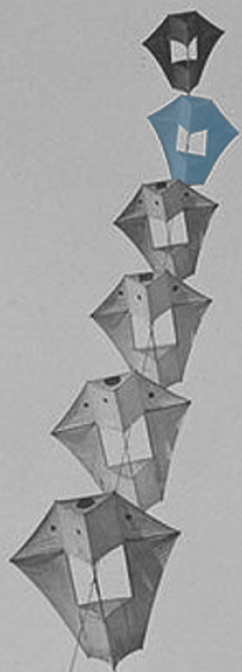


CHRISTOPHER
MILLIN

THE ISLAND OF WAIT

A NOVEL



THE ISLAND OF WAIT

THE ISLAND OF WAIT

Christopher Millin

© Christopher Millin, 2021
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Millin, Christopher, 1976 -
The island of wait / Christopher Millin

ISBN 978-0-9880909-2-7

Cover design by Christopher Millin

Published by Crow Toes Press
Printed in Canada



“Absence is a house so vast that inside you will pass
through its walls and hang pictures on the air.”

- Pablo Neruda

ONE

I only know his name is Jacob and that he is eleven years old.

There is a stage all young boys go through, where they believe they are invincible. Jacob is in this stage of his life, “testing the waters” as mothers and fathers have been saying since time immemorial. I don’t know Jacob. Have never met him. But I have met thousands of Jacobs in my work. The only difference between them: the clothes they wear, the colour of their hair and the way their invincibility falters.

I used to cringe at the moment it happened. I used to grab an object in my vicinity and squeeze it so hard, sometimes it broke. This took a lot out of me. Weakened my light for days. Sometimes months. But now I just stand patiently on the outskirts, a shadow behind a tree, a rustling in a bush, a creak in the floorboards, and I wait so I can get the whole thing over with and move onto the next one. I never imagined death becoming such a big part of my life.

Mere seconds ago, the loudest sound audible was snowflakes hitting the ground. Now it is only the roar of snowmobile engines that fills my ears.

There are four of them. I do not know which one is Jacob, I only know he is the one I will lead away from here. They drive their vehicles up to a treeless patch of snow-covered land a few meters from where I stand, and they kill the engines simultaneously. There is a moment of purity. Snow falling. Chilled-breath rising. White. It is a beautiful moment.

Then the voices return me to the scene.

“This is the spot!” one of the boys shouts as he removes his helmet.

There are two snowmobiles, two boys to each vehicle. The other two boys jump off their snowmobile and remove their helmets.

A hockey net is fastened to the back of one of the snowmobiles. The other snowmobile has a collection of hockey sticks and skates fastened to it.

“Lake Mead?” one of the boys says. “Are you sure it’s still frozen enough?”

“I was up here yesterday,” says the boy who spoke first. The boy I now believe is Jacob, so full of naiveté... so full of life. “It’s perfect for a quick game.”

Flimsy reassurance, but it’s all the other three need to spur them forward. They unfasten their gear and make their way down to the lake: one boy leads, one carries the sticks, one the net, and one the skates. When they reach the shore, the boy who led them takes the net and steps onto the ice without abandon. He walks out a couple of dozen feet and begins to use the bottom of the net to push the freshly fallen snow to the outskirts. Within a minute or two he has created a small rectangular patch of cleared ice.

“Ta-dah!” he shouts.

The other boys, who are in various stages of lacing up their skates look up and start to clap. Mockingly, or in admiration, I cannot tell. The boy who created the rink returns to the shore and puts on his skates. When they’re laced up, he pulls a puck out of his jacket pocket and tosses it onto the ice. “It’ll be me and Michael against the two of you to start,” he says without looking at any of the others. “Then we’ll switch it up. We’ll play to ten.”

There are no objections.

Leaders and followers. It has always been this way. It will always be this way. It is only too bad so many of our leaders are fools. But I am no fool. I did what I was told. I stayed at the back of a crowd. I rarely spoke up. This was the best route for me in life and it served me well. After I left my childhood home, no one wanted to hurt me. No one wished me ill. I never wanted any more than that, and I guess that is why in this existence I have been made to lead.

The boys file onto the ice, hockey sticks in hand. As they skate out to the rink, they're laughing and cursing and using the blades of their sticks to flick snow up onto each other. Their blades leave little lines in the snow. From where I am standing, the lines look like dark string, which has been thrown high up into the sky and has fallen onto the snow in no particular pattern. It is a chaotic mess of crisscrosses and zigzags.

When they reach the rink, the game erupts quickly with a call of "Game on!" They speed up and down the ice: passing, checking, shooting, hitting. A boy is tripped and slides face first into one of the snowbanks lining the side of the rink. "That hurt!" he yells.

"Quit being a baby," the boy named Michael yells. "Get up and get back into the game."

"Time out!" he yells back. "Just give me a second. My skate's come undone."

The three boys skating in circles throw up their hands. "Come on, Jacob," the boy who led them to the ice says. "If you learned how to tie them properly in the first place, we'd be playing already."

Jacob rolls over and sits up. He reaches for his skate and is jarred forward when the ice beneath him shifts. A thunderous crack echoes across the lake. Tiny avalanches roll down the snowbank around him. And then, like that, Jacob is gone. Cracks wind their way out from the hole Jacob has been sucked into. The cracks are attracted to the weight of the three other boys who are now screaming and crying and confused by what's happening... by what they should be doing: get off the ice or try to save their friend.

There is an eruption of water from the hole, and then Jacob bobs up to the surface. He claws at the ice around him looking for something to hold onto. Finding nothing. He's choking on the water in his lungs. Spitting the water out of his lungs. Taking in air. Grasping to life. He uses his elbows to hold him up on the edge of the hole, but it's short lived as the ice crumbles underneath the weight, sending him back under.

Two of the boys skate off the partially frozen lake and fall onto the snowy shore. "Eric!" one of them yells. "Get off the ice! Get off!"

Eric turns to follow them, but another thunderous crack stops him. We can all see the deep line opening and moving across the rink. I'm the only one who knows Eric will be fine. I move out from behind the tree and walk silently toward Jacob. My feet do not leave prints in the snow. My movement does not draw any attention. I am quieter than the wind.

Jacob's flailing hands and arms breach the hole. Through splashing water and creaking ice, a faint "Help me" floats upward. Eric eases down onto his stomach, hockey stick out in front of him. He inches his way toward the hole. He is ten or eleven feet away from Jacob, but he may as well be on the other side of the Earth. "Hold on J," he says quietly. "I won't let you..." he says. "I can't..." I am close enough now I can hear these desperate words. I can't imagine what Eric is feeling. I have never been stuck in such a position. Is friendship driving him forward? Or is it guilt?

Jacob bobs up once more and steadies himself on the edge of the hole. He passes his friend a glance. In that glance I see so much. I see fear and regret and forgiveness. And then I see what I've seen so many times before. I see acceptance. Eric sees it, too. He drops his head into his arms and starts bawling. The slight shift causes a web of cracks to explode out from the ice beneath him.

"You need to get off the ice," Jacob says calmly.

Eric looks up. "I am so close. Just reach out for the stick."

"Eric, we'll both go in. You know it. And I know it. You have to go now. Please. It's okay."

“It’s not okay,” Eric cries.

My feet are next to his head now. I am in the fray now. A few years ago this would’ve stirred up great emotion in me. I would have been distraught by the thought of such young children put in such adult situations. By the realization I can’t just reach down and pull the boy out of the water. But you get punched in the gut enough times, you get used to it.

“Go!” Jacob screams. With the word, the remainder of colour in his cheeks empties out of him.

Eric startles and shuffles backward. “I’m so sorry,” he cries. “I’m so sorry.” He shuffles back further off the cracking ice and stands up. The ice is collapsing all around him. The boys on the shore are screaming at him to move faster. Despite the danger, he never breaks the gaze he and Jacob are sharing.

But my attention is no longer on Eric or the ice breaking apart and collapsing around me. I am within a foot of Jacob now and I know he can see me, because he is smiling. This is the moment someone pushes the mute button on life. The screaming behind me is silenced. The cracking of the ice is silenced. If I can hear anything, it is the last few beats of Jacob’s heart. It is the last blink of his eyes. I reach my hand out and he grabs it without hesitation. I pull him out of him. Behind him his elbows slide off the ice and his body slips back into the water, where it is dragged down to the murky depths of the lake by the weight of his waterlogged clothing, water-filled lungs and poor decisions.

We are standing side by side on Lake Mead. We are on a small slab of ice. Today’s Jacob and me. He waves at his friends but they do not see him. He looks up at the sky and sticks out his tongue. A large snowflake slides through it and continues falling to the ground. He sucks his tongue back into his mouth lizard-like and finally addresses me. “Do I know you?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“I was just in the water and now I’m bone dry.”

“Yes.”

“Why is that?”

“We need to go, Jacob,” I say. “Everything will be answered in due time.”

“Why are they leaving without me?” he asks and points to the three other boys who are now running for the snowmobiles, leaving their skates and sticks strewn across the land like spent weapons after battle.

“You’ll see them again. I promise.”

“I’m confused,” he says. “Who are you and why do I feel like I know you?”

“Come on,” I say and start jumping from ice slab to ice slab. He follows close behind me and fails to notice the slabs do not react to the force of our weight landing on them. The disorientation of being dead sometimes lasts for days. The denial sometimes lasts forever.

“Where are we going?” he asks in mid jump behind me.

I land on the shore and let him catch up. Lar and Annika step out from behind the trees that had been hiding them and they join us at the shore. Annika is smiling. Lar is neutral, save for the string of tears falling from his giant eyes. “Jacob,” I say, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We’re going home.”

TWO

At once we were, and then we ceased to be.

Yet still we are.

We are a collective of three. There is Lar, standing seven foot four, a true behemoth. The antithesis of what should be. But so necessary to what it is we do. He lived his life as a circus freak and died as a hero. Lar, who given the choice, chose to continue wearing the outfit he burned up in: a ragged tuxedo two sizes too small. Then there is Annika, my sister, whose heart was once made of the same things that make rainbows beautiful, but whose heart stopped at the age of nine. Annika, a nine-year old in appearance, who was gifted the brain of a woman with a lifetime worth of wisdom and knowledge hardwired into it. And lastly, there is me. Christened Risto Salminen, I came to be known as Christopher Sams when I moved to Canada and shed my isolated and awkward Finnish past.

We have been together many years now. And we all know our part, and each other's part so well, we barely have to speak a word to each other about it. Any moment now we will stand and Annika

will raise her hand to Jacob and smile and Jacob will finally come to realize his fate. Jacob will look from Annika to me to Lar, and in Lar's eyes he will find comfort. He will trust us to take him where he needs to go.

But in the moments between any moment and now, we will sit here at the dining room table inside Jacob's home and we will let Jacob be a child a while longer. He is standing on the edge of the dining room table, only the tip of his big toe holding him up on it. But not really. He's waving and shouting at all the somber people scurrying around the house. But they pay him no mind. They continue to wipe away tears as they prepare trays full of egg-salad sandwiches and pitchers of iced tea. Now and then Jacob's mother will stop at a portrait of Jacob on the wall just outside the entrance of the dining room and she'll take in a deep breath before continuing on.

"Mom, come back here and look at what I can do," Jacob says. But only the three of us hear him. Her ignorance does not sway him, though.

"When will we see Jacob again?" a tiny voice asks from some nook of the house. The question is never answered.

We sit around the table on chairs left pulled out in haste and forgotten about. A half-played game of Rummy still sits on the table. We feel that which is all around us: the sadness, the anger, the confusion, and if we choose, the wood of the chairs underneath us. We can position ourselves on inanimate objects and we can let emotions affect us, but as I have said, all of this takes energy. It dims our lights. So we rarely move objects and we remain neutral to all of that which is beyond the child in our care.

The black suits and black dresses whirring around the house look like shadows. Like dark spirits. Why black became the colour of death, I will never understand. Before I died I let it be known that my passing was to be a jubilant celebration. I wanted the room of this celebration to be filled with greens, blues and yellows: the colours of rebirth. I wanted my family to not think of me as dying, but as being reborn into something new. Perhaps it was the request,

written by my shaky hand in the last years of my life on Earth, which put me in the position I am in today. Perhaps...

It has been three days since they pulled Jacob's body out of Lake Mead. Jacob stood on the shore with me, Annika and Lar, watching a team of eight search and rescue divers, police officers and firefighters work for almost three hours to retrieve his body. The "out-of-body experience" people who have died and come back to life describe does not exist when death is imminent. When your light (or your soul, as believers call it) is pulled from you, you are flung into a temporary state of disorientation. It's like you are watching television. Everything is there in front of you, but it seems to be in no way related to you. What is happening is make believe. They pulled his body out, its skin as blue as the water itself, and Jacob said, "I've never seen something like this before. Kind of exciting, isn't it?"

Waiting is what makes this time in-between unique. Not unique to life, because all we do in life is wait: wait to order our coffee, to get onto theme-park rides, for our loved ones to come home. No, the uniqueness of the in-between is you are waiting for certain things to happen before you can move on. First you are waiting for your body to be discovered (if somehow it has gone missing), then you are waiting for it to be laid to rest and then you are waiting for your next path. It is our job to carry the child through these times of waiting until they reach the Island where their paths are chosen. Only then is our job done. Only then can we let go and move onto the next job. To our next charge.

Time is much different on this side. I cannot go back in time at will, and though time for my Charge (which is the term we use for the children we are tasked with to bring to the Island) and time for me moves forward, time is not linear, either. It's more like a dotted line, where irrelevant moments are left in the empty spaces between the dots and we only need to experience the necessary moments. Three days ago Jacob died, but right now, it only feels like a few minutes since.

