the footsteps but was too far gone to be woken up by them, and when I was awoken it wasn't from the sound of footsteps or a nightmare, but because I was cold. Really cold. When I opened my eyes I saw stars. I was in the woods. I sat up immediately and tried to figure out what was going on. I thought I was dreaming, but that didn't seem right, though neither did me being in the woods. There was a deflated pool float right in front of me – one of those ones shaped like a shark. This only added to the surreal feeling, but after a while it seemed like I just wasn't going to wake up because I wasn't asleep. I stood up to orient myself, but I didn't recognize these woods. I played in the woods by my house all the time and so I knew them really well, but if these weren't the same woods then how could I get out? I took a step and felt a shooting pain in my foot which knocked me back to where I had just been laying. I had stepped on a thorn. By the light of the moon I could see that they were *everywhere*. I looked at my other foot but it was fine, and as a matter of fact so was the rest of me. I didn't have another scratch on me and I wasn't even that dirty. I cried for a little bit and then stood back up.

I didn't know which way to go so I just picked a direction. I resisted the urge to call out since I wasn't sure I wanted to be found by who or what might be out there I walked for what seemed like hours.

I tried to walk in a straight line, and tried to course-correct when I had to take detours, but I was a kid and I was afraid. There weren't any howls or screams, and only once did I hear any noise that scared me. It sounded like a crying baby. I think now that it was just a cat, but I panicked. I ran veering in different directions to avoid big thicks of bushes and collapsed trees. And I was paying close attention to where I stepped because by that point my feet were in pretty bad shape. I paid too much attention to where I was stepping and not enough to where those steps were leading because not long after hearing the cry I saw something that filled me with a kind of despair I haven't experienced since. It was the pool float.

I was only 10 feet from where I had woken up.

This wasn't magic or some supernatural space-bending. I was lost. Up until that moment I thought more about getting out of the woods than how I got in, but being back at the beginning caused my mind to swim. I wasn't even sure that these were my woods; I had only been hoping that they were. Had I run in a huge circle around that spot, or did I just get turned around and start making my way back? *How was I going to get out?* At the time I thought the north star was just the brightest star, and so I looked and found the brightest one and followed it.

Eventually things started to look more familiar and when I saw "the ditch" (a dirt ditch my friends and I would have dirt-clod wars in) I knew I had made it out. By that point I was walking really slowly because my feet hurt so much, but I was so happy to be so close to home that I broke into a light jog. When I actually saw the roof of my house over a neighboring, lower-set house I let out a light sob and ran faster. I just wanted to be home. I had already decided that I wouldn't say anything because I had no idea what I could possibly say. I would get back in the house somehow, clean up, and get in bed. My heart sunk as I rounded the corner and my house came fully into view.

Every light in the house was on.

I knew my mom was up, and I knew I would have to explain (or try to explain) where I had been, and I couldn't even figure out where to start. My run became a jog which became a walk. I saw her silhouette through the blinds, and although I was worried about how to explain things to her that didn't matter to me at that point. I walked up the couple of steps to the porch and put my hand on the doorknob and turned. Right before I pushed it open two arms wrapped around me and pulled me back. I screamed as loud as I could: "MOM! HELP ME! PLEASE! MOM!" The feeling of being so close to being safe and then being physically pulled away from it filled me with a kind of dread that is, even after all these years, indescribable.

The door I had been torn away from opened, and a flash of hope shot through my heart. But it wasn't my mom.

It was a man, and he was enormous. I thrashed around and kicked at the shins of the person holding me while also trying to get away from the person who had just come out of my house. I was scared, but I was furious. “LET ME GO! WHERE IS SHE? WHERE’S MY MOM? WHAT’D YOU DO TO HER!?” As my throat stung from screaming and I was drawing in another breath I became aware of a sound that had been present for longer than I had perceived it. “Honey, please calm down. I’ve got you.” It sounded like my mom.

The arms loosened and set me down, and as man approaching me blocked out the porch light with his head I noticed his clothes. He was a cop. I turned to face the voice behind me and saw that it really was my mom. Everything was ok. I began to cry, and the three of us went inside.

“I’m so glad you’re home, Sweetie. I was worried I’d never see you again.” By that point she was crying too.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened. I just wanted to come home. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, just don’t ever do that again. I’m not sure me or my shins could take it...”

A little laughter broke through my sobs and I smiled a bit. “Well I’m sorry for kicking you, but why’d you have to grab me like that?!”

“I was just afraid that you’d run away again.”

I was confused. “What do you mean?”

“We found your note on your pillow,” she said, and pointed at the piece of paper that the police officer was sliding across the table.

I picked up the note and read it. It was a “running away” letter. It said that I was unhappy never wanted to see her or any of my friends again. The police officer exchanged a few words with my mom on the porch while I stared at the letter. I didn’t remember writing a letter. I didn’t remember anything about any of this. But even if I sometimes went to the bathroom at night and didn’t remember, or even if I could have gone into the woods on my own, even if all that could have been true, the only thing I knew at that point was,

“This isn’t how you spell my name . . . I didn’t write this letter.”

Chapter Two

Balloons

There were a number of questions that made me curious about certain details about my childhood and so I spoke with my mother. Exacerbated by my questions she said "why don't you just tell them about the goddamn balloons if they're so interested." As soon as she said that I remembered so much about my childhood that I had forgotten. This story will provide some greater context for the previous story, which I think you should read first. Though the order isn't of vital importance, reading that story first will put you in my place more effectively since I remembered the events of Footsteps first. If you have questions or anything feel free to ask and I'll try to answer them. Also, both stories are long, so heads up on that. I'm just hesitant to leave out any details that might be important.

When I was 5 years old I went to an elementary school that, from what I've come to understand, was really adamant about the importance of learning through activity. It was part of a new program designed to allow children to rise at their own pace, and to facilitate this the school encouraged teachers to come up with really inventive lesson plans. Each teacher was given the latitude to create his or her own themes which would run for the duration of the grade, and all the lessons in math, reading, etc., would be designed in the spirit of the theme. These themes were called "Groups." There was a "Space" group, a "Sea" group, an "Earth" group, and the group I was in, "Community."

In Kindergarten in this country you don't learn much except how to tie your shoes and how to share, so most of it isn't very memorable. I only remember two things very clearly: I was the best at writing my name the right way, and the Balloon Project, which was really the hallmark of the Community group, since it was a pretty clever way to show how a community functioned at a really basic level.

You've probably heard of this activity. On one Friday (I remember it being Friday because I was excited about the project and it being the end of the week) toward the beginning of the year, we walked into the classroom in the morning and saw that there was a fully-inflated balloon tied off with string taped to each of our desks. Sitting on each of our desks was a marker, a pen, a piece of paper, and an envelope. The project was to write a note on the paper, put it in the envelope, and attach it to the balloon which we could draw a picture on if we wanted. Most of the kids started fighting over the balloons because they wanted different colors, but I started on my note which I had thought a lot about.

All the notes had to follow a loose structure, but we were allowed to be creative within those boundaries. My note was something like this: "Hi! You found my balloon! My name is [Name] and I attend _____ Elementary school. You can keep the balloon, but I hope you write me back! I like Mighty Max, exploring, building forts, swimming, and friends. What do you like? Write me back soon. Here's a dollar for the mail!" On the dollar I wrote "FOR STAMPS" right across the front, which my mom said was unnecessary, but I thought it was genius, so I did it.

The teacher took a Polaroid of each of us with our balloons and had us put them in the envelope along with our letter. They also included another letter that I assume explained the

nature of the project and sincere appreciation for anyone's participation in writing back and sending photos of their city or neighborhood. That was the whole idea – to build a sense of community without having to leave the school, and to establish safe contact with other people; it seemed like such a fun idea . . .

Over the next couple weeks the letters started to roll in. Most came with pictures of different landmarks, and each time a letter would come in the teacher would pin the picture on a big wall-map we had put up showing where the letter had come from and how far the balloon had traveled. It was a really smart idea, because we actually looked forward to coming to school to see if we had gotten our letter. For the duration of the year we had one day a week where we could write back to our pen-pal or another students' pen-pal in case our letter hadn't come in yet. Mine was one of the last to arrive. When I came into the classroom I looked at my desk and once again didn't see any letter waiting for me, but as I sat down the teacher approached me and handed me an envelope. I must have looked so excited because as I was about to open it she put her hand on mine to stop me and said "Please don't be upset." I didn't understand what she meant – why would I be upset now that my letter had come? Initially I was mystified that she would even know what was in the envelope, but now I realize that of course the teachers had screened the contents to make sure there was nothing obscene, but all the same – how could I be disappointed? When I opened the envelope I understood.

There was no letter.

The only thing in the envelope was a Polaroid, but I couldn't really make out what it was. It looked like a patch of desert, but it was too blurry to decipher; it appeared as if the camera had been moved while the picture was being taken. There was no return address, so I couldn't even write back if I wanted to. I was crushed.

The school year pressed on, and the letters had stopped coming for nearly all of the other students. After all, you can only continue a written correspondence with a Kindergartener for so long. Everyone, including myself, had lost interest in the letters almost completely. Then I got another envelope.

My excitement was rejuvenated, and I reveled in the fact that I was still getting a letter when most of the other pen-pals had abandoned their involvement. It made sense that I received another delivery – there had been nothing but a blurry picture in the first one, so this was probably to make up for that. But again there was no letter at all . . . just another picture.

This one was more distinguishable, but I still didn't understand it. The photograph was angled way up, catching the top corner of a building, and the rest of the image was distorted by a lense-flare from the sun.

Because the balloons didn't travel very far, and because they were all launched on the same day, the board became a bit cluttered, and so the policy for the students still exchanging letters became that they could take the photographs home. My best friend Josh had the second highest number of pictures taken home by the end of the year – his pen-pal was really cooperative and sent him pictures from all around the neighboring city; Josh took home, I think, 4 pictures.

I took home nearly 50.

The envelopes were all opened by the teacher, but after a while I stopped even looking at the pictures. However, I saved them in one of my drawers that housed my collections of rocks, baseball cards, comic book cards (Marvel Metal cards, for those who might remember), and little miniature baseball batting helmets that I'd get out of a vending machine at Winn-Dixie after T-Ball games. With the school year over my attention turned to other things.

My mom had gotten me a small snow cone machine for Christmas that year, and Josh had really coveted it – so much so that his parents bought him a slightly nicer one for his birthday which was toward the end of the school year. That summer we had the idea that we would set up a snow cone stand to make money; we thought we'd make a fortune selling snow cones at \$1. Josh lived in a different neighborhood, but we eventually decided that my neighborhood would be better because there were a lot of people who cared for their lawns; the yards in my neighborhood were slightly bigger. We did this for 5 weekends in a row until my mom told us that we had to stop, and I've only recently come to understand why she did that.

On the 5th weekend Josh and I were counting our money. Because we both had a machine we each had a separate stack of money that we put together into one stack and we then split it evenly. We had made a total of \$16 that day, and as Josh paid out my 5th dollar a feeling of profound surprise consumed me.

The dollar said "FOR STAMPS."

Josh noticed my shock and asked if he had miscounted. I told him about the dollar and he said, "That's so cool, man!" As I thought about it, I came to agree. The idea that the dollar had made it right back to me after changing so many hands floored me. I rushed inside to tell my mom, but my excitement coupled with her being distracted by a phone call made my story incomprehensible and she responded simply by saying "Oh wow! That's neat!" Frustrated, I ran back outside and told Josh I had something to show him. Back in my room, I opened the drawer and took out the stack of envelopes and showed him some of the pictures. I started with the first picture, and we went through about 10 before Josh lost interest and asked if I wanted to go play in the ditch (a dirt ditch down the street from my house) before his mom came to pick him up, so that's what we did.

We had a "dirt war" for a while, but it was interrupted several times by rustling in the woods around us. There were raccoons and stray cats that lived in there, but this was making a little too much noise and we traded guesses at what it was in an attempt to scare each other. My last guess was that it was a mummy, but in the end Josh kept insisting that it was a robot because of the sounds that we heard. Before we left, he got a little serious and looked me right in the eyes and said, "You heard it didn't you? It sounded like a robot. You heard it too right?" I had heard it, and since it sounded mechanical I agreed that it was probably a robot. It's only now that I understand what we heard.

When we got back Josh's mom was waiting for him at the kitchen table with my mom. Josh told his mom about the robot, our moms laughed and Josh went home. My mom and I ate dinner, and then I went to bed.

I didn't stay in bed for long before I crept out and decided that, due to the day's events, I would revisit the envelopes since now the whole affair seemed much more interesting. I took the first envelope and set it on the floor and set the blurry desert Polaroid on top. I laid the second envelope right next to it and placed the oddly angled Polaroid of a building's top corner on top and did this with each picture until they formed a grid that was about 5X10; I was always taught to be careful with things that I was collecting even if I wasn't sure they were valuable.