A stampede of feet echoes through the house. A cacophony

of voices builds to a crescendo. Then the front door slams shut and the house is empty. "Why are they leaving without me?" Jacob asks, his big toe still the only thing connecting him to the table. We listen to the barrage of car doors slamming shut and engines starting up. We listen to all the noise fading out as distance separates us from the engines. And then we stand up in unison. Annika raises her hand to Jacob and smiles. Her smile radiates a thousand hugs...a lifetime of familial and friendly love. He takes hold of her hand and drops down onto the floor. As they look into each other's eyes, they disappear, leaving wavy, transparent outlines of their bodies in their place. When they return to the room a second later, Jacob's bottom lip is quivering. He looks at Lar. Lar's lip is quivering, too. Lar places his catcher's-mitt sized palm on Jacob's back. Jacob sucks in a deep breath and says, "Will I ever see them again?"

"In the short term," I say, "that depends on your answer to my next question. And in the long term, it depends on the path that is chosen for you."

"What does that mean?"

The older children always want to know more. They are always full of questions and explanations once they realize they are dead. As heartbreaking as it is when an infant dies, the younger a child, the more straightforward our job is.

"That's not for me to explain," I say. "We are simply your guides through this first part. What we can do is take you to the funeral, if that is something you might like to do. But this decision must be made now, for once your body is in the ground, this existence will cease to be...forever."

"Are you angels?"

"No."

"Are you ghosts?"

"Jacob, would you like to wait here until you are laid to rest or would you like to go see your parents...your brothers and sisters and cousins one last time?"

"I want to see them," he says quietly.

Children Jacob's age often let the last part go and opt to move forward without the vacant goodbyes created by attending their own funerals. As in life, when actions and emotions are not reciprocal, they are next to meaningless. A child Jacob's age knows what it feels like to not be heard. But Jacob does not want to let go yet and that is fine.

When we die as adults, we do not get the choice to see our loved ones in their living forms one last time. Our light is pulled from our bodies by a cold, invisible hand and we are not lead to the Island...we are dragged to the White, or as it is called on Earth, Heaven. There is no calming presence with us. No sympathetic voice. Even in the afterlife, innocence is a valuable asset. An adult is fully formed, devoid of innocence. He knows his flaws and his strengths. He cannot unlearn. And therefore he cannot return. His life on Earth is over. The Buddhists speak of reincarnation. But the reality of death is that only the children are reincarnated. Only the children can make a fresh start because they are still hunks of clay. They haven't spent twenty, thirty, eighty years learning how perfect life could be if only we could remain children forever. My trip to the White was sidelined by this job I now do, so it is unfair of me to try and speak about whether or not the White is a place as wonderful as Heaven is described on Earth. What I do know is there is nothing more than the White, and everyone eventually ends up there, whether they are saintly missionaries or brutal serial killers. I also know that if I had the chance to see my family one last time, I wouldn't squander that chance either.

There is no walking, or hopping in a car and driving. There's no flash of white light or fading out and fading back in. We are in Jacob's dining room and then we are standing next to a winter-ravaged weeping willow tree in the cemetery Jacob will be buried in. It's like your eyes being open and seeing one thing, then blinking and seeing something completely different when they open up again. Dreamlike. There are half a dozen people milling about the freshly dug hole. Jacob points to one of the people and says, "That's Uncle Dave." Only with the earth disturbed do we see hints

of the world that exists under the snow. The grass. The dirt. Reality moment-arily unmasked. Eight flimsy, cafeteria-style chairs partially covered in wool blankets are set up along the grave. A procession of vehicles is spotted at the far gates and is watched by all as it winds its way through the labyrinthine roads of the cemetery. The cars, led by a dirty hearse, pull up in line and stop on the road a few dozen feet from the gravesite. Doors open simultaneously on both sides of the cars and feet hit the ground all at once, one and then the other, causing tiny booms, like heartbeats from the Earth. Jacob's parents, his two living grandparents and his siblings walk toward the chairs, none of their eyes ever looking at the hole in front of the chairs. They sit quietly and wait as everyone gathers behind them. Jacob looks briefly at each person who arrives and smiles. His thoughts are his own. When he reaches his immediate family, his glares stretch. He has accepted where he is and where he is going. He looks at his family the way we look at a faded photograph from our childhood. What fills us is not sadness or regret. It is more like nostalgia. "I kind of wish they weren't so sad," he says.

The casket is removed from the hearse and carried toward the grave by six people who at one time meant something to Jacob. A path in the snow had been cleared, but covered quickly by the morning's snowfall. The heavy feet leave an indelible path from the hearse to Jacob's final resting spot. A man wearing a Clerical Collar and a heavy winter jacket comforts Jacob's parents and steps to the head of the grave where he waits for the casket to be placed on the lowering device. "Can I get any closer?" Jacob asks.

"As close as you like," I say.

A child who has lived eleven years is filled with so much unrecognized wisdom. It is wisdom held deep in the heart and shared only with those who can relate to it: friends and siblings. Only when a child is on this side of the mirror, does that wisdom become so apparent to all. It's only too bad we three are the only ones who can see it.

Jacob lets go of Annika's hand and walks silently down to the

row of chairs, first to his grandparents. He whispers something in their ears, knowing they may not hear him, but that he is being heard. He walks past his sisters and brothers, running his hand across their rosy cheeks. One of them shivers, which causes Jacob's mother to reach over and take the boy's hands in hers. She brings his hands to her mouth and blows warm air on them, then she lets go and points at the gloves hanging out of his jacket pocket. The boy does not put the gloves on, but holds his hand against the part of his cheek where Jacob had touched. Jacob and his brother both know. Jacob moves past his mother to his father, who is sitting straight, arms crossed, strong, keeping it together for the family. For himself. He goes behind his father's chair and wraps his arms around him in a reverse hug. For several seconds he holds the hug, his father not making a move or a sound. Then, like that, the weight of all that is happening hits the man square in the face. Jacob's father starts to shake. Then he starts to bawl, inconsolable by any of the people around him. Jacob squeezes tighter knowing he's not being felt, but knowing his father feels him. By now, Jacob's casket is on the lowering mechanism. The priest is speaking and motioning to the sky and Jacob is moving in front of his mother. At once she is looking at the ground and then she is looking up into his eyes. All she sees is the sky and the tips of branches from the willow tree we are standing next to. All she sees is everything Jacob will be. Jacob smiles. "I love you, Mom," he says. She smiles almost like she had heard the words. And then he returns to us. "Let's go," he says.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "You still have time."

"They're going to be fine," he says. "Now I just want to walk until it's done. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is," I say. "Where would you like to walk?"

He spins a slow circle and points to a forest a few hundred yards away. "Do you think we could make it there before I'm in the ground?"

"This priest seems like the chatty sort," I say. "I'm sure we'll make it there and further."

“Then that’s where I want to walk to,” he says and takes hold of Annika’s hand again.

He leads the way, pulling Annika close behind him. I follow Annika, and Lar trudges along behind me. We are a procession that, to the visible eye, would garner strange looks and whispered questions. But we are invisible. A single breath in the wind that blows against your neck. We walk by the mourners, but they do not stir from our movement. And Jacob does not look at them. Instead, he looks at footprints in the snow. He looks at a bouquet of dead flowers in a cup full of frozen water next to the grave of a boy who was not much older than him when he died. He looks at birds circling in the sky. Just before we reach the forest he stops and looks back at Annika. “That place you took me...when we were still back at the house,” he says. “Is it a real place?”

“Yes it is, Jacob,” I say, answering for her. Annika bows her head. I see the tips of the smile on her lips. If there is one thing that continues to stir true emotion in me, it’s that smile. That smile connects us here, in this place, when so much distance continues to be between us. That smile is often the only thing that makes this task bearable.

“Thank you for showing it to me,” Jacob says to Annika.

Her head remains bowed. Her eyes closed. Almost as if she’s embarrassed to have let a stranger get so close to her. To us. But I know that is the farthest thing from the truth. All of our “Jacobs” have been on this journey with Annika.

“I know this is what has to happen,” Jacob says. “But I’m...I’m really scared.”

Fear is always the second to last emotion the dead feel. Lar is a fear killer. He steps out from behind me and walks over to Jacob. Jacob looks way up into Lar’s dark, sad eyes. Lar takes Jacob by the shoulders and pulls the boy into him, enveloping Jacob in his giant clothes. This giant hug from a giant of a man takes the fear and replaces it with hope. When Lar lets go of Jacob we are all where we should be. We are at the Island of Wait.

THREE

We were born twins, Annika and I. A city called Rovaniemi, in Finland's northernmost region, Lapland, was where we called home until 1944 when the Germans burned it down. Rovaniemi was a place of magic and snow and fish. Located a mere ten kilometers south of the Arctic Circle, Rovaniemi was blanketed in snow six months of the year and blanketed in darkness almost as long. As children, we believed Santa Claus, who lived two hundred and thirty kilometers away in Korvatunturi, had dropped us off on our father's doorstep. We believed this because we did not have a mother like the other children we knew. No mention of a mother was ever made in our home. No pictures existed. No requests for the truth were ever addressed. My father was a stubborn man who believed heavily in the concept of learning by doing. He was a fisherman by trade, but his profession was drinking vodka. I have a hard time recollecting a moment where he wasn't sipping from a never-empty cup of the poison. After Annika died, it was the same poison he used to finish himself off. The southern Finns who came up during the summers to fish alongside my father

called him Tiili, which meant brick, because of the squareness of his head and the way his skin looked like bumpy cement. Ignoring the mockery behind it, he would say, “Bricks are strong. Built to last. Weather the storm and whatnot. Just like me. I consider it a compliment they call me this.” He became so endeared to the moniker that he eventually got us to call him Tiili instead of father.

In this limbo, this damn yellow between life on Earth and whatever lies in the White, we are left with very little: our purpose and strangely, our feelings (which most of us turn off soon after we get here), our chosen looks and our memories. Oh yes, we are also left with an abundance of distorted time. I believe the memories have been left in us to help pass some of the time. Here we have no need, or want for food. We have no desires or passions. When I thought about Tiili while I was still part of the living, anger burned inside of me. Now it is just minutes that burn by as I wait for my next Charge. My memories serve dual purpose, for they are also the roadmap, which lead me to where I am now. I say we have no passions here, but we can be curious, and I have been ever so curious since day one. How, I can’t stop wondering, did the fates decide I would stay? I believe the answer is woven into my memories. I just have to keep pulling them apart until the answer is the only thing left.

“And then what happens?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, as the Island of Wait comes back into focus. “I was...momentarily distracted. What did you say?”

“I am called forward,” Jacob says, “and then what happens?”

There is a road in front of us that stretches to a fine point some great distance away. Thousands of children line the road. They are slowly moving toward the point. “When you are called, you join the crowd, Jacob. Then you keep moving forward until you can’t move anymore. And when you can’t move, that’s when you put your hands against the barrier holding you back and you push with all of your might.”

“And then what?”

There are thousands of others like us all up and down the road. Groups of three to seven Bearers, all saying the same thing to their charges. All helping them along on their journey. We do not verbally communicate with each other, because we cannot. But we can see each other here on the Island. And we can nod to each other in passing. And in that nod, we can feel camaraderie. I don't know how important that camaraderie is to the others, but to me, it is gold. Another nugget to help keep me on the path. Each group of Bearers is so vastly different from ours. A stone's throw from us, there is a group of four. Their charge is a girl, maybe six or seven years old. She tightly grips the hand of a woman wearing a tutu and ballerina shoes. There is a man in a business suit carrying a briefcase and another man dressed up like a squirrel. A woman, who looks like she could be any of these children's mother, is talking to the little girl just as I am talking to Jacob. She is the literal voice of the group. Her Charge lets go of the ballerina's hand and walks off the road where she takes a seat on the grass next to a girl braiding another girl's hair. When they are comfortable that their job is done, they disappear, like the ghosts they are. Off to haunt another part of the world until the next child dies.

The original shock was seeing just how many children die. We see so little from the insulated twenty-five square kilometer world we spend the majority of our lives living in. The size of the world becomes so much clearer when you are here. A parent should never have to bury a child, but thousands of parents do it every day. When it is out of your sight, it is a passing thought. A sad thought. But passing. Here, it is laid out in front of you, plain as the road we are standing on. And it can be overwhelming, if it is truly taken in. The fact is, every day, small lives are pulled from their bodies and brought here to wait. Most of the children die naturally, from birth defects or cruel diseases that snaked their way into the child's body as it was being formed in the womb. Others die from starvation and poverty, which is cruel on a different level. And then, like Jacob, others die through tragic accidents. No matter what fate befalls them, if they didn't make it through puberty, they

are brought here. And they linger until they are called forward. They linger in groups along the sides of this endless road. The sides are covered in grass and rolling hills. The grass is a perfect green. The sky is a perfect blue. It is called an island because the smell of salt water...of ocean is heavy in the air, though no body of water can be seen anywhere. The children sit on the grass cross-legged. They lie on their backs and stare up at the cloudless sky. They fly kites and kick balls. They wait. The call is not audible. At some point a feeling enters them and they know it's their time. They stand up and move onto the road and into the line. There doesn't need to be much more to it.

"And then you are where you are supposed to be," I tell Jacob. It's as specific and as important as I can make it.

"You don't really know what happens to me, do you?"

Children, for the most part, are accepting individuals. A child has never asked me this before. "I know," I say and stop. I am not rattled by the question, but I am in a spot where I must slide out of the script. I must improvise. The thing is, I want to know what happens. I want to know so badly, but I only know this in-between. And it's not enough anymore. "Jacob, I know that whatever happens to you after you push through the barrier is better than this. You will exist. You will have life and purpose. You will be again in one way or another. And that is all anyone should ever hope for."

"Thank you," he says and turns away from us. He does not say good-bye. Or look back. He walks off the road and is quickly swallowed up by a gathering of children flying kites. Hundreds of beautiful kites all different shapes and sizes, swooping down and rising up like giant skeletal birds in a windless sky.

FOUR

I am standing next to a stop sign at an intersection in the heart of a small town called Biloxi in the American state of Mississippi. It is any day. Any time. Irrelevant. The name in my head is Jacks. Jacks is ten years old and about to die. Upon waking this morning, I am sure dying wasn't even a fleeting thought in young Jacks' mind. While he sat at the kitchen table slurping up pink milk left over after his sugary cereal was gone, I'm sure Jacks was thinking about video games and the school assignments starting to pile up and his favourite afternoon cartoons. When Jacks woke up this morning, I am sure his routine swayed very little from the routine of past mornings. Routine. I might have once said to someone, life without routine is life in disarray. I know now that it is our routines that bury us alive. Hard to tell a ten-year old kid that. Hard to tell that to someone who has fallen into a routine. I did it in life, and now, here I am doing it death. The difference this time is that the routine has been forced upon me...upon us by someone else's hand.

Across the street I spy Lar leaning up against a tree. He is so tall and trunk-like, he looks just like another tree, which has been

uprooted and felled. If the people in the passing cars could see him, they would slow to a crawl and gawk. They'd roll down their windows and holler, "Are you real?" Lar does not speak much, but when he does open his mouth, a lot is said in very few words. I have learned that in life, Lar was forced into a cruel routine by simple genetics. His fifteen-pound birth weight and 28-inch height killed his mother during birth and instilled an instant resentment in his father. By the time Lar was twelve, he had reached his full height and the full extent of his father's tolerance. His father called him, "Freak." And so too did the townsfolk. "Freak" and "Monster" and "Should have never been." When a traveling circus arrived two towns over, Lar's father finally knew what to do with the boy...the boy he had also nicknamed "Burden." He walked Lar to the circus and left him with the folks running the Freakshow. They had a bearded lady and a two-headed boy. They had a man with alligator skin and a woman who could turn her head in a three hundred and sixty-degree circle. But they didn't have a giant. "Every successful Freakshow needs a giant," the man in the black-striped top hat in charge of the Freakshow had said. "Now we can compete with the best Freakshows in the world." He shook Lar's father's hand and ushered Lar into a dingy striped circus tent. Lar turned around to ask his father what was happening, but by then, the man was already gone. No tears. No hugs. No good-byes. Just gone. Lar's long career in the circus began that very night. A full-grown woman the size of a child of five dressed Lar in a giant tuxedo two sizes too small and pushed him out onto a stage where the man in the black-striped top hat was now standing. The man called himself Dr. Wynter Bizarro and proclaimed himself to be, "The greatest collector of freaks in the world." He pointed a cane with a pitbull's head carved into the top of it at Lar and he regaled the small crowd of circus goers with tales of terror featuring the giant now standing in front of them...the giant who once kept an entire city at bay as he ran wild through the streets breaking streetlamps and biting the heads off of house cats and raccoons.

Lar, no more imposing than the tree he is leaned up against waits with his eyes closed. At first, he closed his eyes because the sight of the child dying was too much to take. Now he does it as part of the process. A routine that can't be broken, like the endless nights he spent being paraded onto dark stages in nameless towns, taunted and ridiculed for his abnormal disposition. He will keep his eyes closed until I have pulled the child from the body. I often wonder what he thinks about when his eyes are closed.

I often wonder how long we will have to do this.

Down the road, a block or two away, through the heat waves coming up off the pavement, I see two squiggly figures approaching. They are on bikes. And in no time, they are next to me; they are stopped at the stop sign I am standing next to. There is a boy and a girl. "Jacks," the girl says. "I don't want to go home yet."

The boy, Jacks, looks left to right...looks at the girl. "I don't want to go home yet, either, Suze," he says, "but we have nowhere else to go. Maybe mom will be home. Maybe she'll..."

"She'll what?" the girl, Suze, shouts. "Tell us to stop lying, like she always does."

"She has to believe us this time. We have proof."

"We've had proof before," Suze says sadly. "She never believes us."

"Maybe it's time we go to the police," Jacks says. "It's their job to believe us, right?"

"They're adults," Suze says. "Adults don't believe children. Ever. You know that."

"Don't think that, Suze." Jacks puts his foot on the pedal and moves his bike over the stop line and into the empty intersection.

"Where are we going?" Suze says.

Jacks looks back at the girl as he rides. "To the..." He sees me now. Standing next to the stop sign next to Suze. He sees me but he doesn't. I'm like an image in a developing Polaroid picture. Just a recognizable shape coming into focus. "...police," he finishes uncertainly. The word comes out of his mouth, then the car comes out of nowhere. Like me, not there, then there. It rips past the stop

sign. Through the intersection. It's a red car. Or maybe it's orange. It is going so fast. The car hits Jacks so hard he and his bike are propelled into the air like a cannonball.

Suze's scream can be heard over the squeal of the tires as the red (or orange) car shifts into another gear and speeds off. The car is out of sight before Jacks and his bike hit the ground. Suze drops her bike and runs in the same direction Jacks was tossed. She screams the whole way.

Some thirty feet from where the car collided with the boy and the bike, Jacks lands. The heavy bike still moves forward, eventually coming to a stop when it hits the tree Lar is propped up against. I am with Jacks now. Waiting. I am where he lays broken and bleeding. The only comfort to no one in particular is he has landed on grass. He is twitching and red bubbles are coming out of his nose. Suze appears and drops to her knees. She blankets the boy's body with her own. "Jacks, please..." she cries. "Apple Jacks, don't you leave me. Don't you dare!"

Jacks spits blood on her cheek and smiles. He is looking past her into my eyes. "Everything is going to be..."

I reach my hand down and he takes it. "Okay," he says. I pull him up to his feet and his body falls limp into his sister's embrace below us.

Suze's sorrowful wails are muted. The world emits a new glow. Everything is okay.

Minutes become seconds.

Cars stop. People gather.

Time speeds forward.

"Do I know you?" Jacks asks.

"No," I respond.

"I was just...I was just hit by a car, right? Why do I feel like I know you?"

Because you do know me.

I am the eleven-year old sitting a row behind you in the movie theatre six months ago. I am the nine-year old, two people in front of you, in the line up to buy ice cream last summer. I am that kid

you see in the hallway everyday at school, but never think twice about. Until now. You think you know me, but you don't. I am just the flash of a face you've seen before, but you don't know from where. The mild recognition is padding. Something else to remove the confusion of what has just happened. It allows Lar and Annika and me a little more time to prepare the child for his new journey.

Annika and Lar join us. We form a circle around Jacks' body and Suze, who's still wailing. Annika is smiling. Lar is neutral except for his eyes, from which heavy streams of tears flow. "What's happening here?" Jacks asks.

"We need to go," I say. "Everything will be answered in time."

"Where are we going?" he asks. "And what about Suze? Is she coming, too?"

"We're going home, Jacks."

"No, wait, no," he says and squeezes his palms against his head. He squeezes his eyes shut. He's fighting the confusion. He opens his eyes and looks down at the paramedics that now frantically move about his still body. "That's me, right? I'm confused. Am I... dead? Where did Suze go? What's going on?"

Annika reaches out and gently touches his arm. He flinches like her touch is full of stingers. "No. No. No. That is me," he says. "But I'm here. And I can't be here. I can't. I have to protect her."

He spots Suze sitting on the curb next to an ambulance. A woman and man hover above her. The man is yelling, but the world around the four of us is still silent.

"Suze," he yells. "Run! Run away from them and go to the police."

But only we can hear him. Annika tries to touch his arm again and this time he does not shake her away.

There are no more than these immediate moments with Jacks. There will be no funeral, or celebration of life. There will only be a quick cremation and an even quicker moving on for those who raised him. It is these neglected lives that I find most heartbreaking. To bring a child into the world and to not show him love is the greatest form of torture.

When Annika's soothing touch settles in, the two of them fade out.

Sometimes it works this way. Straight from death to the Island. There is no bouncing from place to place. No good-byes. No wet eyes, save for Lar's. We are the ones who show the child the love he never received in life. We are the ones who care enough to tell him he made a difference. If not to his parents, then to his friends. To his siblings. To us. We are the ones that can assure him he will be okay. He may even be better off.

They fade back in and Jacks has a look of contentment on his face. "Thank you for taking me there," he says. "It was...the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"We need to go now Jacob," I say.

"I understand. But I feel...I can't help but feel like I'm letting Suze down by not being there for her. By not making more of an effort to come back. I feel like I'm leaving her to..."

He doesn't finish his sentence, letting it just hang there like a piece of a collapsed bridge hanging by a flimsy metal wire. Heavy and foreboding. It has been a long time since a child has been so self-conscious so quickly upon dying. Something is off.

Lar sighs and closes his eyes. Something is off and I know he feels it, too.

"Would you like to see Suze one last time?" I ask.

"Will she see me?"

"No, she won't."

"Can I communicate with her in any way?"

"No."

He drops his head and says, "Just take me to where I have to go."

Lar places his hands on Jacks' shoulders and pulls the boy into him for a giant embrace. Jacks does not fight it. Jacks is suddenly lost in the flaps of Lar's giant tuxedo. Lost in the memories and the possibilities of his fading reality. He cries and we cry along with him, though we feel nothing but the discomfort of the boy's concern.

Our objective is simple. Escort the child from his body to his burial to his next phase of being. The only time we sway from this course is when there is no formal burial, or the child is having troubles coming to terms with his state. These exceptions are built into the framework of each delivery. When we sway away from the exceptions, we throw the balance of time off. Time. “We have nothing but time.” Right? We are lead to believe that life is circumstantial. To believe that the choices we make lead to the things that happen to us. It is true that we are free to choose, but what is not known while we live is that the choices we end up making are already known. Not by me, but by the Universe. By God. By that power that brought us into being, whatever you believe that power is. Every second of every day of every life, from the beginning of time until the end of time, is known. Where we go. What we do. When we will die. Everything. And so, if we sway too far, we risk missing the time we are preordained to be at a certain place. This is rarely an issue, because we three ghosts, and those like us, are part of the plan. From here to there to there. Simple. Simple, unless someone ditches the plan and goes off course. I’ve heard stories of what happens to rogue ghosts...to those that sway too far. I’ve heard about the demons or the angels or whatever you want to call them taking over and using fire and torture to destroy everyone involved in the act of disobedience. Essentially, wiping them from the timeline, so nothing changes. But these are just whispers I have heard while on the Island. Heard in my head. Whispers of things no one has ever really seen. Which takes me back to the idea of choice. I am dead, but I often wonder, am I still free to choose? I’ve never swayed off course with my Charges. Though these situations are all horribly sad, nothing has ever made me question whether I am doing the right thing and whether I have any power to change what I am doing.

Until now.

I am unsettled by this Charge and the things left behind. I am unsettled and unsure of why. It is not my job to care for anything other than the Charge, but it is undeniable that with the past few

Charges, my cares and my thoughts have wandered, leading me to this crossroad. The boy is worried about the future of the girl. But why should this affect me? Why? I am no longer human, so I should just carry on with my task. Carry on and move on. Like the thousands of times before this.

Annika touches my hand and a chill shoots through me. Her fingers are icy cold. I do not look at her. "But I can't move on," I say.

"This is not about you," she says in a whisper as cold as her touch. "This is not about what you couldn't or didn't do."

I rarely hear words from my two companions, so when they choose to speak, I know I should treat their words like treasure. But as valuable as treasure is, sometimes, it's best to leave it buried. Unfound. Or unheard. I raise my head and see four walls around us. The walls are covered in posters and pages torn out of magazines... groups of teenage boys posing above words like BEAT STREET and MOOV4U. The visible part of the walls are covered in fist-sized holes and peeling paint. The floor is covered with stuffed animals and garbage: empty potato chip bags and soda cans, clumps of dust and hairballs the size of snowballs. A lava lamp by the bed is knocked over, its bottle on the floor with the garbage.

Lar releases Jacks from his embrace and the world we are now in opens up to us all. "This is Suze's room," Jacks says. "This is..."

"Damn-it, Susan! Get out of there, or I'll..."

"Oh God," Jacks says. "Oh God, no."

We turn to face a closet door and a man with a red face. "I'll break the door down," the man spits. He shakes the closet door handle and pulls at the door, but it won't open. He steps back and with feigned calmness says, "I just want to talk to you, honey. Everything is okay."

"Go away," a terrified voice yells from inside the closet. "Leave me alone. I've already called the police. There's nothing more you can do to me."

Jacks slips out from our circle and runs at the man. "Get away from her he screams!" He swings his arms at the man, but his

words and his actions go unnoticed. Jacks is new to this existence. He is unaware of what it takes to affect the living world.

A woman appears at the bedroom door. "Maybe we should go," she says.

"Go? Go where?" the man screams...his words being spit from his mouth like venom. "If she's telling the truth, we can't get far enough away from here. They'll find us easily. How stupid are you?"

"I told you not to call me stupid," the woman says.

"This whole situation is stupid," the man says. "And it's ending now."

He steps back from the closet and lowers his shoulder.

"Stop him!" Jacks yells. At us. Or at the woman in the doorway. I cannot tell. "Mom...why are you letting him do this? Why?"

The man sucks in a series of quick breaths and runs at the door. When his shoulder hits the door, a piece of wood molding by the handle snaps off and the door pops open. Screams fill the room.

Jacks and Susan, the poor girl in the closet.

Screaming.

FIVE

Brothers. Sisters.

Brothers and sisters.

Jacks and Suze.

Annika and Risto.