I noticed that the pictures gradually became more decipherable. There was a tree with a bird on it, a speed limit sign, power line, a group of people walking into some building. And then I saw something that vexed me so powerfully that I can now, as I write this, distinctly remember feeling dizzy and capable of only a single, repeating thought:

"Why am I in this picture?"

In this photograph of the group of people entering the building I saw myself holding hands with my mother in the very back of the crowd of people. We were at the very edge of the photo, but it was undeniably us. And as my eyes swam over the sea of Polaroids I became increasingly anxious. It was a really odd feeling – it wasn't fear, it was the feeling you get when you are in trouble. I'm not sure why I was flooded with that feeling, but there I sat floundering in the distinct sense that I had done something wrong. And this feeling only intensified as I looked on at the rest of the photos after that the one that had so powerfully struck me.

I was in *every* photo.

None of them were close shots. None of them were only of me. But I was in every single one of them – off to the side, in the back, bottom of the frame. Some of them only had the tiniest part of my face captured at the very edge of the photo, but nevertheless, I was there. I was always there.

I didn't know what to do. Your mind works in funny ways as a kid, but there was a large part of me that was afraid of getting in trouble simply for still being up. Since I already had the looming feeling of having done something wrong I decided that I would wait until tomorrow.

The next day, my mom was off work and spent most of the morning cleaning up around the house. I watched cartoons, I imagine, and waited until I thought it was a good time to show her the Polaroids. When she went out to get the mail I grabbed a couple of the pictures and put them on the table in front of me as I sat waiting for her to come back in. When returned she was already opening the mail and threw some junk mail into the trashcan and I said,

"Mom, can you come here for a second? I have these pictures--"

"Just give me a minute, honey. I need to mark these on the calendar."

After a minute or two she came and stood behind me and asked me what I needed. I could hear her shuffling with the mail behind me but I just looked at the Polaroids and told her about them. As I explained more and pointed to the pictures her frequent "uh huh's" and

“ok’s” decreased, and she was suddenly completely quiet and only making a little noise with the mail. The next noise I heard from her sounded as if she was trying to catch her breath in a room that had no air left in it. At last her struggling gasps were conquered and she simply dropped the remaining mail on the table and ran to the kitchen to get the phone.

“Mom! I’m sorry, I didn’t know about these! Don’t be mad at me!”

With the phone pressed to her ear she was walking/running back and forth and shouting into it. I nervously fiddled with the mail sitting next to my Polaroids. The top envelope had something sticking out of it that I thoughtlessly and anxiously pulled on until it came out.

It was another Polaroid.

Confused, I thought that somehow one of my Polaroids had slipped into the stack when she threw the mail down, but when I turned it over and looked at it I realized that I had not seen this one before. To my dismay, it was me, but this one was a much closer shot. I was surrounded by trees and was smiling. But it wasn’t just me, I noticed. Josh was there too. This was us from yesterday.

I started yelling for my mom who was still screaming into the phone. I repeatedly yelled for her until she finally responded with “What?!” and I could only think to ask, “Who are you calling?”

“I’m talking with the police, honey.”

“But why? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do anything...”

She answered me with a response that I never understood until I was forced to revisit these event from the earliest years of my life. She grabbed the envelope off the table and the picture of Josh and I spun and slid, landing next to the other Polaroids in front of me. She held the envelope up to my eyes but I could only look at her and watch as all the color began draining out of her face. With tears welling up in her eyes she said that she had to call the police because there was no postmark.

Chapter Three

Boxes

I want to apologise for being dishonest. The events of the following story weren't locked away in the recesses of my mind; I've always remembered them. It wasn't until I remembered "Balloons" and spoke with my mother about the following events that I realized how intertwined this story was with everything else, but I originally hadn't really planned on sharing this anyway. My desire to withhold this memory was due mostly to the fact that I don't think I showed good judgment in it; I also wanted consent from another person to tell it, so as to not misrepresent what transpired. I didn't expect there to be a lot of interest in my other stories, so I never thought I'd really get pressed for more details, and I would have been happy to keep this to myself for the rest of my life. I haven't been able to reach the other party, but I would feel disingenuous withholding this story from those who wanted more information now that I've spoken with my mother and another connecting line has been drawn. What follows is as accurate a recollection as I could manage. I apologize for the length.

I spent the summer before my first year of elementary school learning how to climb trees. There was one particular pine tree right outside my house that seemed almost designed for me. It had branches that were so low I could easily grab them without a boost, and for the first couple days after I first learned how to pull myself up I would just sit on the lowest branch, dangling my feet. The tree was outside our back fence and was easily visible from the kitchen window which was just above the sink. Before too long my mother and I developed a routine where I would go play on the tree when she washed the dishes because she could easily see me while she did other things.

As the summer passed my abilities grew and before too long I was climbing fairly high. As the tree got taller its branches not only got thinner but more widely-spaced and so I eventually reached a point where I couldn't actually climb any higher, and so the game had to change; I began to concentrate on speed, and in the end I could reach my highest branch in 25 seconds.

I got too confident and one afternoon I tried to step from a branch before I had firmly grasped the next one. I fell about 20 feet and broke my arm really badly in two places. My mom was running toward me yelling and I remember her sounding like she was underwater – I don't remember what she said but I do remember being surprised by just how white my bone was.

I was going to start Kindergarten with a cast and wouldn't even have any friends to sign it. My mom must have felt terrible because the day before I started school she brought home a kitten. He was just a baby and was striped with tan and white. As soon as she put him down he crawled into an empty case of soda that was sitting on the floor. I named him Boxes.

Boxes was only an outside cat when he escaped. My mom had him declawed so he wouldn't destroy the furniture, so as a result we did our best to keep him inside. He'd get out every now and then, and we'd find him somewhere in the backyard chasing some kind of bug or

lizard, though he could hardly ever catch one because he had no front claws. He was pretty evasive, but we'd always catch him and carry him back inside. He'd scramble to look back over my shoulder – I told my mom that it was because he was planning his strategy for next time. Once inside we'd give him some tuna fish, and he came to learn what the sound of the can-opener might signal; he'd come running whenever he heard it.

This conditioning came in handy later because toward the end of our time in that house Boxes would get out much more often and would run under the house into the crawlspace where neither of us wanted to follow because it was cramped and probably crawling with bugs and rodents. Ingeniously, my mom thought to hook the can-opener to an extension cord out back and run it right outside the hole that Boxes had gone through. Eventually he would emerge with his loud meows, looking excited by the sound and then horrified at how we could run such a cruel ruse on him – a can-opener with no tuna made no sense to Boxes.

The last time he escaped to under the house was actually our last day in it. My mom had put the house on the market and we had begun packing our things. We didn't have much, and we stretched the packing out a while, though I had already packed up all my clothes at my mom's request – my mom could tell I was really sad about moving and wanted the transition to be smooth for me, and I guess she thought that having my clothes in the box would reinforce the idea that we were moving but things wouldn't change that much. When Boxes got out as we were loading some things into the moving van my mom cursed because she had already packed the can opener and wasn't sure where it was. I pretended to go look for it so I wouldn't have to go under the house, and my mom (probably completely aware of my little scam) moved one of the panels and crawled in. She came out with Boxes pretty quickly and seemed pretty unnerved, which made me feel even better about getting out of it. My mom made some phone calls while I packed a little more, and then she came into my room and told me that she had spoken to the realtor and we were going to start moving into the other house that day. She said it like it was excellent news, but I had thought we had more time in the house – she originally said that we weren't moving until the end of the next week and it was only Tuesday. What's more, we weren't completely finished packing, but my mom said sometimes it was just easier to replace things than pack them and haul them all over the city. I didn't even get to grab the rest of my boxed clothes. I asked if I could call Josh to say bye, but she said that we could just call him from our new house. We left in the moving van.

I managed to stay in touch with Josh for years; which is surprising since we no longer went to the same school. Our parents weren't close friends, but they knew that we were and so they would accommodate our desire to see one another by driving us back and forth for sleep-overs – sometimes every weekend. For Christmas one year our parents even pooled their money and got us some really nice walkie-talkies that were advertised to work across a range that extended past the distance between our houses; they also had batteries that could last for days if the walkie-talkie was on but not used. They would only occasionally work well enough that we could talk across the city, but when we stayed-over we'd use them around the house, talking in mock-radio speak that we had taken from movies, and they worked great for that. Thanks to our parents we were still friends when we were 10.

One weekend I was staying over at Josh's and my mom called me to say goodnight; she was still pretty watchful even when she couldn't actually watch me, but I had gotten so used to it that I didn't even notice it, even if Josh did. She sounded upset.

Boxes was missing.

This must have been a Saturday night, because I had spent the night at Josh's the previous night and was going to go home the next day because we had school on Monday. Boxes had been missing since Friday afternoon – I gathered that she had not seen him since returning home after dropping me off. She must have decided to tell me he was missing because if he didn't come home before I did then I would be devastated at, not only his absence, but how she could have kept it from me. She told me not to worry. "He'll come back. He always does!"

But Boxes didn't come back.

Three weekends later I stayed at Josh's again. I was still upset about Boxes, but my mom told me that there had been many times when pets had disappeared from home for weeks or even months, only to return on their own; she said they always knew where home was and would always try to get back. I was explaining this to Josh when a thought hit me so hard that I interrupted my own sentence to say it aloud. "What if Boxes thought of the wrong home?"

Josh was confused. "What? He lives with you. He knows where his home is."

"But, he grew up somewhere else, Josh. He was raised in my old house a couple neighborhoods away. Maybe he still thinks of that place as home, like I do."

"Ohhh I get it. Well that'd be great! We'll tell my dad tomorrow and he'll take us over there so we can look!"

"No he won't, man. My mom said that we couldn't ever go back to that place because the new owners wouldn't wanna be bothered. She said that she told your mom and dad the same thing."

Josh persisted, "ok then we'll just go out exploring tomorrow and make our way to your old house—"

"No! If we get spotted your dad will find out and then so will my mom! We have to go there ourselves . . . We have to go there tonight . . ."

It didn't take that much convincing to get Josh on board since he was usually the one to come up with ideas like this. But we had never snuck out of his house before. It actually turned out to be incredibly easy. The window in his room opened to the back yard and he had a latched wooden fence that wasn't locked. After those two minor hurdles we slipped off into the night, flashlight and walkie-talkies in hand.

There were two ways to get from Josh's house to my old house. We could walk on the street and make all the turns or go through the woods, which would take about half the time. It would have taken about 2 hours to walk there taking the street, but I suggested that we go that way anyway; I told him it was because I didn't want to get lost. Josh refused and said that if we were seen they might recognize him and tell his dad. He threatened to go home if we didn't just take the shortcut, and I accepted it because I didn't want to go by myself.

Josh didn't know about the last time I walked through these woods at night.

The woods were much less creepy with a friend and a flashlight, and we were making pretty good time. I wasn't entirely sure where we were, but Josh seemed confident enough and that bolstered my morale. We passed through a particularly thick patch of tangled trees when the strap on my walkie-talkie got caught on a branch. Josh had the flashlight and so I was struggling to get the walkie free when I heard Josh say,

"Hey man, wanna go for a swim?"

I looked over to where he was shining the flashlight, though I closed my eyes as I did, because I now knew where we were. He was pointing at the pool float. This was where I had woken up in these woods all those years ago. I felt a lump in my throat and the sting of fresh tears in my eyes as I continued to struggle with the walkie. Frustrated, I yanked on it hard enough to break it free and I turned and walked to Josh who had partially laid down on the pool float in a mock-sunbathing pose. As I walked toward him I stumbled and nearly fell into a fairly large hole that was sitting in the middle of this small clearing, but I regained my balance and stopped right at its edge. It was deep. I was surprised by the size of the hole, but more surprised by the fact that I didn't remember it. I realized it must not have been there that night because it was in the same spot where I had awoken. I put it out of my mind and turned to Josh.

"Quit messing around man! You saw I was stuck over there, and you were just laying here joking around on this float!" I punctuated the sentence with a kick to an exposed part of the float. A screeching rose from it.

Josh's smile inverted. He suddenly looked terrified and was struggling to get off the float, but he couldn't in a quick manner due to the awkward way he had been laying on it. Each time he would fall back on the float the screeching would intensify. I wanted to help Josh but I couldn't move myself any closer – my legs wouldn't cooperate; I hated these woods. I picked up the flashlight that he had thrown in his thrashing and shined in on the float not knowing what to expect. Finally, Josh got off the float and rushed next to me looking at where I was shining the light. Suddenly there it was. It was a rat. I started laughing nervously and we both watched the rat run into the woods taking the screeches with it. Josh lightly punched me in the arm, the smile slowly returning to his face, and we continued walking.