As an older sibling, we have inherent obligations we must fulfill. But we are never taught about these obligations. They are instinctual. Male or female, it doesn't matter what sex you are...what matters is age. You are older, therefore wiser. It is your obligation to look after your younger sibling. To keep them safe and innocent. The irony is, you never had someone look after you the same way. A parent's role is to keep you fed and to keep a roof over your head. But to get the food and the roof, a parent must work. This work steals the parent away from many of the obligations older siblings are stuck with. This work sometimes steals the parents away from everything.

Vodka stole my father from his life and from ours, except when he needed an outlet to vent his frustrations. When he stomped through the house knocking over chairs and smashing mirrors with

his fist, I knew we had to leave. It didn't matter what time it was, or how cold it was. I may have only been half an hour older than Annika, but I knew it was my duty to keep her safe. And I was always ready to die to do it.

It was an extremely cold night in early December, during our eighth year of life, when my older-sibling instinct kicked in for the first time. It burned through me like a wick as Tiili screamed our names. Cursed us for ruining him. I quickly helped Annika into her winter clothing then got into mine. I filled a sack with the blankets off our beds, some leftover makkara (Finnish sausage), a box of matches and a few old books. And I hustled us away from the rumbling floors and shaking doors as fast as I could. We would not be caught in the coming storm. I promised her that.

The cold froze the tears to our cheeks. It froze our eyelids shut. But it did not stop us from escaping Tiili's wrath. We ran for half an hour without stopping. We ran through the streets of Rovaniemi and up into the forests outside the city. We fought our way through snow piled two feet high, snow that went up to our waist when it collapsed beneath our weight. We pulled each other out of the snow dozens of times. In the end, our drunken father didn't stop us...exhaustion did. Our legs turned to jelly at the same time, dropping us onto the snow. I found only enough energy to light a match. In that tiny sliver of light the match made, I saw shelter in a small cave. It was crudely dug out of a hillside, underneath a large rock in the hill, I could only assume by children during summer games of hide and seek and bullet-less wars. We crawled on our hands and knees to the cave and we wept and shivered for what seemed like hours, but I am sure was only minutes. Time, like us, was too frozen to move forward.

"I'm so cold," Annika said at some point, her tiny voice barely louder than the sound of the snow hitting the ground. "I can't feel my fingers."

I pulled off her gloves and blew on her hands. "We can't stay here," she said. "We'll freeze to death."

"We can't go home, either," I said. "He'll hurt us."

Silence for several seconds and then her tiny voice again. “I think I’d rather be hurt than be dead.”

Her words stung. “We’ll stay here a few hours,” I said and pulled the blankets out of the sack. “We’ll stay here until the poison inside of him wears off.”

“Even with the blankets, we’ll freeze, Risto.”

I remembered the books. “No, we won’t,” I said. “Wrap yourself tight in the blankets and conserve your energy. I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t leave me, Risto.”

“I’m just going to find some dry wood.”

“It’s winter, Risto. Nothing is dry.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I ignored her pleas and slipped out from under the rocky overhang. She was right, finding anything dry was going to be a challenge, but if I was going to keep us alive through the night, I needed to try. We were eight years old. Logical thinking was still forming in our brains. Had I been a few years older, I would have just marched us to a neighbour’s home, or the police. But right now, I was all about getting a fire started. I was about protecting Annika from the mythical monster Tiili. I fought my way through the snow, shaking out tree branches, looking for little areas protected from the elements. As I moved further and further away from Annika, a new sound matched the sound of my footsteps crunching the snow underneath them: the sound of clapping. The gods, they were applauding my effort...my every laboured step. And their strange clapping sound got louder as I stepped out from the trees...and into a fantasy.

I was standing on the summit of yet another of Northern Finland’s rolling hills, hills Annika and I once endearingly termed goosebumps (or *kananliha*). This hill was higher than most of the other hills in the distance. I could only tell this, because the landscape in front of me was lit up in greens and yellows and pinks. But it wasn’t the land that was alight. It was the sky...and it was reflecting off the land. I looked up and saw it...a ghostly glow pulsating through the star-speckled night sky. The glow

twisted and turned. It reminded me of the taffy the confectioner pulled at the candy shop I sometimes stopped at on my way home from school. At times I thought I could see shapes in the glow. At times, faces. I was transfixed by the magical spectacle, which I felt was being played out for me and me alone. And as I stared upwards, my body filled with warmth. My spirit rose. Life felt wonderful again.

I didn't want to leave that spot on the hill, because I believed that if I did, the magical glow would disappear forever. So I kept looking up. And the longer I looked up, the more the thoughts of Annika and everything else faded away. I looked up, hypnotized and happy, until a loud snorting behind me brought me back to place and time. I turned, and only a few feet from me stood the largest reindeer I had ever seen. The frozen breath funneling out its nose was the colour of the glow. Its eyes were the colour of the glow. It looked at me with a turned head, like it was trying to understand what it was seeing. It took a step toward me and I took a step back. I had only ever seen reindeer behind fences or strapped to sleighs. I had never learned about their temperament.

The reindeer took two strides forward and was standing close enough to me that I could smell it. It smelled like urine and pine. I tried to step back, but it took another step and put its head into my chest. I was suddenly frozen, not by the cold, but by the fear of what this wild creature was about to do to me. But the reindeer did not attack. It nudged me and then it turned me and gently pushed me back into the forest.

It pushed me until I recognized the path I had traversed earlier. I only recognized the path by the three large rocks someone at sometime had purposely set up from largest to smallest in the center of it. Any footprints I had left in the snow of this path were now gone. The trail back to Annika was lost. But I did not worry. The memory of the Annika's location was now glowing bright in my mind.

How much time, I wondered, had I been staring up at the sky. I looked at the reindeer, hoping some sort of clarity would rise, but

the reindeer was done with me. It snorted and clomped off, back out onto the clearing and into the magic from where it had come.

I had once heard about angels from two old ladies sitting on a wooden bench in Kirkkolammen Puisto, the park where Annika and I liked to play. They said angels were always watching over us, even if we didn't believe in them. They said angels were sent by God to deliver His word and protection. I had never been in a church, and had never thought much about the words those old ladies spoke until that reindeer disappeared from my sight. They never said what form an angel took. Who's to say a reindeer couldn't be an angel? Who's to say...

I ran back to the cave where Annika was now asleep, but not dead. Her shivering, the sign of life that set my soul at ease. I was full of heat and excitement. I took her frozen hand and pulled her to her feet. The sudden movement roused her. She mumbled something about not feeling her tongue. "Forget your tongue for a minute," I shouted. "I'm going to show you something and your body, from head to toe, is going to fill with glorious warmth. Use whatever strength you have left in you and follow me. Follow me, sister. I assure you, it will be worth the pain."

She cried and cursed at me for letting her freeze. For not protecting her. For not being her angel. But she followed me. She followed me out of the trees and onto the summit of the rolling hill where the gods still clapped and the sky was still full of colour. "Look up," I said.

Annika raised her head slowly. Her eyes widened. I could see the ghostly glow, now green and yellow, cross her pupils. "Am I dreaming, Risto?"

I pinched her, but she didn't flinch, because she was still frozen. "It's really real," I said.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know."

"It's...it's beautiful."

Her cold, sad face suddenly disappeared. In the glow, I saw a smile appear. I saw colour appear that wasn't being projected from

the sky. As she stood there transfixed, I set about digging a hole in the snow about the size of a car tire. I dug the hole to the earth, which was only half a foot down. I took the books out of the sack and tore the pages from them one by one, crumpling them and tossing them into the hole. I couldn't find wood, but I had enough paper to burn to at least thaw us out. When the hole was filled with paper balls, I found the matches, shaking the box as I pulled it out of the sack. "Not yet," Annika said.

"We need warmth."

"Come here," she said and opened up her blanket, inviting me to join her in the cocoon that had been keeping her alive. "I just want to look at it a little longer. If we light a fire, I know it won't look the same. I know it."

And I knew she was right. The lights in the sky were all the warmth we needed at that moment. I cuddled up next to her and she threw the blanket around me. I tightened it around us. As we looked up at the lights in the sky, I had never felt safer in my life. I had never felt surer that everything was going to be all right. I put my arm around my sister's quivering shoulder and I cried. And she cried. And for the first time in a long time, the tears streaming from our eyes weren't tears of fear or sadness or hopelessness. They were tears of joy, brought on by the overwhelming beauty of the new world that existed right outside our front door. The new world we could resort to if our other world became too difficult to manage.

SIX

Closure is a necessary part of the human condition. To be left hanging is to be left in a place of unending mental torture. Unfortunately, death does not bring closure to the things that haven't been resolved in life. As hard as we three ghosts try to bring closure to the lives our Charges had lived, we rarely, if ever succeed.

Lar, Annika and I circle around Jacks. The screaming fades out and the flapping of kite wings replaces it. When our circle breaks apart, the walls are gone and we are on the Island.

A group of four children runs up to us and one by one, they wave at Jacks. "Come fly kites with us," says a boy with the brownest eyes.

I place my hand on Jacks' shoulder. "You'll be called forward at some point," I say, unsure of why I am speaking. "It won't be an audible voice. It'll be inside you, speaking to you from every atom of your being. Do what it says, and then you will be..."

I can't finish my sentence. The uneasiness of this situation is pulling me apart. Where Jacks will be once he is called forward is

not where he should be just yet. Where Jacks should be is at home protecting his sister before his sister becomes our next charge.

Annika's fingers fall on my arms light as raindrops, then slide off. "Finish this," she says.

"Do what it says," I say again, "and then you will be...where you are supposed to be."

Jacks looks up at me. He looks into me and sees the same thing I see looking down at him. I have never shared a moment like this with any of my charges. Annika begins to cry, and then Lar begins to cry. The anguish pouring out of me is too hard to hold back. It cuts into them.

It stings them.

I can't look at any of them any more. I turn and walk away. The volume of the flapping of kite wings and the laughing of children increases. The more distance I put between them and me, the louder it all gets. The fuzzier it gets. Like television snow and the volume button stuck on increase. Louder and louder and louder. Fuzzier and fuzzier and...

The ground below me rumbles. The light around me fades and when it is brought back up I am standing on a rumbling subway platform. The hot sun is beating down on the edge of the platform pushing commuters under awnings while they wait. Hundreds of other people brush past me en route to their wherever. I am just another face in this crowd, unnoticed, or more precisely, unseen. The name in my head is Dominique. But the name I can't get out of my head is Jacks. What devil spirit would create such an afterlife where we continue to be haunted by our failures...where we're allowed to continue to fail?

A train pulls into the stop and when the door opens, Annika is pushed out onto the platform with the dozen or so people making this their stop. She separates herself from the mob of commuters and spots me. She raises her arm and forcefully points her index finger at me. But not quite at me. She points it at something behind me. I turn and see Lar leaning up against a green pole with a telephone attached to it. Lar is slouched over. His proportions

are off. There is a hump on his back that did not exist when I saw him last.

“We’re in trouble,” Annika, now standing next to me, whispers in my ear. “We’re in grave trouble now, dear brother.”

In life, my grand dilemma, like so many others, was figuring out my true purpose. Figuring out whether or not my being alive really made a difference in the bigger picture? At first I thought I was on Earth to protect Annika. And she died. I thought it was to find a wife and take care of her. She left because I was too overbearing. After that I thought my purpose was to rescue someone in trouble. Someone I also loved dearly. She ended up hating me. It was one botched attempt after another to find my purpose. And when I died, I still didn’t have the answer. Only in death did I learn that the Universe knows our path every step of the way, but we still decide how to walk that path...a path that is a labyrinth of adventure and experience. We touch things, we talk to people, we push buttons and we stop for moments just to think. What we don’t see is what these little actions do to change the world as a whole. We don’t see how different the world would have been had we not done these things. Our purpose, therefore, is to get the world to where it is meant to be when we die. And it’s all through these itty-bitty changes we make along the way, that over the course of a lifetime, create a massive impact. We are each unique puzzle pieces, and when one is missing, the puzzle just isn’t complete. The world would not be the same had I not been in it. For better or for worse, that is the truth, and it showed me just how powerful one person can be. My actions set off the course of other’s actions. It got people to where they were supposed to be. Now I am left wondering, why does it have to be different in the afterlife?

Jacks slides out from under Lar’s jacket, hits the platform and stumbles onto his knees. Lar looks at me, and in his long pale face, my own face is reflected. I cannot fault him for acting on my emotions. We three ghosts may as well be one with the amount of time we have shared together.

There's commotion next to a man on a mobility scooter fifteen or so steps from me. The man is yelling at a young boy. The boy has a funny round head. A perfectly round head. And his hair looks like it has been glued down flat to accentuate the roundness of his head. The boy is tugging on a grocery bag in the basket on the front of the scooter. The man has both hands on the bag. He's yelling for help. He's yelling like he's being murdered. People walk by him, trying not to look at him. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was a ghost like us the way no one sees him. The boy is stretching the handles of the bag. He's committed and now that he knows no one is coming to the rescue, he brings a closed fist down on the man's hands. The man yelps and lets go of the bag, sending the boy tumbling back toward the edge of the platform. Back toward the tracks.

I know this boy will not regain his balance. I know he will fall over the edge onto the tracks and the train, which is just leaving the station, will run him over. The path Dominique walked has lead him to this moment in time. Though the only thing on my mind is Jacks, and whether or not his disappearance from the Island has been noticed, I have to pull the boy from the boy. For him. For the fact that I have never let a Charge become a Fade, one of the pour souls that isn't returned to the Island. There is a worse fate than death, and to become a Fade is it. As for the fate of the group that failed to bring their Charge in, no one knows. They are never seen on the Island again.

I unnecessarily step over a backpack lying on the ground. A tipped coffee cup. A homeless man. I am close enough to Dominique to see his eyes widen in fear as he loses the battle between keeping his balance and gravity. A lock of hair flaps away from his head, pointing out the direction he's now heading. He falls over the edge and I reach for him. He reaches out, but the hand he grabs is not mine.

The hand belongs to a man who is standing almost shoulder to shoulder with me. A man who wasn't there, and then was. He is wearing a train conductor's uniform from what looks like

the early 1900s. The rope chain from a hidden pocketwatch is swinging in motion with him as he pulls the boy's light out of the boy. The two of them steady themselves on the platform next to me as chaos erupts around us. This time...this time I can hear the squealing of the train's breaks. I can see the people in the train being thrown off their seats and into other people. People are running by in all directions, screaming. Confused. The time of day and the angle of the sun cast long shadows behind every one of them.

I step back, because this man next to me and his charge have not acknowledged my presence. If the people scrambling around the train platform could see me, they would see a man just as confused as they are. Three people step out of the crowd and approach the man and his charge as casually as they would approach a friend in a school hallway. These are his Lar and Annika. There are two women and a man. The women are dressed like doctors and the man, who might be just as tall as Lar, is wearing a basketball uniform. The words coming out of the conductor's mouth are the words I should be speaking. I whisper them in time to the movement of his lips. And then Annika, Lar and Jacks are by my side.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Annika whispers in my ear. "I have misplaced my instincts."

"I feel our instincts have been stripped from us, dear sister."

"Already?"

"Time has no bearing on anything. You and I both know that."

Dominique's physical body still lies under the wheel of the 3:45 commuter train to Glasgow. But his true being and his Bearers are now en route to the Island. Two paramedics have arrived. They lower a ladder onto the tracks. Lar suddenly pulls Jacks close to him and drops his arms over Jacks, securing the boy.

"What?" I ask.

Lar's head slowly lowers and points in the direction of the paramedics. To where their shadows are being cast. The shadows

are not right. They are growing far faster than the sun is moving. Growing toward us. Within a half-dozen feet of us. Then, with fat black arms that have peeled up off the wood platform, the shadows reach out for us.

SEVEN

Lar's story did not end with the circus, but his end with the circus brought about the end of his story on Earth. The circus was failing. Crowds had dwindled, because a new form of entertainment had started to rise in popularity: television. The anxiety running through the cast and crew of the freak show meant everyone was always on edge...always at that split second before throwing a dumbbell through a wall or riding an elephant through a crowd of circus goers. Lar couldn't tell you what day it was when it happened, only that it was close to 9pm, because that was the time the Freak Show ended. It was close to the time he could return to his tiny room in the back of the horse trailer and hide until the next night's show. A particularly vicious crowd spurred on by a far more vicious than usual Dr. Wynter Bizarro seemed to be out for literal blood on this cool night in anywhere-town USA. They were shouting, "Kill the giant! Burn him!" Lar heard these chants on a nightly basis. They were "part of the theatre," Bizarro would say. But on this night, the crowd was tossing rocks and sharp objects, like scissors and broken soda bottles. Occasionally, this *would* occur in the

past, but as was warned at the beginning of each performance, “throwing hard objects at the performers would result in the show being cancelled.” And shows had been cancelled because of such actions. But on this night, the show went on. And on. And on. It was an opened pocketknife that flew by Lar’s head and nicked his ear that made him stop biting the head off a prop cat. He spit the cotton out and stared into the crowd with those deep-set sad eyes I know so well. Confrontation was Lar’s true nightmare. His fear of inciting conflict kept him from ever opening his mouth. Kept him from ever standing up to the nightly injustices he suffered. The fear was crippling. But on this night, after years of abuse from the circus and from society, both of whom had found an outlet through him to exercise their own frustrations, Lar let go of his fear. Like a helium-filled balloon, it floated up up and away from him, never to be seen again. He stood up straight showing his true height to the cowards hiding in the dark stands. “I am a man like many of you,” he said in his gentle, unwavering voice. “The only difference is you could fit two of you in my frame. I did not choose to be this way. Just as you did not choose to be respectful of me. I understand your need to hurt something. I hurt so badly each and every night, and I often feel the only way to make that better is to hurt someone or something else.” The crowd whispered and booed. One man shouted, “Shut up and keep being a monster. That’s what I paid for. That’s what I want to see!” Lar dropped his shoulders and his head. Droplets of blood from his ear splattered onto the wood planks between his feet. The real monster in the room was hiding in the darkness beyond the stage. It had many heads and an unending evil in its soul. Lar walked off the stage past Dr. Wynter Bizarro, who was yelling, “Finish the show! Finish it or you won’t eat for a week!” The words meant nothing anymore. The threats were as empty as the circus’s bank accounts. Lar pushed over the strong man who tried to stop him. He kicked the alligator man back into a wall when he tried to stop him. He kicked open the back door to the stage and headed into the world of the real for the first time in seven years. It had to be late fall, or early spring,

because the few people still wandering around the circus grounds had their jackets on. And ghostly wisps of breath still escaped from their mouths. Each person that crossed Lar's path froze at the sight of him. In the dark, lit only by the garish circus lights, he looked like the monster the crowd, his employers and his genetics made him out to be. He ignored the open mouths and the wide eyes, and he left the circus. He did not know where he was going. He just walked and walked and walked, never once looking back. After an hour of walking, his giant nose caught a whiff of burning wood. Being that time of year, the smell of burning wasn't uncommon. Being 10pm at night, the smell of burning was uncommon. He followed the smell a block up the road where a massive Victorian home stood. Flames reached out the windows of the upper floor, like they were trying to touch the stars. Little screams rang out from all over the house. A large wrought-iron gate at the home's entranceway had a metal sign attached to it that read THE WILKES ORPHANAGE FOR ABANDONED CHILDREN. Just then the front doors flung open and a woman wearing a nightgown and nightcap ran out of the house. Three Doberman Pinchers followed closely behind her. As they stepped onto the front lawn a blast of smoke exploded out of the open doors. "They're all trapped!" the woman screamed. "Somebody please! Help my children!" There wasn't a moment of contemplation or hesitation. Lar ran past the woman and into the house. As he did, she startled at the sight of him, which caused the dogs to bark. One by one, Lar broke down bedroom doors and carried boys and girls to safety. And each time he appeared at the front door with another child in his arms, the rescued children cheered. When he was sure they were all safe, he returned to the group that was huddled on the front lawn far from the house. They were shaking and crying and staring at Lar in awe. Many had never seen a giant before, and the spectacle was more powerful than the spectacle of their home burning down in front of them. "Is everyone here, because I couldn't find anyone else?" he asked. The woman counted heads and yelled, "No. No no! Frederick is missing. Frederick!" The kids began yelling his name,

too. “Frederick!” Lar had checked the house over, but if there was still a child unaccounted for, he was going to find him. Lar ran back into the burning house. Flames had broken through the main floor windows and were tickling the flames coming out of the upper floor windows. What Lar didn’t get a chance to see was Frederick crawl out from under a large bush in the front garden where he had been relieving himself. And just as Lar ran in to save a boy who was already saved, THE WILKES ORPHANAGE FOR ABANDONED CHILDREN collapsed in on itself. Lar’s body was never recovered. It was assumed he just burned up with the furniture and the ornate picture frames and the weathered carpets. I had heard stories about this event while I was alive. Many of the survivors believed the quiet giant was an angel sent from Heaven above to spare their innocent souls. If only they knew just how right they were.

EIGHT

Lar spins around and pushes Jacks into me. “You know where to take them,” he says to Annika. They are the first words I have heard him speak in years.

Annika shakes her head, “No Lar, you need to come with us.” The shadows expand and curl overtop of Lar’s head, eclipsing the sun behind them.

“No no no,” Jacks cries. “This is my fault. Please don’t do this because of me.”

Lar smiles. “This is not only for you, my child. Now go!”

Annika grabs Jacks hand and my hand and just as the train platform fades away from our view, the shadows slap down on Lar, snuffing him from this strange existence of ours.

Forever.

When you live a full life, you start to see at a certain point that the amount you lose equals out to, or sometimes even surpasses the amount you had spent your life gaining. Friends and family start to die and fade away. Your possessions slowly disappear as you downsize and shrink. Your health starts to dwindle. Your

belief that mankind has any redeemable qualities evaporates when it proves over and over again that it does not. And worst of all, when you've reached the end and you've experienced so much loss, you find you don't really care about any of it anymore. And losing the will to care is a death unto itself. So I find it funny that in this afterlife, I care again. I care about Jacks' mission to save his sister and I care about what has happened to Lar.

I care. And it makes me hurt.

Lar not being a part of my afterlife any more makes me hurt. Hurt, I remember, is a byproduct of caring too much. I care and I hurt and I hate these corporeal emotions infecting my spirit.

And I hate that it's so dark where we now are. But it's not as dark as where we would be had we been stamped out by the shadows. I am sure of that.

"This way," Annika whispers. Her words sound like long grass blowing in the wind. The breeziness behind them masks the sadness she refuses to show.

"I know where we are," Jacks says, running ahead of Annika. "It's just through the trees."

"Yes, it is," Annika confirms.

He looks back at us occasionally to make sure we're still following him. It reminds me of a dog I once had, named Damocles, who loved to roam free, as long as my eyes were still tethered to him.

"How is this possible?" I whisper.

"You've been doing this long enough, brother," Annika says. "You should know that 'possible' holds no weight in the afterlife. Just because you can't bring me here, doesn't mean I can't bring you."

"Why haven't you done this sooner?"

"It was never my purpose to bring you here, Risto. Ever."

"This is not where I want to be, Annika."

"This is the only place to be right now."

"But I haven't been here since..."

"Shhh...shhh...I know."

Jacks has pushed through the forest and into the clearing. His awe becomes audible. "Oh my gosh," he says. "It's even more beautiful than last time."

Annika and I step through the tree line and into the place I have spent the whole of my existence, minus nine years, trying not to remember. Burying. Though this place is integral to the job we do, it is never spoken of. This place, so cursed by tragedy.

Now a curse to be a part of me for eternity.

Invisible giants paint the sky with the liquid inside of broken glowsticks. The green is so bright it makes the world below it, the world on which we now stand, look alien in nature. It was that alien green that made the night Annika died even more terrifying. Seeing its reflection dance in her glassy, lifeless eyes. Everyone telling me, "Everything was going to be alright." I saw wings in the reflection. Rising upward. I knew the truth was far from what the people around me were saying.

Jacks sits down next to a small cliff and hangs his legs over the edge. He cranes his neck up and is soon hypnotized by the movement of the vapor above us. Annika and I take a seat on each side of him. I can't bear to look up, so I close my eyes. I am at a complete loss as to what to do. That innate feeling that has driven me to where I need to be, when I need to be there, since the day I died, is gone.

"We both felt it in you," Annika whispers. "Lar only did what you would have eventually done anyways. We are all...and we are one in this, brother. Had we just continued on delivering our Charges to the Island, we would no longer be one. Slowly splitting into a million pieces by the same convictions that brought us here now. This was inevitable, brother. We would all eventually meet the shadows somewhere down the line. If not for stealing Jacks away from his fate, then for some other child. You know that is the truth. You know fate is stronger than diamonds. And breaking it is costly."

I open my eyes and lean over. My nine-year old sister is sitting next to Jacks. Her hair is tied tight in a ponytail and she's wearing

the pajamas she had on the night of her death. Her favourite pajamas. The white ones with the rose pattern on them. She loved roses. I loved her...and seeing her that way for the first time since she died reminds me just how strong that love was.

“What are we going to do, Annika?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

“I’ve lost the intuition, sweet sister. I’ve lost the thing that moves us forward.”

“I brought us here, didn’t I?” Annika asks. “Perhaps I can get us elsewhere.”

“I’m afraid that’s not how it works. I’m afraid that when you try to do that, we’ll be right back on that train platform the very second those shadows attack.”

Annika shrugs her shoulders and cranes her head up at the lights with Jacks. She starts kicking her heels against the cliff face they’re dangling over. She has momentarily reverted to her true nine-year old self again.

“Why do they call you Jacks?” she says. “I knew a Jack and even a Jackson, but Jacks...that’s the funniest name I’ve ever heard.”

Jacks doesn’t take his eyes off the entertainment in the sky. “It is a funny name, isn’t it?” he says and chuckles. “My mom, she really liked this cereal when she was a kid. It was called Apple Jacks. She always said the happiest time of her life was when she was a kid. I think she named me Jacks because she just wanted to be reminded that she was happy once.”

“That’s really sad.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Well, at least she didn’t call you Apple.”

Jacks chuckles again. “Sadly, Apple became a bit of a nickname for me. My sister and some of the girls at my school would call me Apple.”

“Girls can be so cruel, can’t they?”

“Ahhh...I never minded. There are worse things to be called than Apple.”

Annika chuckles. “I’m thinking of a few right now.”

“Me, too,” Jacks says.

They both laugh and when the laughing stops their full attention returns to the aurora borealis. They mimic each other’s mouth movements when they “Oooh” and “Ahhh” at the same time. This goes on for minutes. Or hours. Or days. I can’t keep my eyes off Annika. And as I watch her, the redness she carries in her skin slowly fades away, only to be replaced by the bluish white of frostbite and the ice crystals growing up her neck.

“Is this the night it happened?” I ask, breaking the hypnosis.

Annika shakes her head, breaking off the ice attached to her. “What are you talking about?” she asks.

“This place and time. Is it...do you always bring the charges back to the night it happened? Is that something you can do?”

“Look at it, Risto,” she says as she points at the sky.

“You know I can’t.”

“It was the most beautiful of all the nights we had ever been here. I couldn’t stop looking at it and waving at it. Trying to get someone up there to notice me. I thought...I thought maybe the Emerald City was hidden in it.”