We quickened our pace and made it out of the woods faster than we thought we would, and we found ourselves back in my old neighborhood. The last time I had rounded the bend ahead I had seen my house fully illuminated, and all the memories of what transpired came flooding back. I felt a skipping in my heart as we were finally turning the corner and about to face the full view of my house, remembering last time how incandescent it was. But this time all the lights were off. From a distance I could see my old climbing tree and as my mind traced the steps of causality backward I realized that I wouldn't back here this night if that tree hadn't grown, and I was briefly in awe of how all events were like that. As we got closer I could see that the lawn looked terrible; I couldn't even guess when it had last been mowed. One of the shutters had partially broken loose and was rocking back and forth in the breeze, and over all the house just looked dirty. I was sad to see my old home in such a state of disrepair. Why would my mom care if we bothered the new owners if they cared so little about where they lived? And then I realized:

There were no new owners.

The house was abandoned, though it looked simply forsaken. Why would my mom lie to me about our house having new people in it? But, I thought that this was actually a good thing. It would be easier to look around for Boxes if we didn't have to worry about being spotted by the new family. This would make it much quicker. Josh interrupted my thoughts as we walked through the gate and up to the house itself.

"Your old house sucks, dude!" Josh yelled as quietly as he could.

"Shut up, Josh! Even like this it's still nicer than your house."

"Hey man---"

"OK, OK. I think Boxes is probably under the house. One of us has to go under and look, but the other should stay next to the opening in case he comes running out."

"Are you *serious*? There's no way I'm going under there. It's your cat, man. You do it."

"Look, I'll game you for it, unless you're too scared . . ." I said holding my fist over my up turned palm.

"Fine, but we go on 'shoot,' not on three. It's 'rock, paper, scissors, SHOOT,' not 'one, two, THREE.'"

"I know how to play the game, Josh. You're the one who always messes up. And it's two out of three."

I lost.

I wiggled loose the panel that my mom would always move when we she had to crawl under here for Boxes. She only had to do it a couple of times since the can-opener trick usually worked, but when she had to do it she hated it, especially that last time, and as I looked into the darkness of the crawlspace I had a greater appreciation for why. Before we moved she said that it was actually better that Boxes ran under here, despite how hard it could be to get him out. It was less dangerous than him jumping over the fence and running around the neighborhood. All that was true, but I was still dreading doing this. I grabbed the flashlight and the walkie and began to crawl in; a powerful smell overtook me.

It smelled like death.

I turned on my walkie. *Josh, are you there?*

This is Macho Man, come back.

Josh, cut it out. There's something wrong down here.

What do you mean?

It stinks. It smells like something died.

Is it Boxes?

I really hope not.

I set down the walkie and moved the flashlight around as I crawled forward. Looking through the hole from the outside you could see all the way back with the right lighting, but you had to be inside to see around the support blocks that held the house up. I'd say that there was about 40% of the area that you couldn't see unless you were actually in the crawlspace, but even inside I discovered that I could only see directly where the flashlight was pointing;; I realized that this would make scouting around the place much more difficult. As I moved forward the smell intensified. The fear was growing in me that Boxes had come here and something had happened to him. I shined the flashlight around but couldn't see much of anything. I wrapped my fingers around a support block to pull myself forward and as I did that I felt something that made my hand recoil.

Fur.

My heart sank and I prepared myself emotionally for what I was about to see. I crawled slowly so I could prolong what I knew was coming and I inched my eyes and the flashlight past the block to see what was on the other side.

I staggered back in horror. "JESUS CHRIST!" escaped my trembling mouth. It was a hideous and twisted creature, badly decomposed. Its skin had rotted away on its face so the teeth appeared to be enormous. And the smell was unbearable.

What is it? Are you ok? Is it Boxes?

I reached for the walkie *No, no it's not Boxes.*

Well what the hell is it then?

I don't know

I shined the light on it again and looked at it with less fear in my vision. I chuckled.

It's a raccoon!

Well keep looking. I'm gonna go into the house to see if he might've made it in there somehow.

What? No. Josh, don't go in there. What if Boxes is down here and runs out?

He can't. I put the board back.

I looked and saw that he was telling the truth.

Why'd you do that?

Don't worry man, you can move it easy. This makes more sense. If Boxes ran out and I missed him then he'd be gone. If he's down there then grab him tight and I'll come move the board, and if he's not then you can move it yourself while I look in the house!

Some of his points were good, and I doubted he'd be able to get in anyway.

OK. But be careful and don't touch anything. There's a bunch of my old clothes still in boxes in my room, you can look in there to see if he crawled in one. And make sure to bring your walkie.

Roger that, good buddy.

I realized that it would be pitch-black in there; the power would have been turned off since no one was paying the bill. With any luck he'd be able to see from the streetlights that might cast some light inside – otherwise I'm not sure what he'd do.

Before too long I heard footsteps right over my head and felt old dirt raining down on me.

Josh is that you?

Chhkkkk Breaker, Breaker. This is Macho Man coming back for the big Tango Foxtrot. The Eagle has landed. What's your 20, Princess Jasmine? Over.

"Asshole."

Macho Man, my 20 is in your bathroom lookin' at your stash of magazines. Looks like you've got a thing for dudes' butts. What's the report on that? Over.

I could hear him laughing without the walkie and I started laughing too. I head the footsteps fade away a little – he was on his way to my room.

Man, it's dark in here. Hey, are you sure you had boxes of clothes in here? I don't see any.

Yeah, there should be a couple boxes in front of the closet.

There aren't any boxes in here, lemme check to see if you maybe put the boxes in the closet before you left.

I started thinking that maybe my mom had come back and gotten the clothes and just given them away because I had outgrown a lot of them, but I remembered leaving the boxes there – I didn't even have time to close the last one up before we left.

While I was waiting for Josh to tell me what he found, I kicked out my leg which had started falling asleep because of the position I was in and it hit something. I looked back and saw something really strange. It was a blanket and all around it there were bowls. I crawled a little closer to it. The blanket smelled moldy and most of the bowls were empty but one had something that I recognized still in it.

Cat food.

It was a different kind than we gave to Boxes, but I suddenly understood. My mom had set up a little place for Boxes to encourage him to come here instead of running around the neighborhood. That made a lot of sense, and it seemed even more likely that Boxes would have come back to this place. "That's so cool, mom," I thought.

I found your clothes

Oh cool. Where were the boxes?

Like I said, there are no boxes. Your clothes are in your closet . . . They're hanging up.

I felt a chill. This was impossible. I had packed *all* my clothes. Even though we weren't supposed to move for another two weeks when we left, I remember packing them and thinking that it was stupid for me to have to get clothes out of the box and put them back in. I had packed them, but someone had hung them back up. *Why though?*

Josh needed to get out of there.

That can't be right, Josh. They're supposed to be in boxes. Stop messing around, and just come back outside.

No joke man. I'm looking at them. Maybe you just thought that you left them. Haha! Wow! You sure like to look at yourself, don't you?

What? What do you mean?

Your walls, man. Haha. Your walls are covered in Polaroids of yourself! There are hundreds of them! What'd you hire someone to—

Silence.

I checked my walkie to see if I had switched it off somehow. It was fine. I could hear footsteps but couldn't tell exactly where Josh was going. I waited for Josh to finish his sentence, thinking that his finger had just slipped off the button, but he didn't continue. He seemed to be stomping around the house now. I was just about to radio him when he came back.

There's someone in the house.

His voice was hushed and broken – I could hear he was on the verge of tears. I wanted to respond, but how loud was his walkie turned up? What if the other person heard it? I said nothing and just waited and listened. What I heard were footsteps. Heavy, dragging footsteps. And then a loud thud.

“Oh God . . . Josh.”

He had been found; I was sure of it. This person had found him and was hurting him. I broke out in tears. He was my only friend, next to Boxes. And then I realized: What if Josh told him I was under here? What could I possibly do? As I struggled to compose myself, I thankfully heard Josh's voice through the walkie.

He's got something, man. It's a big bag. He just threw it on the floor. And . . . oh God, man . . . the bag . . . I think it just moved.

I was paralyzed. I wanted to run home. I wanted to save Josh. I wanted to go for help. I wanted so many things but I just lay there, frozen. As I lay unable to move my eyes focused on the corner of the house that was right under my room; I moved my flashlight. My breath hitched at what I saw.

Animals. Dozens of them. All of them dead. They lay in piles all around the perimeter of the crawlspace. Could Boxes be among these corpses? Was this what the cat food was for?

Seeing this broke my shock as I knew I had to get out of there and I scrambled to the board. I pushed on it, but it wouldn't budge. I couldn't move it because it was wedged in there and I couldn't get my fingers around it since the edges were outside. I was trapped.

“Goddamn you, Josh!” I whispered to myself. I could feel thunderous footsteps above me. The house was shaking. I heard Josh scream, and it was matched by another scream that wasn't full of fear.

As I continued pushing I felt the board move, but I knew it wasn't me who was moving it. I could hear footsteps above me and in front of me and shouting and screaming filling the brief silences between the footsteps. I moved back and held my walkie ready to try to defend myself, and the board was thrown to the side and an arm shot in and grabbed for me.

“Let's go, man! Now!”

It was Josh. Thank God.

I scrambled out of the opening holding the flashlight and the walkie. When we got to the fence we both jumped it but Josh's walkie fell, he reached for it and I told him to forget it. We had to move. Behind us I could hear yelling, though they weren't words, only sounds. And we, perhaps foolishly, ran for the woods to get back to Josh's quicker and be somewhat harder to follow. The whole way through the woods Josh kept yelling,

"My picture! He took my picture!"

But I knew the man *already* had Josh's picture -- from all those years ago at the ditch. I supposed Josh still thought those mechanical sounds were from a robot.

We made it back to Josh's house and back into his room before his parents woke up. I asked him about the big bag and if it really moved and he said he couldn't be sure. He kept apologizing about dropping the walkie at the house, but obviously that wasn't a big deal. We didn't go to sleep and sat peering out the window waiting for him. I went home later that day as it was about 3am already.

I told my mom the basics of this story a couple days ago. She broke down and was furious about the danger I put myself in. I asked her why she made all those things up about bothering the new owners to stop me from going -- why did she think the house was so dangerous? She became irate and hysterical, but she answered my question. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it harder than I thought her capable of and locked her eyes to my, whispering as if she was afraid of being overheard:

"Because I never put any fucking blankets or bowls under the house for Boxes. You weren't the only one to find them . . ."

I felt dizzy. I understood so much now. I understood why she had looked so uneasy after she brought Boxes out from under the house on our last day there; she found more than spiders or a rat's nest that day. I understood why we left almost 2 weeks early. I understood why she tried to stop me from going back.

She knew. She knew he made his home under ours, and she kept it from me. I left without saying another word and didn't finish the story for her, but I want to finish it here, for you.

I got home from Josh's that day I threw my stuff on the floor and it scattered everywhere; I didn't care, I just wanted to sleep. I woke up around 9pm to the sound of Boxes' meowing. My heart leapt. He had finally come home. I was a little sick about the fact that if I had just waited a day none of the previous night's events would have happened and I'd have Boxes anyway, but that didn't matter; he was back. I got off my bed and called for him looking around to catch a glint of light off his eyes. The crying continued and I followed it. It was coming from under the bed. I laughed a little thinking I had just crawled under a house looking for him and how this was so much better. His meows were being muffled by a shirt, so I flung it aside and smiled, yelling "welcome home, Boxes!"

His cries were coming from my walkie-talkie.

Boxes never came home.

Chapter Four

Maps

It's funny how memories work. The details might all be present in your mind, though scattered and disarrayed, and then a single thought can stitch them back together almost instantly. I never thought of these events much because I was focused on the wrong details. I went back to my mom's house and went through my old childhood school work looking for something that I think is important. I couldn't find it, but I'll keep looking. Again, sorry for the length.

Most old cities and the neighborhoods in them weren't planned with the thought that the population would begin to grow exponentially and it would have to be accommodated. The layout of the roads is generally originally in response to geographical restrictions and the necessity of connecting points of economic importance. Once the connecting roads are established, new businesses and roads are positioned strategically along the existing skeleton, and eventually the paths carved into the earth are immortalized in asphalt, leaving room only for minor modifications, additions, and alterations, but never a dramatic change.