“You know it was a trick, right? The city wasn’t actually green. The wizard made everyone who went into the city wear green-tinted glasses.”

“Risto, stop.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how that fact is still in here,” I say and tap my temple.

“I knew when I was looking into the green, it was only a matter of time before someone threw a ladder down and let me climb it. This was the night it was going to happen, and I felt safe. More safe than I had felt in years. Even safer than I felt that first night out here with you. I’m sorry, Risto. I knew it was all going to end that night and I had resigned myself to the comfort of that knowledge.”

“But, it was...none of this makes any sense.”

“Shhh shhh,” she says putting her finger up to her lips. “Tell me your plan. I know you’ve figured something out.”

“If we don’t ensure the safety of Jacks’ sister, this will all have

been for naught. If this is, in fact, Rovaniemi in 1943, then I guess we find our way to Biloxi by foot, by boat, by train...and we wait. We wait for generations until the day we are charged with bringing Jacks to the Island. And then we step off the path and we change the course.”

“Will that really work?”

“I have no idea what is possible and what isn’t anymore.”

“The shadows will never stop looking for us.”

“So we wait where there are no shadows. In basements and bunkers and underground caves. We don’t need light to see, so we wait in the dark.”

“Like ghosts?”

“I suppose so.”

NINE

Faint whimpers echo out from the forest. The whimpers get louder and are soon joined by little footsteps crunching down on the snow. Behind us, Annika approaches. But not to sit with us. She is coming to sit at the edge of the cliff and wait until the men and women of the Emerald City in the sky rescue her. Her real body slides into the exact spot where her afterlife body is sitting. It will be an hour before the hypothermia sets in and kills her. An hour before whoever is charged to bring her to the Island shows up.

“This is too much to bear, Annika.”

“It’s part of my process,” she responds. “It shows the charge that we shared the same pain...the same fate.”

“I am not one of your Charges, sister. We need to leave and find a safe spot to hide for the next seventy-five years or so.”

“I think you need to stay, Risto. You can’t hold onto this...this accident forever. If we’re going to rescue Jacks’ sister, you need to forgive yourself. You couldn’t do it during your living life and I know you haven’t done it in your afterlife. Really, it’s why we’re here right now. And you know that.”

It is why we're here, isn't it?

Imagine knowing it was going to be last time you ever did something, whether it's kiss a partner, or sleep next to a wife, or see a certain sight, or taste something extraordinary, or hug a parent or a sibling and tell them, "I love you." I've often thought about how my reaction to some of these things would have been had I known it would be my last time doing them. The kiss my wife Lenora gave me a week before she left me. I knew she was leaving at some point, but had I known that kiss would be the last, I don't think I would've let it end. We had shared a life of twenty-two years together. For a time, we were one being. I had no idea that day she went out to grab groceries and she pecked me on the lips before leaving, that would be the last time I ever felt the warmth of her body again. Just like that morning I woke up to Annika slowly dripping water out of glass onto my forehead, I had no idea that would be the last day I chased her around the house and gave her a giant bear hug when I finally caught her. Had I known, I probably would have never let her go.

Tiili punched his hand through the wall next to the calendar. It was the fifth such hole. Initially, we thought it was because we were making too much noise running around the house. But then we saw the day: December 18, 1943. The significance of December 18 wouldn't be made clear to me for another six years when I discovered a note in Tiili's bedside table after we had moved to Tampere. The note was buried under a mess of grooming supplies, metal wires and food wrappers. It simply said, "Never ever forget December 18, 1936. It's the day your life ended." It was one of the only things Tiili and I had in common: a moment in time that caused us overwhelming grief. That stopped us from truly being alive. He dealt with his by drinking and being an asshole. I, too, was an asshole. But the way I dealt with my grief was by never allowing myself to experience joy. And when it seemed like I did, it was simply an act to keep those around me from worrying. Authenticity was not my strong suit. The previous December 18 had brought out the worst in Tiili's monster, so this

year I got us into our winter clothes and hurried us out of the house. It was the Saturday before Christmas, so we spent the day in the city playing in toy stores and sneaking around candy stores, stealing the occasional piece of salmiakki to keep our energy up. We weaved in and out of merry shoppers weighed down with bags of clothes and games and fruitcake, ready to be wrapped as gifts for loved family members. We spotted a couple walking hand in hand and we followed behind them, imagining our life as their children. Annika had the most elaborate imagination. She told stories about family sauna nights and roasting makkara in the fireplace while we were all still in our robes. About hot-air balloon trips and hiking adventures to find Santa's home. The folks in front of us had no idea how rich their lives with us were. But then they disappeared from our sight and we were brought back to the cold reality of our real, present life. The past couple of years Tiili had left the house in the evening of the 18th and had not returned till later the next day. We headed home around 5pm to find the front door wide open and a Tiili sized imprint in the snow along the walkway to the house. I imagined Tiili stumbling through the door, tripping over himself and falling face down into the snow. I had found him that way more nights than I could count. But he had managed to drag himself away this time. The inside of the house felt like a freezer. How long the door had been open was anyone's guess. Our breath was visible. I was shivering. I needed to warm the house up. Warm our bodies up. It was all I could think about doing. I closed the front door and locked up. There were three locks. And one of those locks was far more important than the other two. One of those locks was put into the door the week after Annika and I first discovered the lights. The lights had become such a source of comfort for her...such medication for her anxiety and sadness...when she sleepwalked, she made her way there, wearing only her pajamas and holey socks. Luckily, Tiili would catch her each time and direct her back to bed. He had been dealing with Annika's sleepwalking since the day she could walk on her own, but it had never been as focused as it

was once we saw the lights. It was Tiili who put the lock on the door. It was Tiili who showed me where the key for the lock was kept. "Two dead bolts and a key lock," he said. "Whenever you go to bed, boy, triple check that they're all locked. Especially, the top one." Get warm. I couldn't stop thinking about that and that only. I started a fire on the hearth and put water on the boil for hot cocoa. I wrapped us in blankets and turned on the radio. For the next couple of hours we nibbled on bread, drank our cocoas and listened to Christmas carols. Despite the grey cloud hanging over the day, it was one of my favourites as a child up until then. By 9pm, our eyes had become heavy. Tiili's absence, the ethereal voices emanating through the radio speaker, and the now blazing warm house lulled us into quiet contentment that the day was going to end okay. I helped Annika up off the floor and helped her into bed. Like every night before it, I wrapped my arms around her as tight as I could and I told her I loved her and I'd see her in the morning. She returned the sentiment and I went to bed. I woke to the sound of smashing glass and Tiili's suddenly very sober voice. "Goddamnit, Annika!" he was yelling. "Where are you?" Then my door was kicked open and Tiili was above me. I smelled the poison before I saw him. It was so thick in the room I gagged. The light coming from the hallway gave his silhouette a glowing yellow outline that made him look like a specter. The ghost of Christmas future. He reached down and lifted me up out of my bed by my throat. "Where is Annika?" he asked in a terrifyingly calm voice. "She's...she's in bed, right?" I replied through clasped vocal chords. I was having trouble breathing and he could sense it, because he threw me back down on my bed. "The front door was unlocked," he said. My stomach dropped. "Did you... did you lock the third lock before you went to bed?" he asked. "Yes... no...I don't remember." I began to hyperventilate. As the tears rolled down my cheeks, my deep breaths sucked the tears into my mouth, giving the memory of the night a salty taste, which lingered through the rest of my life. "Just know this, Risto Salminen," Tiili said. "Whatever happens from here on out, it is your fault. This

will be on your conscience until the day you die. Now put some goddamned clothes on and let's go find her." We both knew where she was. As soon as she had started sleepwalking with directive, I had to disclose the site to Tiili. Beyond the intense feelings of the night and beyond the horror of the outcome, it was the tactile moments that continued to form swells of grief in me: sliding out of my pajamas and putting on daytime clothes at midnight; sliding my feet into rubber boots; turning the cold door handle; the crunch of the snow under the weight of my footsteps; the brush of tree branches against my jacket. Tiili let me lead. When I slowed down, he pushed me forward. His hand on my back. I spotted Annika through the trees. She was sitting with her legs over the little cliff, reaching toward something.

"She'll be okay," Jacks says without letting go of his gaze at the lights above.

"I am okay," Annika says. "It was always meant to happen this way. So I could find you again. So I could make other children like me feel safe. Like you made me feel as a child. You did everything you could to keep me safe, Risto. I never blamed you for any of it. You were nine-years old. A child. Don't let a slip of the mind... an overwhelming need to be more adult than you ever should have been continues to haunt you, even in the afterlife. You saved me, brother."

"But..."

A woman with wings appears in front of us. The woman is wearing an extravagant white wedding dress. The dress and her tulle veil wave around as hypnotically as the coloured vapour in the sky above her. Her wings look fake, like a movie prop. There are straps wrapped around her shoulders keeping the wings attached. But they flutter like they are a living part of her body. The woman doesn't take notice of us. She is only focused on Annika. Annika, who is now filled with freezing blood and down to a deathly five breaths a minute, reaches out to her. The ice that has formed on Annika's cheeks cracks as she smiles. And in the quietest voice I have ever heard come out of her, she says, "Hi mom."

Our mother, more beautiful than I had ever imagined her to be, reaches out and takes hold of her daughter's light. And just before Annika let's out her last breath, in that same small voice she says, "I love you, Risto." And then our mother and Annika are gone. Her body sits frozen next to us. The way I saw it when I stepped through the trees and realized I would never get a chance to hug my sweet sister again.

"I knew you were there, Risto. You've always been there for me. And now you're going to be there for Jacks' sister. And for Jacks. So tell me, brother, what do you want to do now?"

My unearthly body begins to shake uncontrollably. I don't breathe in this afterlife, but fast, short breaths suddenly shoot from my mouth. I hunch over and put my face in my hands, and I begin to cry. I cry like I have never cried before. The tears and the breath leaving my body carry with them bits of the poison that has been holding me back for an entire living life...for an entire afterlife. I cry until all the poison is out and when I lift my head up out of my hands Jacks and Annika are staring at me.

Am I the only one who has carried their grief with them into the afterlife?

"I want to save Suze," Jacks says. "She is bound for greatness, I just know it. But Jerry...he'll take that potential away from her. He's the most dangerous person I've ever met. I want to save Suze so badly."

"So do I," Annika says.

My thoughts are clear. The plastic film that had been stretched over them making them hazy for so long is gone. I feel only for Annika and Jacks and Suze. "Saving Susan is the only thing I want to do," I say. I rise up onto my feet and the others follow my lead. I can hear Tiili and the nine-year old me working our way through the forest. I can hear Tiili berating me. Condemning me. "Instead of going back," I say. "Let's go forward." And I leap off the cliff into the black abyss below. I look up and before I am completely swallowed by the darkness, I see Annika and Jacks making the same leap.

TEN

World War II is near its end, but fighting still rages on across Europe. We spend a year traveling at night, first by ship to Estonia, then by horse and buggy through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, then among German soldiers being transported through Poland and Germany. During the day, when the sun is above, casting watchful shadows behind every man, woman and child, we hunker down in the basements of blown up farmhouses and churches, or in the blown-out husks of flipped tanks and shot-down fighter planes. The rubble of these once glorious buildings and mighty machines shields us from the sun. When we reach Belgium, we are lucky enough to slip onto a decommissioned Zeppelin being flown to a field in Scotland to live out the rest of its life as a tourist attraction. Jacks can't control his laughter at the sight of the Zeppelin. "It looks like an overstuffed sausage," he decrees. "Or a fat cat with no legs. How can this be a practical way to fly?" I spend much of the flight teaching Jacks about the fallibility of the Zeppelin and why the ones remaining are all heading to museums. Despite being trapped in a linear timeline again, it doesn't wear on

us like it does on the living. We live a sort of woken hibernation. Three bears that know spring will eventually come. We relive an alternate history to the one I lived as a breathing human being in Finland and Canada. And I see firsthand that the war was so much more complicated than radio broadcasts and our leaders ever made it out to be. Everyone entangled in the war shares the same feeling: fear. I see it in their eyes, in their shaking legs, in their over-exuberant bravado. Young men across Europe, fighting on both sides submitting to a madman's ideals or a country's "duty"...too young to have taken "Thou Shall Not Kill" to heart. Goddamn the monsters that exploit that fact. We walk among so many other ghosts who died in battlefields and city streets and in concentration camps, and sadly, never found their way to the White. Unlike those lost ghosts, we have a destination and a purpose, and therefore the spaces we inhabit are not deemed haunted by the locals. "Before Biloxi, Gourock, Scotland is where we want to be," I had said the night we left Rovaniemi. I explained to Annika and Jacks the only way for us to get to America was to cross the Atlantic Ocean by boat. The most famous boat of the era, and maybe of all time, was the Queen Mary. Having been a bit of a history buff in my living life, I had recalled that when the war broke out, the Queen Mary was converted into a troopship, spending the next seven years ferrying allied soldiers to and from Europe. "Get to Scotland and get on board," I had said. "That's the plan for now."

And that's the plan in motion.

ELEVEN

It is now 1946, the month of May I think, and we have called the Queen Mary home for more than two years. Annika, Jacks and I have decided to ride the ship as long as we can. The constant flow of new faces, the nights out on the promenade deck looking up at the stars and out at whales lit by the glow of the moon, all the different nooks and crannies throughout the ship to ride out the years exploring...the consensus to stay on board the ship came early. Currently, we're on the first night of the fourth voyage transporting European war brides and their children to Canada. I have never seen such hope and such joy in the faces of the living. Where only a couple of years earlier the thought of a future was frivolous and dangerous, now it is a reality. We are among the women and children who will put roots down in every empty patch of land across Canada and the United States and will make North America the powerful continent it eventually becomes.