My childhood neighborhood must have been old, then. If straight lines move "as the crow flies" then my neighborhood must have been built based on the travels of a snake. The first houses built must have been placed around the lake and gradually the inhabitable area increased as new extensions were built off the original path, but these new extensions all ended abruptly at one point or another – there was only one entrance/exit for the entire neighborhood. Many of these extensions were limited by a tributary which both fed and drank from the lake and passed right by what I came to call (and have called in these stories) "the ditch." Many of the original homes had enormous yards, but some of those original plots had been divided, leaving properties with smaller and smaller boundaries. An aerial view of my neighborhood would give one the impression that an enormous squid had once died in the woods and some adventuring entrepreneur found the corpse and paved roads over its tentacles only to withdraw his involvement and leave time, greed, and desperation to divide up the land among prospective home-owners like an embarrassing attempt at the Golden Ratio.

From my porch you could see the old houses that surrounded the lake, but the house of Mrs. Maggie was my favorite. She was, as best as I can remember, around 80 years old, but despite that she was one of the friendliest people I had ever met. She had a head of loose-set, white curls and always wore light dresses with floral patterns. She would talk to me and Josh from her back porch when we were swimming in the lake, and she would always invite us in for snacks. She said that she was lonely because her husband Tom was always away on business, but Josh and I would always decline her invitation because as nice as Mrs. Maggie was there was still something a bit odd about her.

Every now and then when we would swim away she would say, "Chris and John, you're welcome here anytime!" And we could hear her still yelling that when we were walking back into my house.

Mrs. Maggie, like many of the older home-owners, had a sprinkler system that was on a timer, though at some point over the years her timer must have broken because the sprinklers would come on at various points during the day and often even at night all year. While it never got cold enough to snow very much, several times each winter I would go outside in the morning to see Mrs. Maggie's yard transformed into a surreal arctic paradise by the frozen water. Every other yard stood sterilized and dry by the biting frost of the winter's cold, but right there in the middle of the bleak reminder of the savagery of the season was an oasis of beautiful ice hanging like stalactites from every branch of every tree and every leaf of every bush. As the sun rose it reflected off and each piece of ice splintered the sun into a rainbow that would only be viewed briefly before it blinded you. Even as a child I was struck by how beautiful it was, and often Josh and I would go over there to walk on the iced grass and have sword fights with the icicles.

I once asked my mom why she left it on like that. My mom seemed to search for the explanation before she said,

"Well, Sweetie, Mrs. Maggie is sick a lot, and sometimes when she gets really sick she gets confused. That's why she messes up yours and Josh's names sometimes. She doesn't mean to, but sometimes she just can't remember. She lives in that big house all by herself so it's ok if you talk to her when you swim in the lake, but when she invites you in you should keep saying 'no.' Be polite; her feelings won't get hurt."

"But she'll be less lonely when her husband comes home though, right? How long will he be away on business? It seems like he's always away."

My mom seemed to struggle and I could see that she had become very upset. Finally she answered,

"Honey . . . Tom's not going to come home. Tom's in heaven. He died years and years ago, but Mrs. Maggie doesn't remember. She gets confused and forgets, but Tom's not ever coming home. If someone moved back in with her she might even think it *was* Tom, but he's gone, Sweetie."

I would have only been around 5-6 when she told me that, and while I didn't understand it completely, I was still profoundly sad for Mrs. Maggie.

I know now that Mrs. Maggie had Alzheimer's. She and her husband Tom had had two sons: Chris and John. The two had worked out payment plans with the utility companies and paid for Mrs. Maggie's water and electricity, but they would never visit her. I don't know if something happened between them, or if it was the illness, or if they just lived too far away, but they never came around. I have no idea what they looked like, but there were times when Mrs. Maggie must have thought Josh and I looked like they did when they were children. Or maybe she saw what some part of her mind so desperately wanted her to see; ignoring the images transmitted down her optic nerve and just for a little while showing her what used to be. I realize only now how lonely she must have been.

During the summer after Kindergarten, before the events of "Balloons," Josh and I had taken to exploring the woods near my house, as well as the tributary of the lake. We knew that the woods between our houses were connected, and we thought it would be neat if the lake near

my house was somehow connected to the creek around his, so we resolved ourselves to find out.

We were going to make maps.

The plan was to make two separate maps and then combine them. We would make one map exploring the area around the creek near his house, and make another following the outflow from my lake. Originally, we were going to make one map, but we realized that wasn't possible since I had started drawing the map of my area so huge that the route from his house wouldn't have been to scale. We kept the map from the lake at my house and the map from the creek at his house, and we would add to each when we stayed the night with each other.

For the first couple weeks it went really well. We would walk through the woods along the water and pause every couple minutes to add to the map and it seemed like the two maps would come together any day. We had no equipment needed for the job – not even a compass – but we tried to make due. We had the idea to impale the earth with a stick when we had reached the end of a venture so that if we came upon the stick from the other direction the next weekend we would know we had joined the maps. We might have been the world's worst cartographers. Eventually, however, the woods became too thick near the water coming from the lake and we were unable to proceed further. We lost interest in the whole project for a bit, and reduced our explorations significantly, though not completely, when we started selling snow cones.

After I showed my mom all the pictures I had taken home from school and she took away my snow cone machine our interest in the maps revitalized. We had to come up with another plan. Although I didn't understand why, my mom had placed what I considered to be extremely severe restrictions on what I could do and where I could go, and I had to check in frequently if I went outside to play with Josh. This meant that we couldn't stay in the woods for hours and continue to look for a new path. We thought that we could just swim when we got to the cutoff in the woods, but that clearly wouldn't work since the map would get wet. We tried going faster when we were coming from Josh's house, but we eventually ran into the same problem. Then we had a brilliant idea.

We'd build a raft.

Due to the construction in the neighborhood, there was a large amount of scrap building material that the company would set in the ditch to keep it out of the road and offsite since they no longer needed it for building. We originally conceived of a formidable ship complete with a mast and an anchor, but this quickly diminished into something more manageable. We set aside the wood and took several large pieces of Styrofoam that were backed with foam board and tied them together with rope and kite string.

We launched our vessel a little down water from Mrs. Maggie and waved a farewell to her as she motioned us to come back her way. But there was no stopping us.

The raft worked very well, and while we both behaved and spoke as if the functionality of the raft was a given, I know at least I was a little surprised. We each had a fairly long tree branch to use as a paddle, but we found it was easier to simply push against the land under the water

than actually use them as intended. When the water became too deep we'd simply lie on our stomachs and use our hands to paddle the water, which still worked – albeit less well. The first time we had to resort to that method of propulsion I remember thinking that from far above it must have looked like a colossally fat man with tiny arms was out for a swim.

It actually took us several trips to get the raft to the impassable patch of woods that marked the farthest we had made it. After we had come up with the idea of marking the ground with the stick, we had taken to running through the woods until we got to the stick and then, as carefully and precisely as we knew how, charting our course. This meant that the impasse was actually quite a bit away, so to sail from around my house all the way to the blockade in the woods was taking longer than expected. We'd sail for a bit and then dock the raft, and then next time we'd run through the woods to the raft and go a little farther.

We continued this well into first grade. Josh and I were assigned to different Groups that year so, since we didn't really see one another during the school day, our parents were more willing to let us hang out all weekend each week. What's more, Josh's dad had taken on a lengthy construction job that required him to work over the weekends, and his mother was on-call, so this meant that Josh would stay at my house most every weekend for weeks on end.

We should have been making excellent progress, but when we finally made it to the impasse and had the opportunity to explore past it we couldn't find a place to dock the raft. The woods were simply too thick, and the water had eroded the land to the point that there was nearly a two-foot rise of earth over the tributary which exposed the twisting and damp roots of the trees above. We'd have to turn back every time and leave the raft at the same thick of trees that prompted us to build it in the first place. Even worse, winter had arrived, so we couldn't justify leaving the house in our swimsuits; we were getting nowhere – we always had to come home before we could gain much ground.

On a Saturday, around 7pm, Josh and I were playing when one of my mom's coworkers knocked on our door. Her name was Samantha, and I remember her well now because I would propose to her a couple years later when I was visiting my mom at work. My mom said that she had to go to work to fix a problem that had arisen and that she'd back in about two hours. Her car was being repaired so she'd have to ride with Samantha, but I gathered that the problem was the Samantha's fault and discussing it in the car was why it would only take two hours. She said that under no circumstances were we to leave the house or open the door for anyone, and she was in the middle of explaining that she would call every hour when she got there to check in, but she ended that statement prematurely when she remembered that our phone had been turned off for delinquent payments – this was why Samantha had just come by unannounced. She looked me dead in the eye as she was closing the door and said "Stay put."

This was our chance.

We watched her drive down the serpentine road toward the exit, and as soon as the car rounded the last visible bend we ran back to my room. I dumped my backpack out while Josh grabbed the map.

"Hey, do you have a flashlight?" Josh chimed.

“No, but we’ll be back way before dark.”

“I was thinking just in case, we should have one.”

“My mom has one, but I don’t know where she keeps it . . . Wait!”

I ran into my closet and pulled a box down from the top shelf.

“You have a flashlight in there?” Josh asked.

“Not exactly . . .”

I opened the box and revealed 3 roman candles that I had taken from the pile that my mother had amassed for the 4th of July that past summer; along with a lighter that I had managed to take from her some months before, this would ensure that we at least had *some* light if we needed it. This was a little bit before I had been given an opportunity to be afraid of the woods at night, so it wasn’t fear that motivated our search for a light source – only practicality. We threw it all in the backpack and bolted out the backdoor, making sure to close it so Boxes wouldn’t get out. We had one hour and fifty minutes.

We ran through the woods as fast as we could and made it to the raft in about 15 minutes. We had our bathing suits on under our clothes, so we stripped off our shirts and shorts and left them in two separate piles about four feet from the edge of the water. We untied the raft from the tree, grabbed our branch-paddles, and cast off.

We tried to move rapidly to reach a point beyond the contents of our ever-expanding map, as we didn’t have time to waste seeing old sights. We knew that we were slower in the raft than on land, and that we would be in the raft for quite a while after the cutoff since the woods were too thick to walk through and there wasn’t a place to dock; this meant that we’d have to ride the raft *back* to the original docking site even if we found a new place to dock it further ahead.

After we passed the last charted part of our map the water began to get really deep and eventually we could no longer touch the bottom with our tree branches, so we lay on our stomachs and paddled with our hands. It was getting darker and as a result it was becoming harder to distinguish the trees from one another, and we were both becoming slightly unnerved. In the interest of making good time we were paddling fast with our arms, but this caused a lot of noise as our hands repeatedly confronted and then broke through the water’s surface tension. During these periods we could both hear the crunching of dead leaves and the snapping of fallen sticks in the woods to our right. As we would slow our pace and quiet our actions the rustling in the woods would cease, and we began to wonder if it was really ever there at all. We didn’t know what kinds of animals resided this far into the woods, but we did know that we didn’t wish to find out.

As Josh amended the map that I was illuminating with the lighter we were suddenly confronted with the fact that the sounds were not imagined. Rapidly and rhythmically we heard

crunch
snap
crunch

It seemed to be moving slightly away from us, pushing through the woods just beyond our map. It had become too dark to see. We had misjudged how long the sun would linger.

Nervously, I called out.

“Hello?”

There was a brief moment of breathless tension as we lay static in the water. This silence was suddenly broken by laughter.

“*Hello?*” Josh cackled.

“So what?”

“Hello, Mr. Monster-in-the-woods. I know you’re sneaking around but maybe you’ll answer to my ‘hello’? Hellooooooooo!”

I realized how stupid it was. Whatever animal it was, it wouldn’t respond. I hadn’t even realized I’d said it until afterwards, but if anything was actually there I obviously wouldn’t get a reply.

Josh continued, “Helloooooo,” in a high falsetto

“Helloooo” I countered with as deep a baritone as I could manage.

“ello there mate!”

“Hel-lo. Beep Boop”

“hhheeeEEELLLLLOOOoooo”

We continued mocking each other, and were in the process of turning the raft around to head back when we heard, “hello”.

It was whispered and forced as if it were powered by the last breath in a pair of deflating lungs, but it didn’t sound sickly. It had come from the spot just off the map, which now sat behind us since we had turned the raft around. I slowly shifted on the raft and faced the direction of the sound as I fumbled with the roman candle. I wanted to see.

“What’re you doing?!” Josh hissed.

But I had already lit it. As the sparking fuse sunk into the wrapper I held it toward the sky. I had never actually shot one of these myself and thought to just use it like a flair in the movies. A glowing, green orb rocketed out toward the stars and then quickly extinguished. I lowered my arm more toward the horizon; I could remember that there were several colors, but I couldn't remember how many times one of these fired before being depleted. A second ball of red light burst out and fizzled above the trees, but I still saw nothing.

"Let's just go, man!" Josh pressed, as he turned to face the direction back home and began paddling desperately.

"Just one more..."

Lowering my arm directly at the woods in front of me another red ball of fire was launched from the tube. It traveled straight ahead until it collided with a tree, briefly exploding the light in a much greater diameter.

Still nothing.

I dropped the firework in the water and watched as one more struggling fireball burst free only to quickly die, suffocated by the water. As we began paddling in the direction toward my house we heard a loud and unconcealed rustling in the woods. The breaking of branches and the trampling of fallen leaves overpowered the sound of our splashing.

It was running.

In our panic we jostled the raft too violently and I felt one of the ropes under my chest loosen.

"Josh, be careful!"

But, it was too late. Our raft was breaking. Before too long it had completely fallen apart. We each held on to a separate piece of Styrofoam, but the pieces weren't big enough to keep us completely afloat, and our legs dangled beneath us in the winter water.

"Josh! Quick!" I yelled as I pointed at the water right next to him.

He scrambled, but it was too cold to move quickly and we both watched as the map floated away.

"I'm c-c-cold, m-man." Josh shuddered, dejectedly. "Let'sss get out of the w-water."

We approached the shore, but each time we attempted to pull ourselves up we'd hear the frantic rustling thundering toward us from the woods just above. Eventually we were too cold and weak to even try anymore.

Steadily we kicked our legs and found ourselves nearing the dock site. We toppled off the debris and tried to pull it on land, but Josh's piece slipped away and floated in the direction of the lake. We took off our swim suits and were desperate to get into dry clothes to shield us from the biting chill of the air. I slid my shorts, but there was something wrong. I turned to Josh.

"Where's my shirt, man?"

He shrugged and suggested, "Maybe it got knocked into the water and floated into the lake?" I told Josh to go back to my house, and to say that we were playing hide and seek if my mom was home. I had to try to find my shirt.

I ran behind the houses and peered out over the water and scouted along the shoreline. It occurred to me that with any luck maybe I could find the map too. I was moving pretty fast because I needed to get home, and was about to give up when my concentration was interrupted by a sound coming from just behind me.

"Hello."

I whipped around. It was Mrs. Maggie. I had never seen her at night before, and in this poor light she looked exceedingly frail. The usual warmth that wrapped her manner seemed to have been snuffed out by the chill. I couldn't remember ever seeing her without a smile, and so her face looked strange.

"Hello, Mrs. Maggie."

"Oh, Hi Chris!" the warmth and smile had returned to her, even if her memories had not. "I couldn't see it was you in the dark there."

Jokingly, I asked her if she was going to invite me in for a snack, but she said maybe another time; I was too busy looking for my map and the shirt to really engage her, but she sounded happy so I didn't feel bad. She said a couple other things, but I was too distracted to pay attention. I said goodnight and ran down her driveway toward my house. Behind me I could hear her walking across the frozen yard, but I didn't turn around to wave; I had to get home.

I made it home a couple minutes before my mom did, and by the time she came in Josh and I had already changed clothes and warmed up. We'd gotten away with it, even though we'd lost the map.

"Couldn't find it?"

"Nah, but I saw Mrs. Maggie. She called me Chris again. I'm telling you dude, just be glad you've never seen her at night."

We both laughed and he asked me if she invited me in for a snack, joking that the snacks must be terrible since she couldn't even give them away. I told him that she didn't and he was surprised, and now that I had time to think about it so was I. Literally, every time we had

seen her she had invited us in for snacks, and here I had, albeit sarcastically, invited myself, and she said no.

As Josh talked more about Mrs. Maggie I suddenly realized that the lighter might still be in my pocket and that it would be disastrous for my mom to find. I grabbed the shorts off the floor and padded my pockets; I felt something, but it wasn't the lighter. From my back pocket I slid out a folded piece of paper and my heart leapt. "The map?" I thought. "But I watched it float away." As I unfolded the paper my stomach turned as I tried to understand what I was seeing. Drawn on the paper inside of a large oval were two stick figures holding hands. One was much bigger than the other, but neither had faces. The paper was torn so a part of it was missing, and there was a number written near the top right corner. It was either "15" or "16." I nervously handed Josh the paper and asked him if he had put it in my pocket at some point, but he scoffed at the idea and asked why I was so upset. I pointed toward the smaller stick figure and what was written next to it.

It was my initials.

I shook it off and told Josh the rest of the conversation between Mrs. Maggie and I. I had always attributed the odd exchange to her being sick until revisiting the events in my mind all these years later. As I think about it now, the feeling of profound sadness for Mrs. Maggie returns, but it is augmented by a looming feeling of despair when I think about why she said "maybe another time." I knew what she had said, but I didn't understand what it meant that night. I didn't understand what her words had meant weeks later when I watched men in strange, orange suits bio-hazard suits carry what I thought were black bags full of garbage out of her house, or why the whole neighborhood smelled like death that day. I still didn't understand when they condemned the house and boarded it up a little while before we moved. But I understand now. I understand why her last words to me were so important, even if neither she nor I realized it at the time.

Mrs. Maggie had told me that night that Tom had come home, but I know now who had really moved in; just as I know now why I never saw her body brought out on a stretcher.

The bags weren't filled with garbage.

Chapter Five

Screens

At the end of the summer between Kindergarten and 1st grade I caught the stomach flu. This has all of the components of the regular flu; however, with the stomach flu, you throw up in a bucket and not the toilet because you are sitting on it – the sickness gets purged from both ends. This lasted for about 10 days, but just before it had passed the sickness was granted an extension in the form of pink eye. My eyelids were so fused together by the dried mucus generated during the night that the first day I awoke with the infection I thought I had gone blind. When I started 1st grade I had a kink in my neck from 10 days of bed-rest and two swollen, bloodshot eyes. Josh was in another Group and didn't have my lunch, so in a cafeteria bursting with 200 kids I still had a table to myself.

I started keeping spare food in my backpack that I would take into the bathroom to eat after lunch since my school meals were usually confiscated by older kids who knew I wouldn't stand up to them since no one would stand with me. This dynamic persisted even after my condition cleared up since no one wants to be friends with the kid who gets bullied, lest they have some of that aggression directed toward themselves. The only reason this stopped was due to the actions of a kid named Alex.

Alex was in the 3rd grade and was bigger than most of the other kids in any grade. Around the 3rd week of school he started sitting with me at lunch, and this put an immediate end to the shortage of my food supply. He was nice enough, but he seemed kind of slow; we never really talked at length except for when I finally decided to ask why he had been sitting with me.

He had a crush on Josh's sister, Veronica.

Veronica was in 4th grade and was probably the prettiest girl in the school. Even as a 6-year-old who fully endorsed the notion that girls were disgusting, I still knew how pretty Veronica was. When she was in 3rd grade, Josh told me, two boys had actually gotten into a physical fight which erupted out of an argument concerning the significance of the messages she had written in their yearbooks. One of the boys eventually hit the other in the forehead with the corner of the yearbook and the wound required stitches to close. While not one of those two boys, Alex wanted her to like him and confessed that he knew Josh and I were best friends; I gathered that he had hoped that I would convey his ostensibly philanthropic deed to Veronica and that she would presumably be so moved by his selflessness that she'd take an interest in him. If I told her he would continue to sit with me for as long as I needed him to.

Because this was during the time when Josh mostly stayed at my house building the raft and navigating tributary with me I didn't have the chance to bring it up to Veronica because I simply didn't see her. I told Josh about it and he made fun of Alex, but said that he would tell his sister since I wanted him to. I doubted that he would. Josh was annoyed that people seemed to be so taken with his sister. I remember him calling her an ugly crow. I never said anything to Josh, but I remember wanting to say, even then, that she was pretty and would one day be beautiful.

I was right.

When I was 15 I was seeing a movie at a place my friends and I had come to call the Dirt Theatre. It was probably nice at some point, but time and neglect had weathered the place severely. This theatre had movable tables and chairs on a level floor, so when the theatre was full there were very few places you could sit and see the whole screen. The theatre was still open, I imagine, for three reasons: 1) it was cheap to see a movie there; 2) they showed a different cult movie twice a month at midnight; and 3) they sold beer to underage kids during the midnight showings. I went for the first two, and that night they were showing *Scanners* by David Cronenberg for \$1.00.

My friends and I were sitting in the very back. I wanted to sit closer to the front for a better view, but Ryan had driven us so I relented. A couple minutes before the movie started a group of girls walked in. They were all pretty attractive, but whatever beauty they might have had was eclipsed by the girl with the dirty blonde hair, even though I had only caught a glimpse of her profile. As she turned to move her seat I caught a full view of her face which gave me the feeling of butterflies in my stomach – it was Veronica.

I hadn't seen her in a long time. Josh and I saw progressively less of one another after we snuck out to my old house that night when we were 10, and usually when I'd visit him she'd be out with friends. While everyone stared at the screen, I stared at Veronica – only looking away when the feeling that I was being a creep overcame me, but that feeling would quickly subside and my eyes would return to her. She really was beautiful, just like I had thought she'd be when I was a kid. When the credits started to roll my friends got up and left; there was only one exit and they didn't want to be trapped waiting for the crowd to clear. I lingered in hopes of catching Veronica's attention. As she and her friends walked by I took a chance.

"Hey, Veronica"

She turned toward me looking a little startled.

"Yeah?"

I got out of my seat and stepped a little into the light coming in through the open door.

"It's me. Josh's old friend from way back . . . How . . . How've you been?"

"Oh my god! HEY! It's been so long!" she motioned to her friends that she'd be out in a second.

"Yeah, a few years at least! Not since the last time I stayed over with Josh. How is he anyway?"

"Oh, that's right. I remember all you guys' games. Do you still play Ninja Turtles with your friends?"

She laughed a little and I blushed.

“No. I’m not a kid anymore . . . Me and my friends play X-men now.” I was really hoping she’d laugh.

She did. “Haha! You’re cute. Do you come to these movies every time?”

I was still reeling from what she said.

Does she really think I’m cute? Did she just mean I was funny? Does she think I’m attractive?

I suddenly realized that she had asked me a question, and my mind grasped for what it was.

“YEAH!” I said much too loudly. “Yeah, I try to anyway . . . what about you?”

“I come every now and then. My boyfriend didn’t like these movies but we just broke up so I plan on coming from now on.”

I was trying to be casual, but failed. “Oh, well that’s cool . . . not that you guys broke up! I just meant that you’d be able to come more often.”

She laughed again.

I tried to recover, “So are you coming the week after next? They’re supposed to show *Day of the Dead*. It’s really cool.”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.”

She smiled, and I was about to suggest that maybe we could sit together when she quickly closed the space between us and hugged me.

“It was really good to see you,” she said with her arms around me.

I was trying to think of what to say when I realized the biggest problem was that I had forgotten how to talk. Luckily Ryan, who I could hear approaching from the hallway, came in and spoke for me.

“Dude. You know the movie’s over right? Let’s get the fuck outtu— OHHH YEAAHHH.”

Veronica let go and said that she’d see me next time. She was played out of the room by the porn music Ryan was making with his mouth. I was furious, but it dissipated as soon as I heard Veronica laughing in the lobby.

Day of the Dead couldn't come soon enough. Ryan's family was going out of town so he wouldn't be able to drive us, and the other friends I was with that night didn't have cars. A couple of days before the movie I asked my mom if she could take me. She responded almost immediately by denying my request, but I persisted and she picked up on the desperation in my voice. She asked why I wanted to go so badly since I had seen the movie before and I hesitated before saying that I was hoping to see a girl there. She smiled and asked playfully if she knew the girl and I reluctantly told her it was Veronica. The smile disappeared from her face and she coldly said "No."

I decided that I would call Veronica to see if she could pick me up. I had no idea if she still lived at home, but it was worth a try. But then I realized that Josh might answer. I hadn't talked to him in almost 3 years, and if he answered I obviously couldn't ask to talk to his sister. I felt guilty for calling to speak with Veronica and not Josh, but I dismissed that feeling quickly; Josh hadn't called me in years either. I picked up the phone and dialed the number that was still embedded in my muscle memory from having dialed it so often all those years ago.

It rang several times before someone picked up. It wasn't Josh. I felt a mixture of both relief and disappointment – I realized in that second that I really missed Josh. I would call after this weekend and talk to him, but this was my only chance to see if Veronica could or would take me so I asked for her.

The person told me I had dialed the wrong number.

I repeated the number back to her, and she confirmed. She said they must have changed their number and I agreed. I apologized for the disturbance and hung up. I was suddenly intensely sad because now I couldn't contact Josh even if I wanted to; I felt terrible for having been afraid that he might answer the phone. He had been my very best friend. I realized that the only way I could be put back in touch with him would be through Veronica, so now, not that I needed one, I had another reason to see her.