It's just past midnight and Annika and I are standing outside at the stern of the ship. On the Sundeck. We spend most of our nights here, looking out at the frothy wake, the stars and the moon.

We say few words to each other anymore. Most nights, the soldiers who didn't make it out of the war alive join us at the back of the Sundeck. We are not like these soldiers. We can't interact with them and they can't see us. We are true ghosts to these ghosts. But they share their stories with one another and by proximity with us. Tonight, there are three of them. Canadians. They were members of the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade and they all died during the Mediterranean campaign to liberate Italy. "Had that sub not sunk us, I think we could have made a real impact," one of the men says after reflectively looking out at the dark ocean for several minutes.

"Yeah," says another. "I was really looking forward to that fight. My grandparents are Sicilian, you know? I really wanted to get in there and fight for them. Make their home safe again."

"We did our part, boys," says the third one. "We should be proud. It's a safer world now and hopefully, this will make humans a little smarter in the future. Hopefully, the new world will be built on kindness and compassion. On helping our fellow man, instead of taking it all away from him."

The two other soldiers chuckle and one of them says, "You're a funny one, Martin. You sound like you're advertising something. You get all that, and it'll only cost the lives of thousands and thousands of dumb men. This will never stop, my friend. It'll just be dressed up in different clothes."

It's these conversations between the dead and the living that help the time pass. Each night it is a new group of soldiers, or civilians that didn't make it out of the war. Or it is a group of young women who did, nervously discussing the rest of their lives. Little slices of life so far removed from the one I lived. Though my early life was filled with violence and sadness, it came from a different place...no less traumatic, but different.

"I really thought it all went black when we died," the first soldier says. "I went to church as a kid. Sunday school. All that. But the whole thing sounded so far fetched to me. We evolved from the dirt, so it made more sense that we'd just go back to the dirt. More

oil for the cogs and wheels that turn the Earth, you know? I saw men becoming religious by the minute as we headed into battle... men who had previously scoffed at the idea of a God. But there they were looking skyward praying to keep them safe. I didn't pray to God once during my service. I watched a German soldier dig an eyeball out of a still living soldier with his bayonet. He then forced the soldier to eat his own eye. A true god would not let that type of barbarism happen. So it just re-enforced my notion that the Holy Trinity was a hoax...that we are singular. That divinity was more about the actions of the self as opposed to the actions of a greater being. But when them bodies floated back up to the surface and that white light rose up out of most of 'em...then shot up into the sky, everything changed."

"You found God?" one of the other soldiers asked.

"No. I found peace. To believe we are at once everything and then in an instant we are nothing is a heavy burden to carry around with you. Makes you constantly question whether or not life is a curse or a blessing. I mean, if you get fifty or sixty good years of life and a few years after you die, no one remembers you or talks about you, or really even cares about you anymore, unless of course, they purposely stop to think about you, then what's it all for? And fifty years from then, when those people are long gone... It's all pointless, man. I used to call humans the butt of the biggest joke the Universe ever told. But after seeing that light rise up into the sky, I knew we were anything but a joke. We are the energy that keeps that same jokester of a Universe going. That energy is us. And it is absorbed by everything, including the next generation of people who walk the Earth. Now I believe we never truly die. And that is a comfort to me."

"But what about us?" one of the other soldiers asks. "What about all the other ghosts walking around? There are thousands of them. I saw the lights leaving the dead soldiers, too. So why didn't our light go up? Why did our light reform our bodies? Why are we still walking around talking to each other? Why are we on this ship?"

“Don’t really know. Maybe we have unfinished business,” the first soldier responds. “We’ll come to realize we’re on this ship for a reason.”

The third soldier looks at the other two with wide eyes and says, “I thought I saw my wife and our baby boy on board when we first appeared. And then we were standing here having this conversation. You know, when that missile hit us, and our boat started to sink, all I could think about was Gretchen and Oscar. I think...I think we’re here to make sure they safely make it to wherever they’re going.”

“Yes, that’s it,” says the first soldier. “That must be it! Jenny and I always talked about going to Canada when the war ended. My brother and his wife are there. They have a patch of land in Winnipeg they were willing to give us to build a home on. To build a new life. Some of the men who died with us, I know they didn’t have families. Some of them were so young, I’m sure those poor bastards had never even kissed a girl. The Universe has given us all one more mission, boys, and that’s to watch our loved ones get on with their new, safe lives. Once we see that through, I’m sure our light will be dispersed to its inevitable place. I am sure of it.”

The men fade away; off to watch over their loved ones until they are confident they are safe. I had heard the soldiers’ conversation dozens of times before out of the mouths of others, with slight variations: locations of death, names and final destinations of loved ones, and of course, histories with God. And every time the ghosts realize their final purpose, Annika and I turn to each other and smile. It’s good to know where you are going, whether in life or in death.

There is a moment where only the sound of the ocean passing behind us is audible. It’s the sound of a million librarians shushing the moon, because it is so damn loud against the night. And in that moment, Jacks joins us. And we three ghosts, charged to wait out time and save a life instead of taking one, stare out at everything, and actually take the time to see what we never really saw in life. We count each star and each shade of black and blue painted into

the night. We focus on railings and screws and warning signs. The colours that make them up. The scratches in the signs. The dots of ocean water sprinkled over everything.

“About a year before I got hit by that car,” Jacks says at some point, “Suze brought home a kitten she had found in an old shoe box in an alleyway up from our house. She knew there was no way she’d ever be able to keep it, because mom hated cats...geesh, she’d make the biggest stink about her eyes and skin itching whenever there was a cat within spitting distance. Suze knew just bringing the cat in the house for a moment was a risk that could lead to serious bruises on our shins and arms, but she also knew I had never pet a cat in my life. The risk of giving me that opportunity far outweighed the repercussions.”

Jacks stops speaking. After a few seconds of listening to the gentle rumble of Mary’s engine and the water bubbling up behind it, he continues. “When Suze lifted the top off the box and the kitten’s little fluffy head poked out and its big eyes looked up at me, I almost screamed out. It was so small and so helpless. And so beautiful. It was so...something that was just so out of place in our hell world and it scared me. The same way I would have been scared had I seen it in the middle of a busy freeway trying to get to the other side. ‘Suze,’ I said, ‘what are you doing? Mom’s going to kill us when she starts itching.’ ‘I call him Hampton,’ she said. ‘Just run your finger along his back. Let him sniff you. Let him paw you. Let his little teeth gnaw on your finger. Let him do it to you and everything will be all right. I promise.’ We weren’t allowed things so tiny and so precious. Our things were scratched and missing pieces and two sizes too small. Hand me downs pulled out of dumpsters and the backs of relatives’ closets. ‘You get what you get,’ mom would say. ‘Be happy with that. Some kids don’t get anything.’ She would say that so much...‘Some kids don’t get anything.’ Anyways, the kitten seemed just as in shock to see me as I was to see him. I carefully moved my finger toward his head and he shuffled back in the box. ‘It’s okay, Hampton,’ Suze said. ‘Jacks won’t hurt you. He won’t, I promise.’ Suze’s voice eased the

kitten's fear of me. He laid his head down on the floor of the box as if to give me permission. I had never touched a kitten before. My heart was racing. I could feel it trying to jump out of my body. I had never felt fear and excitement and joy all at the same time. I gently placed my finger on the top of Hampton's head and felt him vibrate. He purred and my heart rate slowed and then...and then I disappeared. It was just me and Hampton and white. Nothing else. No one else. I felt every little hair on his head. I felt the warmth coming out of his skin. I smelled the cardboard of the shoebox on him. For the first time and only time in my life I completely lost myself in experiencing something so small. And it seemed so very big. Like everything that ever was and ever will be was contained in those few moments. And then it was over. My mom burst into my room and screamed and grabbed the box and the kitten and threw them out the window. I didn't have the energy to be shocked. I just climbed into my bed and pulled my covers over my head and spent the next hour getting beat up and yelled at. It was...It was..."

"I never got to pet a cat," Annika says steering the tone back to the light. "You were lucky to get that experience."

"We have a whole life ahead of us to experience all the small things we took for granted or didn't notice when we were alive," I say. "Other than saving Susan, it's the consolatory prize we win for being on this new journey."

Jacks looks up at me and smiles. I swear I see moonlight glaring off his teeth.

A line of light forms on the horizon. This is our cue to retreat to the lower decks of the ship, where it is impenetrable to the blazing sun that will soon pass overhead.

"Shall we?" I say.

"Before you go," a woman who is nowhere and everywhere says, "I was hoping we could take a minute or two to discuss a few things."

"Is she talking to us?" Jacks asks while scanning the boat deck. His confusion is understandable. I am thinking the same thing. For years we'd been unnoticed by other ghosts and by the Bearers

charged with bringing children to the island. Many children had died on the ship, so seeing Bearers was not uncommon. To everything but the shadows, we appeared to no longer exist.

“Are you speaking to us?” I ask.

“Over here,” she says.

The voice is now coming from the port side of the ship, where the deck chairs are set up. I walk toward the chairs and Annika and Jacks follow close behind. They stop as a shape materializes on one of the chairs. A human-sized, white cigar-like shape. I move closer as form and definition fill in the shape. It is a woman of an indiscernible age. An indiscernible race. She is wrapped in heavy plastic. Her dirty white nightgown is visible through the plastic. Her arms are crossed and pinned down with her hands clasping her shoulders. Her hair is blue and matted. And a pink flame engulfing the area where her face should be, burns outward at us. The flame splits and forms a sort of fiery mouth. “I’ve been watching you for a long time now,” she says through the flame. “Waiting for a night like this to make my presence known.”

“Who are you?” I ask.

The body wrapped in plastic remains still. Only the flame dancing around her face indicates any sort of life.

“I am the Shadow Mother,” she says. “I am she who returns balance to the Island. And right now the Island is dangerously close to tipping over. Risto and Annika Salminen, the boy must be returned, or the earth will descend into further chaos. She will fold in on herself and slowly start the process of human extinction. That will be on you. Is that something you are willing to risk?”

“The boy will be returned,” I say. “In 2020, after we right a wrong.”

“I warn you, Risto Salminen, in those intervening years you choose to hide the boy in the dark, you risk more war, wide-spread famine and genocide. Plagues and pandemics will blanket the continents. Curiosity will be replaced with apathy. And on and on. Again, is one child worth all of that destruction?”

It’s a ruse.

“I’ve lived this life already,” I say. “Your fear tactics are unjust, because those things you mention all happen anyways. I suffered through them all. The boy has nothing to do with what is inevitable.”

“Ahhh...but you’ve always had the boy, Risto Salminen,” she says. “This is a never-ending loop we are in here. Did you not take heed of what your sister said when you were sitting on the cliff in Finland where she died? She said she knew you were there sitting next to her. This all just repeats, Risto Salminen. Over and over until you stop hiding in the dark and you return the boy.”

“We will return him,” I say more emphatically. “After we save his sister.”

“As I have done many times before, I will leave you with the aforementioned consequences of your actions. That doesn’t include the consequences to you and your sister’s light. You will be snuffed out of existence just like your giant friend back on the train platform.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Because nothing ever changes, Risto Salminen. Because the girl always dies in the end. The shadows always take you before you can save her.”

“Liar!” Jacks screams and rushes at her. The flames leap out at him, touching his outstretched hands. He pulls back and screams as little pink flames burn at his fingertips. Annika rushes to him and wraps herself around him like a blanket stamping out the flames. Physical pain is not a feeling brought with us into the afterlife. I am startled by Jacks authentic reaction. But Annika is with him. She makes even the worst pain fade.

“How did you find us here? How did you know about the cliff in Finland? The train platform? If you say this is a never-ending loop, and you know how it ends, why have you not come to us sooner?”

The sun has peaked above the horizon line and small bands of light begin to unfurl over the ocean’s surface. Soon those bands of light will hit the ship’s deck. Tickle the passengers’ noses. People will

begin to wake and make their morning trek around the promenade, their morning shadows marching in front of them.

"You hide behind walls full of bullet holes, Risto Salminen," she says. "I see you moving around. I just don't know your exact position. You see, Risto Salminen, I am the one who shot the wall full of holes. And I am the one who decides. I decide who lives and who dies. I am the Universe. I am the White. I am the one who continues the cycle of life. And you, Risto Salminen...you are here because of me."

"Then why have you not stopped this yet?"

Angrily, she snaps, "I am merely a voice, Risto Salminen. I am a voice of reason and hope to some, and of warning to others. I don't know how to stop it, because it was never meant to happen. No one has ever strayed from the path."

"But I have heard rumours of disobedience, and about what happens to all those involved in that disobedience."

"You have felt rumours, Risto Salminen. Rumours placed in you by me to gain your obedience. And those rumours have always worked... until your giant removed the boy from the Island. Until your group of Bearers became susceptible to your will."

"We have to go," I say. "What we do know is real is the shadows will stop us. And they are close. This may or may not have happened all before, but this version of me has never been through it. I have no idea what will happen. No idea what the truth is. A woman wrapped in plastic with fire coming out of her face isn't going to convince me that I am to blame for the world's slow destruction."

I point downward to Annika and Jacks. Our feet drift through the wood planks of the promenade deck. Then our shins. Our knees. Our thighs. As we lower ourselves further down to the Main deck, into the Tourist Class Lounge, then into the bowels of the ship, she speaks one last time before I can't hear her anymore. "I will continue to watch you, Risto Salminen," she says. "As I always have and always will. And one of these times, the same lingering conscience that made you take the boy will make you give him back before too much damage is done. And when that conscience kicks

in...and it will, you can return, the same way you did in the past. As long as the boy is with you. But if your conscience continues to steer you along this path you now walk, trust me when I say this, it will lead you to a place where you can't hide from the shadows. You've been there before, Risto Salminen. You know you will perish. Your sister will perish. The boy will perish. And all will be right with the world again."