I told my mom the day before the movie that I was no longer concerned with going, but was hoping she could drop me off at my friend Chris' house. She relented and dropped me off that Saturday a couple of hours before the movie. My plan was to walk from his house to the theatre since he only lived about a half-mile away. They went to church early on Sundays so his parents would go to sleep early Saturday night, and Chris was fine with not coming with me since he had planned on chatting with this girl he met online. He said that the walk back to his house would be even lonelier after she laughed in my face when I tried to kiss her, and I told him not to electrocute himself when he tried to have sex with his computer.

I left his house at 11:15.

I tried to pace myself so I'd get there just a little before the movie. I was going by myself and so I didn't want to just hang around there waiting. On the way to the theatre I figured that if Veronica showed up at all it would be too lucky for us to arrive at the same time, so I debated whether I should wait outside or just go in. Both had their pros and cons. As I was grappling with these concerns I noticed that the steady stream of streaking car lights that had been overtaking me had been replaced by a single, constant spotlight that refused to pass. The road wasn't illuminated by streetlights, so I was walking in the grass with the road about two

feet to my left; I stepped a little more to my right and craned my neck over my left shoulder to see what was behind me.

A car had stopped about 10 feet behind me.

All I could see were the violently bright headlights that were cutting through the otherwise stygian surroundings. I thought that it might be one of Chris' parents; maybe they had come to check in on us and seen that I was gone. It wouldn't have taken much pressing for Chris to confess. I took one step toward the car, and it broke its pause and started driving toward me at a slow pace. It passed me and I saw that it wasn't Chris' parents' car, or any car that I recognized for that matter. I tried to see the driver but it was too dark, and my pupils had shrunk when faced with the blinding lights from the car just moments before. They adjusted enough so that I could see a tremendous crack in the back window of the car as it drove away.

I didn't think much of the whole affair; some people find it fun to scare other people – I'd often hide around corners and jump out at my mom, after all.

I timed it right and got there about 10 minutes before the movie. I had decided to wait outside until around 11:57, since that would give me time to find her inside if she was already seated. As I was considering the possibility that she might not show, I saw her.

She was alone, and she was beautiful.

I waved to her and walked to close the distance. She smiled and asked if my friends were already inside. I said that they weren't and realized that this must seem like I was trying to make this a date. She didn't seem bothered by that, nor was she bothered when I handed her the ticket I had already bought. She looked at me quizzically, and I said, "Don't worry, I'm rich." She laughed and we went inside.

I bought us one popcorn and two drinks and spent most of the movie debating whether or not I should time reaching my hand into the popcorn bag when she reached in so they would touch. She seemed to enjoy the movie and before I knew it, it was over. We didn't linger in the theatre, and because this was a midnight show we couldn't loiter in the lobby, so we walked outside.

The parking lot of the theatre was big because it connected with a mall that had gone out of business. Not wanting the night to be over just yet I continued the conversation while causally walking toward the old mall. As we were about to round the corner and leave the theatre out of sight I looked back and saw that her car wasn't the only one left in the parking lot.

The other one had a large crack in the back window.

My immediate uneasiness turned to understanding.

That makes a lot of sense. The driver of that car works here and must have figured I was on my way to the movie.

Injecting real horror into the life of a horror fan seemed like an obvious move.

We walked around the mall and talked about the movie. I told her that I thought *Day of the Dead* was better than *Dawn of the Dead*, but she refused to agree. I told her of when I called her old number and about my dilemma about who would answer the phone. She didn't find it as funny as I now did, but she took my phone and put her number in it. She commented that it might be the worst cell phone she'd ever seen. Her evaluation wasn't rescinded when I told her I couldn't even receive pictures on it. I called her so she'd have my number and she programmed it in.

She told me that she was graduating, but she hadn't done well in school so far that year so she wasn't sure if she'd even get into college. I told her to attach a picture of herself to the application and they'd pay her to go there just so they could look at her. She didn't laugh at that one and I thought she might be offended – she might have thought I was implying that she couldn't get in based on her intelligence. I nervously glanced at her and she was just smiling and even in this poor light I could see that she was blushing. I wanted to hold her hand but I didn't.

As we walked down the final side of the mall back toward the theatre I asked her about Josh. She told me she didn't want to talk about it. I asked her if he was at least doing alright and she just said "I don't know." I figured Josh must have taken a wrong turn somewhere and started getting into trouble. I felt bad. I felt guilty.

As we approached the parking lot I noticed that the car with the cracked back window was gone and that her car was now the only one in the parking lot. She asked me if I needed a ride and even though I really didn't I said that I'd appreciate it. I had drunk my whole soda during the movie and all the walking was putting pressure on my bladder. I knew that I could wait until I was back at Chris', but I had decided that I was going to try to kiss her when she dropped me off, and I didn't want this biological nagging to rush me out of the car. This would be my first kiss.

I could think of no ruse to conceal what I needed to do. The theatre had long closed so I only had one option. I told her that I was going to go behind the theatre to piss but that I'd be back in "two shakes." It was obvious that I thought it was hilarious and she seemed to laugh more at how funny I found it than at how funny it clearly was.

On the way toward the theatre I stopped and turned toward her. I asked her if Josh had ever told her that kid named Alex had done something nice for me. She paused to think for a moment and said that he had; she enquired as to why I had asked, but I said it was nothing. Josh really was a good friend.

When I went to go behind the theatre I realized that there was a chain-link fence extending off and running parallel to the walls of the building. Where I stood she could still see me, and the fence seemed to stretch on endlessly, so I thought I'd just hop it, duck out of sight, and return as quickly as I could. It may have been too much of an effort, but I thought it polite. I climbed the fence and walked just a little ways until I was out of sight and urinated.

For a moment the only sounds were the crickets in the grass behind me and the collision of liquid and cement. These sounds were overpowered by a noise that I can still hear when it is quite and there are no other noises to distract my ears.

In the distance I heard a faint screeching which quickly subsided only to be replaced with a cascade of thundering vibrations. I realized quickly enough what it was.

It was a car.

The growling of the engine got louder. And then I thought.

No. Not louder. Closer.

As soon as I realized this I started back toward the fence, but before I could get very far at all I hear a brief, truncated scream, and the roar of the engine terminated in a deafening thud. I started running, but after only two or three steps I was tripped by a loose piece of stone and fell hard and fast onto the concrete – my head striking the corner of a chair as I fell. I was dazed for maybe 30 seconds but the renewed rumbling of the engine drew my senses back and my equilibrium was restored by adrenaline. I redoubled my efforts. I was worried that whoever had crashed the car might harass Veronica. As I was climbing over the fence I saw that there was still only one car in the parking lot. I didn't see any evidence of a crash. I thought that I might have misjudged its direction or proximity. As I ran toward Veronica's car and as my orientation changed I saw what the car had hit. My legs stopped working almost completely.

It was Veronica.

Her car was sitting between us and as I closed the distance and walked around it she came fully into view.

Her body was twisted and crumpled like a discarded figure meant to represent a catalog of things the human body cannot do. I could see the bone of her right shin cutting through her jeans, and her left arm was wrapped so hard around the back of her neck that her hand fell on her right breast. Her head was craned back and her mouth hung widely open toward the sky. There was so much blood. As I looked at her I actually found it hard to discern whether she was laying on her back or her stomach, and this optical illusion made me feel sick. When you are confronted with something in the world that simply doesn't belong, your mind tries to convince itself that it is dreaming, and to that end it provides you with that distinct sense of all things moving slowly as if through sap. In that moment I honestly felt that I would wake up any minute.

But I didn't wake up.

I fumbled with my phone to call for help but I had no signal. I could see Veronica's phone sticking out of what I thought was her front right pocket. I had no choice. Trembling, I reached for her phone and as I slid it out she moved and gasped for air so violently that it seemed as if she were trying to breathe in the whole world.

This startled me so much that I staggered back and fell onto the asphalt with her phone my hand. She was trying to adjust her body to get it into its natural position, but with every spasm and jerk I could hear the cracking and grinding of her bones. Without thinking I scrambled over to her and put my face over hers and just said,

“Veronica, don’t move. Don’t move, OK? Just stay still. Don’t move. Veronica, please just don’t move.”

I kept saying it but the words started to fall apart as tears came streaming down my face. I opened her phone. It still worked. It was still on the screen where she had saved my number and when I saw that I felt my heart break a little. I called 911 and waited with her, telling her that she would be ok, and feeling guilty for lying to her every time I said it.

When the sound of sirens tore through the air she seemed to become more alert. She had remained conscious since I found her, but now more of the light was coming back into her eyes. Her brain was still protecting her from pain, though it looked as if it was finally allowing her to become aware that something was terribly wrong with her. Her eyes rolled over to mine and her lips moved. She was struggling, but I heard her.

“Hhh...he...P...pi...picture. M...my picture...he took it.”

I didn’t understand what she meant, so I said the only thing I could “I’m so sorry, Veronica.”

I rode with her in the ambulance where she finally lost consciousness. I waited in the room that they had reserved for her. I still had her phone so I put it with her purse and I called my mom from the hospital phone. It was about 4am. I told her that I was fine, but that Veronica was not. She cursed at me and said she’d be right there, but I told her I wasn’t leaving until Veronica was out of surgery. She said she’d come anyway.

My mom and I didn’t speak that much. I told her I was sorry for lying, and she said that we’d talk about that later. I think that had we talked more in that room – if I had just told her about Boxes or the night with the raft; if she had just told me more of what she knew – I think that things would have changed. But we sat there in silence. She told me that she loved me and that I could call her whenever I wanted her to come get me.

As my mom was leaving Veronica’s parents rushed in. Her dad and my mom exchanged a few words that appeared to be quite serious while Veronica’s mother talked to the person at the desk. Her mother was a nurse, but didn’t work at this hospital. I’m sure that she had tried to get Veronica transferred, but her condition was prohibitive. While we waited the police came in and talked to each of us – I told them what happened, they made some notes, and then they left. She came out of surgery and 90% of her body was covered in a thick, white cast. Her right arm was free, but the rest of her was bound like a cocoon. She was still under, but I remembered how I felt when I had my cast before Kindergarten. I asked a nurse for a marker, but I couldn’t think of anything to write. I slept in a chair in the corner, and went home the next day.

I came back every afternoon for several days. At some point they had moved another patient into her room and set up a screen around Veronica's bed to act as a partition. She didn't seem to be feeling better, but she made more moments of lucidity. But even during these periods we wouldn't really talk. Her jaw had been broken by the car, so the doctors had wired it shut. I sat with her for a while, but there was nothing much I could say. I got up and walked over to her. I kissed her on the forehead and she whispered through her clenched teeth,

"Josh . . ."

This surprised me a little, but I looked at her and said, "Has he not come to see you?"

"No . . ."

I found myself really irritated. "Even if Josh had been getting into trouble, he should still come see his sister," I thought.

I was about to express this when she said, "No . . . Josh . . . he ran away . . . I should've told you."

I felt my blood turn to ice.

"When? When did this happen?"

"When he was 13."

"Did . . . did he leave a note or something?"

"On his pillow . . ."

She started crying and I followed her, but I think now we were crying for different reasons even if I didn't realize it. At this point there were a lot of things I still didn't remember about my childhood, and there were a lot of connections I hadn't yet made. I told her I had to go but that she could text me any time.

I got a text from her the next day telling me not to come back. I asked why and she said she didn't want me to see her like that again. I agreed begrudgingly. We texted each other every day, though I kept this from my mom because I knew that she didn't like me talking to Veronica. Usually her texts were fairly short, and mostly only in response to more lengthy texts that I would send her. I tried calling her only once, I was sure she was screening her calls, but hoped I could hear her voice; she picked up but didn't say anything – I could hear how labored her breathing was. About a week after she told me not to come see her anymore she sent me a text that simply read,

"I love you."

I was filled with so many different emotions, but I responded by expressing the most prevalent one. I replied,

“I love you, too.”

She said that she wanted to be with me, and that she couldn’t wait until she could see me again. She told me that she had been released and was convalescing at her house. These exchanges carried on for several weeks, but every time I asked to come see her, she would say “soon.” I kept insisting and the following week she said that she thought she might be able to make it to the next midnight movie. I couldn’t believe it, but she insisted that she would try. I got a text from her the afternoon of the movie saying,

“See you tonight.”

I got Ryan to drive me since Chris’ parents had found out what had happened and said I wasn’t welcome at their house anymore. I explained to Ryan that she might be in bad shape, but that I really cared about her so to give us some space. He accepted that and we headed down there.

Veronica didn’t show.

I had saved a seat for her right next to me near the exit so she could get in and out easily, but 10 minutes into the movie a man slid into the chair. I whispered, “Excuse me, this seat is taken,” but he didn’t respond at all; he just stared ahead at the screen. I remember wanting to move because there was something wrong with the way he was breathing. I forfeited because I realized that she wasn’t coming.

I texted her the next day asking if she was alright and I enquired as to why she didn’t show the previous night. She responded with what would turn out to be the last message I’d receive from her. She simply said,

“See you again. Soon.”

She was delirious, and I was worried about her. I sent her several replies reminding her about the movie and saying it was no big deal but she just stopped replying. I grew increasingly upset over the next several days. I couldn’t reach her at her home because I didn’t know that number, and I wasn’t even sure where they lived. My mood became increasingly depressed, and my mother, who had been really nice as of late, asked me if I was OK. I told her that I hadn’t heard from Veronica in days, and I felt all the warmth leave her disposition.

“What do you mean?”

“She was supposed to meet me at the movies yesterday. I know it’s only been like 3 weeks since she got hit, but she said she would try to come, and after that she just stopped talking to me altogether. She must hate me.”

She looked confused, and I could read on her face that she was trying to tell if my mind had simply broken. When she saw that it hadn't her eyes began to water and she pulled me toward her, embracing me. She was beginning to sob, but it seemed too intense a reaction to my problem, and I had no reason to think that she particularly cared for Veronica. She drew in a shuttering breath and then said something that still makes nauseous, even now. She said,

"Veronica's dead, sweetheart. Oh God, I thought you knew. She died on the last day you visited her. Oh baby, she died weeks ago."

She had completely broken down, but I knew it wasn't because of Veronica. I broke the embrace and staggered backwards. My mind was swimming. This wasn't possible. *I had just exchanged messages with her yesterday.* I could only think to ask one question, and it was probably the most trivial I could ask.

"Then why was her phone still on?"

She continued sobbing. She didn't answer.

I exploded, "WHY DID IT TAKE THEM SO LONG TO SHUT OFF HER GODDAMNED PHONE?!"

Her crying broke enough to mutter, "The pictures . . ."

I would come to find out that her parents thought that her phone had been lost in the accident, despite the fact that I had put it in her purse the night she was brought to the hospital. When they retrieved her belongings the phone was not among them. They intended to contact the phone company at the end of the billing cycle to deactivate the line, but they received a call informing them of a massive impending charge for hundreds of pictures that had been sent from her phone. Pictures. Pictures that were all sent to my phone. Pictures that I never got because my phone couldn't receive them. They learned that they were all sent after the night she died. They deactivated the phone immediately.

I tried not to think about the contents of those pictures. But I remember wondering for some reason whether I would have been in any of them.

My mouth went dry and I felt the painful sting of despair as I thought of the last message I received from her phone . . .

See you again. Soon.

Chapter Six

Friends

On the first day of Kindergarten my mother had elected to drive me to school; we were both nervous and she wanted to be there with me all the way up to the moment I walked into class. It took me a bit longer to get ready in the morning due to my still-mending arm. The cast came up a couple inches past my elbow which meant that I had to cover the entire arm with a specially-designed latex bag when I showered. The bag was built to pull tight around the opening in order to seal out any water that might otherwise destroy the cast. I had gotten really adept at cinching the bag myself; that morning, however, perhaps due to my excitement or nervousness, I hadn't pulled the strap tight enough and halfway through the shower I could feel water pooling inside the bag around my fingers. I jumped out and tore the latex shield away, but could feel that the previously rigid plaster had become soft after absorbing the water.

Because there is no way to effectively clean the area between your body and a cast, the dead skin that would normally have fallen away merely sits there. When stirred by moisture like sweat it emits an odor, and apparently this odor is proportionate to the amount of moisture introduced, because soon after I began attempting to dry it I was struck by the powerful stench of rot. As I continued to frantically rub it with the towel it began to disintegrate. I was growing increasingly distressed – I had put as much effort as a child could into his very first day of school. I had sat with my mom picking out my clothes the night before; I had spent a great deal of time picking out my backpack; and I had become exceedingly excited to show everyone my lunchbox that had the Ninja Turtles on it. I had fallen into my mom's habit of calling these children I hadn't yet met my "friends" already, but as the condition of my cast worsened I became deeply upset at the thought that surely I wouldn't be able to apply that label to anyone by the time this day was over.

Defeated, I showed my mom.

It took 30 minutes to get most of the moisture out while working to preserve the rest of the cast. To address the problem of the smell my mom cut slivers off a bar of soap and slid them down into the cast, and then rubbed the remainder of the soap on the outside in an attempt to cocoon the rancid smell inside of a more pleasant one. By the time we arrived at the school my classmates were already engaged in their second activity and I was shoehorned into one of the groups. I wasn't made very clear on what the guidelines of the activity were and within about five minutes I had violated the rules so badly that each member of the group complained to the teacher and asked why I had to be in *their* group. I had brought a marker to school hoping that I could collect some signatures or drawings on my cast next to my mother's, and I suddenly felt very foolish for having even put the marker in my pocket that morning.

Kindergarteners had the lunchroom to themselves at my elementary school, but some of the tables were off limits, so I didn't have to sit alone. I was self-consciously picking at the fraying ends of my cast when a kid sat across from me.

"I like your lunchbox," he said.

I could tell he was making fun of me, and I grew really angry; in my mind that lunchbox was the last good thing about my day. I didn't look up from my arm, and I felt a burning in my eyes from the tears that I was holding back. I looked up to tell the kid to leave me alone, but before I could get the words out I saw something that made me pause.

He had the exact same lunchbox.

I laughed. "I like your lunchbox too!"

"I think Michelangelo's the coolest," he said while miming Nunchuck moves.

I was in the middle of rebutting by saying that Raphael was my favorite when he knocked his open carton of milk off the table and onto his lap.

I tried very hard to stifle my laughter since I didn't know him at all, but the struggling look on my face must have struck him as funny because he started laughing first. Suddenly, I didn't feel so bad about my cast, and thought that this person would hardly notice now anyway. Just then, I thought to try my luck.

"Hey! Do you wanna sign my cast?"

As I pulled out the marker he asked me how I broke it. I told him that I fell out of the tallest tree in my neighborhood; he seemed impressed. I watched him laboriously draw his name, and when he was done I asked him what it said.

He told me it said "Josh."

Josh and I had lunch together every day, and whenever we could we partnered up for projects. I helped him with his handwriting, and he took the blame when I wrote "Fart!" on the wall in permanent marker. I would come to know other kids, but I think I knew even then that Josh was my only real friend.

Moving a friendship outside of school when you are 5 years old is actually more difficult than most remember. The day we launched our balloons we had such a good time that I asked Josh if he wanted to come to my house the next day to play. He said he did and that he'd bring some of his toys; I said that we could also go exploring and maybe swim in the lake. When I got home I asked my mom and she said it would be fine. My enthusiasm was boundless until I realized that I had no way of contacting Josh to tell him. I spent the whole weekend worrying that our friendship would be dissolved by Monday.

When I saw him after the weekend I was relieved to find that he had run into the same obstacle and thought it was funny. Later that week we both remembered to write down our phone numbers at home and then exchange them at school. My mom spoke with Josh's dad, and it was decided that my mom would pick up Josh and myself from school that Friday. We alternated this basic structure nearly every weekend; the fact that we lived so close made things much easier on our parents who seemed to work constantly.

When my mom and I moved across the city at the end of 1st grade I was sure that our friendship had seen its last day; as we drove away from the house I had lived in my whole life I felt a sadness that I knew wasn't just about a house – I was saying goodbye to my friend forever. But, Josh and I – to my surprise and delight – stayed close.

Despite the fact that we spent the majority of our time apart and only saw one another on weekends, we remained remarkably similar as we grew. Our personalities coalesced, our senses of humor complimented each other's, and we would often find that we had started liking new things independently. We even sounded enough alike that when I stayed with Josh he would sometimes call my mom pretending to be me; his success rate was impressive. My mom would sometimes joke that the only way she could tell us apart sometimes was by our hair – he had straight, dirty-blond hair like his sister, while I had curly, dark brown hair like my mother.

One would think that the thing most likely to drive two young friends apart would be what's out of their control; however, I think the catalyst of our gradual disengagement was my insistence that we sneak out to my old house to look for Boxes. The next weekend I invited Josh over to my house, in keeping with our tradition of alternating houses, but he said that he wasn't really feeling up to it. We started seeing progressively less of one another over the next year or so; it had gone from once a week, to once a month, to once every couple months.

For my 12th birthday my mom threw a party for me. I hadn't made that many friends since we'd moved, so it wasn't a surprise party since my mom had no idea who to invite. I told the handful of kids I'd become acquainted with and called Josh to see if he wanted to come. Originally, he said that he didn't think he could make it, but the day before the party he called me to say that he'd be there. I was really excited because I hadn't seen him in several months.

The party went pretty well. My biggest concern was that Josh and the other kids wouldn't get along, but they seemed to like each other well enough. Josh was surprisingly quiet. He hadn't brought me a gift and apologized for that, but I told him it wasn't a big deal – I was just glad that he was able to make it. I tried to start several conversations with him, but they seemed to keep reaching dead ends. I asked him what was wrong; I told him that I didn't get why things had become so awkward between us – they were never like that before. We used to hang out almost every weekend and talk on the phone every couple days. I asked him what happened to us. He looked up from staring at his shoes and just said, "You left."

Just after he said that my mom yelled in from the other room that it was time to open presents. I forced a smile and walked into the dining room as they sang "Happy Birthday." There were a couple of wrapped boxes and a lot of cards since most of my extended family lived out of state. Most of the gifts were silly and forgettable, but I remember that Brian gave me a Mighty Max toy shaped like a snake that I kept for years afterwards. My mom was insistent that I open all the cards that had been brought and thank each person who had given one because several years before on Christmas I had torn through the wrapping paper and envelopes with such fervor that I had destroyed any possibility of discerning who had sent which gift or what amount of money. We separated the ones that had been sent by mail and the ones that had been brought that day so my friends wouldn't have to sit through me opening cards from people they had never met. Most of the cards from my friends had a couple dollars in them, and the ones from my family members contained larger bills.

One envelope didn't have my name written on it, but it was in the pile so I opened it. The card had a generic floral pattern on its face and seemed to be a card that had been received by someone else who was now recycling it for my birthday because it was actually a little dingy. I actually appreciated the idea that it was a reused card since I'd always thought that cards were silly. I angled it so that the money wouldn't fall to the floor when I opened it, but the only thing inside was the message that had come printed in the card.

"I Love You."

Whoever had given me this card hadn't written anything in it, but they had circled the message in pencil a couple times.

I chuckled a little and said, "Gee, thanks for the awesome card, mom."

She looked at me quizzically and then turned her attention to the card. She told me it wasn't from her and seemed amused as she showed my friends, looking at their faces trying to discern who had played the joke. None of the kids stepped forward, so my mom said,

"Don't worry sweetheart, at least you know now that *two* people love you."

She followed that with an extremely prolonged and excruciating kiss on my forehead that transformed the group's bewilderment into hysteria. They were all laughing so it could have been any of them, but Mike seemed to be laughing the hardest. To become a participant rather than the subject of the gag I said to him that just because he had given me that card he shouldn't think that I'd kiss him later. We all laughed, and as I looked at Josh I saw he was finally smiling.

"Well, I think that gift might be the winner, but you have a couple more to open."

My mom slid another present in front of me. I was still feeling the tremors of suppressed chuckles in my abdomen as I tore the colorful paper away. When I saw the gift I had no need to suppress the laughter anymore. My smile dropped as I looked at what I'd been given.

It was a pair of walkie-talkies.

"Well go on! Show everyone!"

I held them up, and everyone seemed to approve, but as I drew my attention to Josh I could see that he had turned a sickly shade of white. We locked eyes for a moment and then he turned and walked into the kitchen. As I watched him dial a number on the corded phone attached to the wall my mom whispered in my ear that she knew that Josh and I didn't talk as much since one of the walkie-talkies had broken, so she thought I'd like it. I was filled with an intense appreciation for my mom's thoughtfulness, but this feeling was easily overpowered by the emotions resurrected by the returning memories I'd tried so hard to bury.

When everyone was eating cake I asked Josh who he had called. He told me he wasn't feeling well so he called his dad to come get him. I understood that he wanted to leave, but I told him that I wished we could hang out more. I extended one of the walkie-talkies to him, but he put his hand up in refusal.

Dejected, I said, "Well thanks for coming, I guess. I hope I'll see you before my next birthday."

"I'm sorry ... I'll try to call you back more often. I really will." he said.

The conversation stagnated as we waited by my door for his dad. I looked at his face. Josh seemed genuinely remorseful that he hadn't made more of an effort. His mood seemed suddenly bolstered by an idea that had struck him. He told me that he knew what he'd get me for my birthday – it would take a while, but he thought that I would really like it. I told him it wasn't a big deal, but he insisted. He seemed in better spirits and apologized for being such a drag at my party. He said that he was tired – that he hadn't been sleeping well. I asked him why that was as he opened the door in response to his dad's honking in the driveway. He turned back toward me and waved goodbye as he answered my question,

"I think I've been sleepwalking."

That was the last time I saw my friend, and a couple months later he was gone.

Over the past several weeks the relationship between my mother and I has grown increasingly strained due to my attempts to learn the details of my childhood. It's often the case that one cannot know the breaking point of a thing until that thing fractures, and after the last conversation with my mother I imagine that we will spend the rest of our lives attempting to repair what had taken a lifetime to build. She had put so much energy into keeping me safe, both physically and psychologically, but I think that the walls meant to insulate me from harm were also protecting her emotional stability. As the truth came pouring out the last time we spoke I could hear a trembling in her voice that I think was a reverberation of the collapse of her world. I don't imagine my mother and I will talk very much anymore, and while there are still some things I don't understand, I think I know enough.

After Josh disappeared, his parents had done all that they could to find him. From the very first day, the police had suggested that they contact all of Josh's friends' parents to see if he was with them. They did this, of course, but no one had seen him or had any idea of where he might be. The police had been unable to turn over any new information about Josh's whereabouts, despite the fact that they had received several anonymous phone calls from a woman urging them to compare this case with the stalking case that had been opened about 6 years before.

If Josh's mother's grip on the world loosened when her son vanished, it broke when Veronica died. She had seen many people die at the hospital, but there is no amount of desensitization that can fortify a person against the death of her own child. She would visit Veronica twice a day since she was recuperating at a different hospital; once before her shift, and once afterward. On the day Veronica died, her mother was late leaving work, and by the time she arrived at her daughter's hospital Veronica had already passed. This was too much for her and over the next couple weeks she became increasingly more unstable; she would often

wander outside yelling for both Josh and Veronica to come home, and there were several times her husband found her wandering around my old neighborhood in the middle of the night – half-clothed and frantically searching for her son and daughter.

Due to his wife's mental deterioration, Josh's dad could no longer travel for work and began taking construction jobs that were less well-paying, so he could be closer to home. When they began expanding my old neighborhood more, about 3 months after Veronica died, Josh's dad applied for every position and was hired. He was qualified to lead the build sites, but he took a job as a laborer helping to build frames and clean up the sites and whatever else was needed. He even took odd jobs that would occasionally come up; mowing lawns, repairing fences – anything that to keep from traveling. They began clearing the woods in the area next to the tributary to transform the land into inhabitable property. Josh's dad was tasked with the responsibility of leveling the recently deforested lot, and this job guaranteed him at least several weeks of work.

On the third day, he arrived at a spot that he could not level. Each time he'd drive over it, it would remain lower than all the surrounding land. Frustrated he got off the machine to survey the area. He was tempted to simply pack more dirt into the depression, but he knew that would only be an aesthetic and temporary solution. He had worked construction for years and knew that root systems from large trees that had been recently cut down would often decompose leaving weaknesses in the soil that would manifest as weaknesses in the foundations above. He weighed his options and elected to dig a little with a shovel in case the problem was shallow enough to fix without needing a machine that would have to be brought over from another site. And as my mother described where this was, I knew I had been at that spot both before the soil was broken and before it had been filled in.

I felt a tightening in my chest.

He dug a small hole about 3 feet down until his shovel collided with something hard. He smashed his shovel against it repeatedly in an attempt to gauge the thickness of the root and the density of the network when suddenly his shovel plunged through the resistance.

Confused, he dug the hole wider. After about a half-hour of excavating he found himself standing on a brown blanket-covered box about seven feet long and four feet wide. Our minds work to avoid dissonance – if we hold a belief strongly enough our minds will forcefully reject conflicting evidence so that we can maintain the integrity of our understanding of the world.

Up until the very next moment, despite what all sense would have indicated – despite the fact that some small but suffocated part of him understood what was supporting his weight – this man believed, he *knew*, his son was still alive.

My mom received a call at 6 p. m. She knew who it was, but she couldn't understand what he was saying. But what she did comprehend made her leave immediately.

“DOWN HERE ... NOW ... SON ... PLEASE GOD.”

When she arrived she found Josh's dad sitting perfectly still with his back to the hole. He was holding the shovel so tightly it seemed that it might snap, and he was staring straight ahead

with eyes that looked as lifeless as a shark's. He wouldn't respond to any of her words, and only reacted when she tried to gently take the shovel from him.

He dragged his eyes slowly to hers and just said, "I don't understand." He repeated this as if he had forgotten all other words, and my mother could hear him still muttering it as she walked past him to look in the hole.

She told me she wished she had gouged her eyes out before she faced downward into that crater, and I told her that I knew what she was about to say and that she need not continue. I looked at her face and it was expressing a look of such intense despair that it caused my stomach to turn. I realized that she had known of this for almost ten years and was hoping that she'd never have to tell me. As a result she never came up with the proper arrangement of words to describe what she saw, and as I sit here I'm met with the same difficulty of articulation.

Josh was dead. His face was sunken in and contorted in such a way that it was as if the misery and hopelessness of all the world had been transferred to it. The assaulting smell of decay rose from the crypt, and my mother had to cover her nose and mouth to keep from vomiting. His skin was cracked, almost crocodilian, and a stream of blood that had followed these lines had dried on his face after pooling and staining the wood around his head. His eyes lay half-lidded facing straight up. She said by the look of him he had not been long-dead, and thus time had not brought the mercy of degradation to erase the pain and terror that was now etched into his face. She said it was as if he had fixed his gaze right on her, his open mouth offering an all-too-late plea for help. The rest of his body, however, wasn't visible.

Someone else was covering it.

He was large and lay face-down on top of Josh, and as my mother's mind stretched itself to take in what her eyes were attempting to tell her she became aware of the significance of the way in which he laid.

He was *holding* Josh.

Their legs lay frozen by death, but entangled like vines in some lush, tropical forest. One arm rested under Josh's neck only to wrap around his body so that they might lay closer still.

As the sun passed through the trees its light became reflected by something pinned to Josh's shirt. My mother stooped to one knee and raised the collar of her shirt over her nose so that she might block out the smell. When she saw what had caught the sun her legs abandoned her and she nearly fell into the tomb.

It was a picture...

It was a picture of me as a child.

She staggered backwards gasping and trembling and collided with Josh's father who still sat facing away from the hole. She understood why he had called her, but she could not bring herself to tell him what she had kept from everyone for all these years. Josh's family never knew about the night I had woken up in the woods. She knew now that she should have told them, but to tell him now would help nothing. As she sat there resting her back against Josh's dad's. He spoke.

"I can't tell my wife. I can't tell her that our little boy---" his speech staggered in fits as he pressed his wet face into his dirt-caked hands. "She couldn't bear it..."

After a moment he stood up still shuttering and lumbered toward the grave. With a final sob he stepped down into the coffin. Josh's dad was a big man, but not as big as the man in the box. He grabbed the back of the man's collar and pulled hard – it was as if he intended to throw the man out of the grave in a singular motion. But the collar ripped and the body fell back down on top of his son.

"YOU MOTHER FUCKER!"

He grabbed the man by the shoulders and heaved him back until he was off of Josh and sat awkwardly but upright against the wall of the grave. He looked at the man and staggered back a step.

"Oh God ... Oh God, no. No, no, no please God, PLEASE GOD NO."

In a struggling but powerful movement he lifted and pushed the corpse completely out of the ground and they both heard the sound of glass rolling against wood. It was a bottle. He handed it to my mother.

It was ether.

"Oh Josh." He sobbed. "My boy ... my baby boy. Why is there so much blood?! WHAT DID HE DO TO YOU?!"

As my mother looked at the man who now lay facing upwards, she realized she was facing the person who had haunted our lives for over a decade. She had imagined him so many times, always evil and always terrifying, and the cries of Josh's father seemed to confirm her worst fears. But as she stared at his face she thought that this didn't look like who she imagined – this was just a man.

As she looked at his frozen expression, it actually looked serene. The corners of his lips were turned up only slightly; she saw that he was smiling. Not the expected smile of a maniac from a film or horror story; not the smile of a demon, or the smile of a fiend. This was the smile of contentment or satisfaction. It was a smile of bliss.

It was a smile of love.

As she looked down from his face she saw a tremendous wound on his neck from where the skin had been ripped out. She was at first relieved when she realized that the blood had not been Josh's. Perhaps he had suffered less. But this comfort was short-lived as she realized just how wrong she was. She brought a hand up to her mouth and whispered, almost as if she was afraid to remind the world what had happened,

"They were alive."

Josh must have bitten the man's neck in an attempt to get free, and although the man had died Josh couldn't move him. I began crying when I thought of how long he might have laid there.

She looked through the man's pockets for some kind of identification, but she only found a piece of paper. On it was a drawing of a man holding hands with a small boy and next to the boy were initials.

My initials.

I'd like to think that she was remembering that part of the story inaccurately, but I'll never know for sure.

As Josh's father carried his son out of the grave my mom slid the piece of paper into her pocket. He kept muttering that his son's hair had been dyed. She saw that it had – it was now dark brown, and she noticed that he was dressed oddly; his clothes were all far too small. After Josh's dad delicately laid his boy on the soft dirt he began gently pressing his hands against his son's pants to feel his pockets; he heard a crinkle. Carefully he retrieved a folded piece of paper from Josh's pocket. He looked at it but was vexed. Absently, he handed it to my mother, but she didn't recognize it either. I asked her what it was.

She told me it was a map, and I felt my heart shatter. He was finishing the map – that must have been his idea for my birthday present. I found myself strangely hoping that he hadn't been taken while expanding it – as if that would somehow matter now.

She heard Josh's father grunt and looked to see him pushing the man's body back into the ground. As he walked back toward the machine that had found this spot for him he put his hand on a canister of gasoline and paused with his back toward my mother.

"You should go."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault. I did this."

"You can't think like that. There was nothi--"

He interjected flatly, almost with no emotion at all. “About a month ago a guy approached me as I was cleaning up the site on the new development a block over. He asked me if I wanted to make some extra money, and because my wife’s not working right now I accepted. He told me that some kids had dug a bunch of holes on his property and he offered me \$100 to fill them in. He said that he wanted to take some pictures for the insurance company first, but if I came back after 5:00pm the next day that would be fine. I thought this guy was a sucker since I knew clearing that lot was coming up so someone would’ve had to do it anyway, but I needed the money so I agreed. I didn’t think he even had \$100, but he put the bill in my hand, and I did the job the next day. I’ve been so exhausted that I didn’t even think about it after it was done. I didn’t think about it until today when I pulled that same guy off of my son.”

He pointed at the grave and his emotions started to push through as he broke into a sob.

“He paid me \$100 so that I would bury him with my boy...”

It was as if saying it aloud forced him to accept what had happened, and he collapsed onto the ground in tears. My mother could think of nothing to say and stood there in silence for what felt like a lifetime. She finally asked what he would do about Josh.

“His final resting place won’t be here with this monster.”

As she looked back when she reached her car she could see black smoke billowing and diffusing against the amber sky and she hoped against all hope that Josh’s parents would be ok.

I left my mom’s house without saying much else. I told her that I loved her and that I would talk to her soon, but I don’t know what “soon” means for us. I got into my car and left.

I understood now why the events of my childhood had stopped years ago. As an adult, I now saw the connections that were lost on a child who tends to see the world in snapshots rather than a sequence. I thought about Josh. I loved him then, and I love him even still. I miss him more now that I know I’ll never see him again, and I find myself wishing that I had hugged him the last time I saw him. I thought about Josh’s parents – how much they had lost and how quickly that loss had come. They don’t know about my connection to any of this, but I could never look them in the eyes now. I thought about Veronica. I had only really come to know her later in my life, but for those brief few weeks I think I had really loved her. I thought about my mother. She had tried so hard to protect me and was stronger than I would ever be. I tried not to think about the man and what he had done with Josh for more than two years.

Mostly I just thought about Josh. Sometimes I wish that he never sat across from me that day in Kindergarten; that I’d never known what it was like to have a real friend. Sometimes I like to dream that he’s in a better place, but that’s only a dream, and I know that. The world is a cruel place made crueler still by man. There would be no justice for my friend, no final confrontation, no vengeance; it had been over for almost a decade for everyone but me now.

I miss you, Josh. I’m sorry you chose me, but I’ll always cherish my memories of you.

We were explorers.

We were adventurers.

We were friends.