TWELVE

We spend the rest of the voyage huddled together in the baggage and cargo area at the front of the ship. It is a safe place where the outside light never reaches in. We do not want to see the woman in plastic ever again. Jacks insists she is an evil witch who tells tales and makes false promises to get what she wants. Like the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. But this witch's tales have stuck with me, and they pick at my remaining consciousness. None of it makes any sense. If we're in this never-ending loop, how does time continue to move forward? Am I literally holding the Earth back from its true potential? I try to stay focused on Jacks and Annika and Susan, but the poison the witch has fed me is affecting me. When the Queen Mary docks in Halifax, I rush us off the ship. We slide into the back seat of a classic Daimler Straight Eight Model DE36 Limousine that is in the car hold, and we ride it to the home of Halifax's premier Angus Macdonald. The car, a gift from the monarchy for Macdonald's recent fine hospitality, will become his touring vehicle.

And we will become wanderers once more.

It is now our third night wandering through the suburbs of Halifax. Looking for some sort of temporary permanence. When we first stepped out of the Daimler and saw the landscape, just as the sun was setting, Jacks and Annika said it was one of the most beautiful places they had ever seen. We decided then and there that if we were going to hunker down for more than seventy years, Halifax is where we'd do it. We don't know what we are looking for, we only know that when we do find it, it will be as clear as the day we can no longer see. We spent the previous two days in backyard sheds filled with lawn tools, patio furniture and half-built birdhouses. Though it wouldn't have been an inconvenience to make these sheds our home, we all agreed something with a little more life in it would be better. Why that is important to us, defies me.

"Look over there," Annika says, pointing at a plot of land with seven homes in various stages of construction. "The one that looks like a barn."

It is the most complete house of the group and it does, indeed, resemble a small barn. Even in the dark I can see the wood planks that make up its outer walls are painted red. It's a two-storey house with a gambrel roof built over the second storey. A chimney pokes out of the roof on the far left side of the house. Two windows are built into the roof. I assume these are bedrooms. The roof hangs down a foot or so over a front door at the far right side of the home. The door is also painted red. To the left of the front door is a large window that looks into a living room. There are four symmetrical cross-hatched windows built into the right side of house.

"It looks like something out of a fairy tale," Jacks says. "But the good part of the fairy tale."

"Yes, it does," I say. "Should we go inside?"

Annika and Jacks nod.

We float through the front door into a darkened hallway. The home is void of the living. But we are not alone. Voices swirl around every corner of the house. Voices of men and women and children.

They don't react to our arrival, so we know we are invisible to them. It is such a funny notion that even ghosts can be living with ghosts. A stairwell in the hallway leads to a basement. I take the lead and descend into complete darkness. Once we are downstairs, we push ourselves up against a wall and begin our wait.

Hours pass. Faint sunlight eventually appears at the top of the stairwell indicating the arrival of morning. When the sunlight reaches the third step down and goes no further, a whirlwind of voices filters into the basement. I can make out four distinct voices. They are all speaking at the same time, making the conversation sound more like gibberish at first.

"...feel it, too," one of the voices clearly says.

There is more gibberish as they all speak at the same time again.

"Brother," Annika says, "I think they feel our presence."

"No ghost has ever noticed us," I remind her. "They must be referring to something else."

A fiddle sound rises above the gibberish.

Off-key singing accompanies the music.

*"Farewell to Nova Scotia, the sea-bound coast,"
"Let your mountains dark and dreary be.
For when I am far away on the briny ocean tossed,
Will you ever heave a sigh or a wish for me?"*

The voices separate again.

"Munition ships on fire. Making for Pier 6. Good-bye..." another one of them says. "Hopefully, they get the message."

"I feel like this might be worse than they're letting on," says another.

Suddenly, more voices enter the conversation.

"...but what does Mont-Blanc mean? That's French, right," says one of them.

"I have to be at work in 10 minutes," says another. "I don't have time to sit around and watch a boat burn."

“Someone said they’re evacuating the city,” says another. “Maybe we should...”

An explosion blasts through the house. Or the sound of an explosion. With it comes a force that knocks Annika, Jacks and me back against a pile of loose hardwood flooring. We tumble to the ground and the flooring tumbles over on top of us.

And then the voices go silent. The house is still again.

“What the heck was that?” Jacks asks as he rises back up onto his feet. “Other than that witch’s burn, I didn’t think I could feel things on this side.”

“That was new for me, too,” Annika says and rises to her feet.

I rise and try to come up with some sort of explanation. Sometimes any explanation, whether right or wrong, puts minds at ease. “With a great expenditure of our light, we do have the ability to interact with the living world,” I say. “But we don’t do it, because it takes months...sometimes even years to regain the energy to continue on with our jobs. I’ve never felt anything like that from ghosts. I can only assume it’s because we walk on different plains and we are closer to the living than they are...that so much energy was released from whatever caused that explosion, it somehow carried through time and space.”

“What do you mean we can interact with the living world?” Jacks asks, suddenly forgetting what had just happened to us. “Why haven’t you mentioned that before?”

“Well,” I say a little sheepishly, “It’s not something we’re meant to do.”

“Who says? That creepy witch in the plastic bag? Have you ever moved something?”

“Other than that flooring? Yes. A few things. And I couldn’t properly take care of my Charges for days... sometimes months after.”

“Like what? What did you move?”

“I don’t know. Tree branches. Small rocks. A wine glass.”

“And it made you weak when you did it? But you always recovered?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel weak now?”

“No. There was a different kind of energy that caused that.”

Jacks’ light is glowing brighter than it has in months. It lights up the whole unfinished basement. The exposed pipes hanging from the ceiling. The moldings yet to be installed. The unpainted walls. A few mice hiding from outside predators scurry under a pile of construction garbage in a corner of the basement. Jacks walks over to the garbage and swings his arms wildly through it. “Move!” he shouts. “Move! Move! Move!”

But his arms pass through the garbage without affecting it whatsoever. Not even the sheets of paper mixed in with the garbage flutter.

“It’s not easy,” I say. “And it will weaken you. I’m not trying to scare you, Jacks. But it takes energy to make energy. Sometimes it takes a lot of energy.”

“Yeah, well I have the next seventy years to perfect it,” he says while he continues trying to move the garbage. “To be dim or invisible or whatever it is that happens to you for a few days now and then doesn’t scare me. This...this is how I’m going to save Suze, you see. This is what I’ve been waiting to figure out. She’ll live and he’ll die. I’ll push him in front of a car before he even gets a chance to touch her. Or I’ll...I’ll hit him with a hammer, or something. And he’ll hurt before he dies. He’ll hurt just like he made her hurt.”

Jacks has revealed so little to us in our years together. When words do come out of his mouth, they are usually questions about the old world we are now apart of. Why do they always listen to the radio? Why are cars so big? How do the kids not get bored when there aren’t any video games? You mean, the Internet hasn’t always been around? Things like that. There has never been a need for any sort of explanation about Susan’s predicament. We all just know we have to do what we’re doing. And that has always been enough for Annika and me. But like Lar and his tale, little bits and pieces are sure to come out over the years. And when we reach our final

destination, a full story will have been told. And whatever it is we do to save Susan or to damn us all, that story will be brought to its proper conclusion.

It is three days later and Jacks is still waving his arms through everything he can, trying to make some sort of connection. At 9am, just like at 9am yesterday morning and 9am the morning before that, the ghosts reappear and say all the same things before the sound of the explosion rips through the house. On this morning, though, real feet shuffle around on the main floor after the explosion. Voices from the living world swirl through the house. There is a resonance in the voice of the living that sets it apart from the dead. It's like the sound coming out of a jar filled with bees, with holes poked through the lid of the jar. Buzzing with anticipation and frustration and consternation. The basement lights turn on and two children run down the stairs. A boy, maybe eleven or twelve years old, and a girl who looks to be eight or nine. Both are wearing heavy jackets, which seem excessive for mid-spring weather. But I have never lived in Halifax in the spring, so who am I to say?

"Ooh, it's creepy down here," says the girl.

"Yeah," says the boy. "I bet there are ghosts."

"Don't say that, Billy. I don't think I can live here if there are ghosts."

"What do you think?" says a man from the top of the stairs.

"It's creepy," the girl shouts back at him.

Her name is Candice. Her name is glowing in my head like all the other Charges' names glowed when I was tasked to bring them to the Island. It has to be a trick. The Universal hag making a ploy to get me back. But I can't shake the name.

Candice.

The man steps down six of the stairs. He is wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses, a tan overcoat and a scarf. He is followed by a woman in a fur coat with her hair up in a bun of braids. They stand on the same step holding hands. "But it isn't quite finished yet," says the man. "You're just seeing the skeleton of what's eventually going to be here. Skeletons are always creepy."

“It’s a mess down here,” says the woman. “What’s with all the garbage? And why didn’t they stack the flooring a little nicer?”

“The house is still being built, Joy,” the man says. “Two weeks from now, I’m sure everything will be clean and pristine.”

“Well I hope so,” Joy says. “Because I did not pay all this money to move into a filthy house. And I will not live in another house with ghosts.”

“Joy, you know there are no such thing as ghosts,” the man says and nudges her with his elbow.

“You know that’s not true, Dad,” Billy says.

“With the floor down and the walls up and painted, this will definitely become the most popular place the house, I am sure of it,” Billy’s father says.

“Can we put the television down here?” Billy asks.

His father laughs. “I think we’ll keep it in the living room where we can all enjoy it together,” he says.

“If the television is in the living room,” Joy says, “then that will be the most popular room in the house.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

The parents chuckle and head back upstairs. As they ascend the stairs, I can hear the mother, Joy, speaking in a hushed tone. “If there are ghosts, Jim,” she says, “I will get this house cleaned.”

“It’s a brand-new house,” Jim replies. “A house needs a history before it has ghosts. Let’s not even think about that right now.”

When they reach the top of the stairs, Joy shouts, “Billy! Candice! Let’s go! We’ll be back soon.”

THIRTEEN

Over the next couple of weeks tradesmen of all types parade through the home tightening pipes and screws, touching up paint and installing cabinet doors. The floor goes down in the basement and the walls and ceiling go up, and it goes from dark and creepy to bright and cheery. The garbage is removed and the mice are killed, and for one glorious day the house is the most perfect it has been and ever will ever be. During the evening we walk every square foot of the house, inspecting it. There are no scratches in the paint. No scuffs on the floors. No mildew in the bathrooms. No dirt on the windows. No skeletons in the closet. I have never seen such a perfect home in all my time on earth, while alive or dead. Even the ghosts seem taken aback, because they have stayed silent since the last tradesman left. I choose not to bring up my knowledge of the young girl Candice to Annika and Jacks. I don't want them to think we are compromised.

In the kitchen, blinds are pulled down to the halfway point of the window. From outside, I imagine it looks like the house is trying to wink. Jacks floats over to the window and futilely swings his

arms through the blinds. His frustration has increased tenfold since the day he got it into his head he could use his physical presence to save Susan. I so want to give him direction. I so want him to know how to focus his energy on one little point of his being and invoke connection through restraint, but I continue to hold back. And Annika never questions my response, because she feels what I feel. In the living world, I would be called selfish or cruel for not helping a child. But these are not childish things we are reaching for. If a ten-year old had asked me how to hot-wire a car or load a shotgun while I was alive, I surely would have said no, too.

Around midnight, the deadbolt on the front door unlocks and the door creaks open. We float into the front hallway to see who's visiting at such a late hour. A man is standing in the doorway, but he doesn't enter the house. He is a large man both in height and in girth, carrying a silhouette on him that better fits a football guard, or a walk-in refrigerator. The only available light comes from the moon, which is directly behind him. It casts a yellowish-white skin of light around his silhouette. A foreboding darkness to the whole experience gives me the equivalent of chills. He is carrying a briefcase with his left hand and a broom with his right hand. He leans the broom up against the outer wall of the house and slowly runs his index finger the length of the doorframe. He then holds his finger up in front of the space where his eyes should be and inspects it.

"He's alive," Jacks says. "But do you feel it? His energy...it's... it's like the energy we put off. It's like how I feel around you and Annika."

"Yes," Annika says. "I feel it, too. Right now everything in me is telling me to get away from this...this person."

"I really don't like this at all," Jacks says. "I'm going downstairs till he leaves."

"I think I'll join you," Annika says.

They float down through the floorboards, leaving me alone with the man in the doorway. The man carries with him not just a broom and a briefcase, but also the essence of the dead. I have

never felt a human presence like this. I don't sense evil in him, but I do sense a shared purpose: collection and redistribution.

He wipes his finger on his pants and steps through the doorway into the entrance hall. He lowers the briefcase to the ground and retrieves the broom. Before closing the front door, he turns profile to me. The moonlight accentuates a long, cone-shaped nose, which he starts moving around like a divining rod. He lifts it up and points it at the ceiling, then down at the floor, where Annika and Jacks had just slid through. He takes in long, deep breaths through the nose, but it isn't to smell. It's more like meditative breathing. Six breaths, and then the nose points in my direction. I can't see his eyes, but he is looking directly at me. Into me. He knows I am standing here.

"My name is Delron Baumgartner," he whispers. "I have been employed by the Cartwrights to clean their new home. My intention is not to send you to your next plain of existence, but to simply remove you from this house and to set up a barrier so you cannot re-enter it. You will be free to move on to any other house you desire."

He sucks in another deep breath through his nose and holds it. "I count eight different entities in this home," he says and lets the breath out. "But three are unlike the other five. Three of these entities...I have never crossed paths with their likes before. It's almost like the energy they put off has a thickness to it. It's more tangible. Syrupy. And I can tell, sir, you are one of these thicker spirits. I wish I had more time, so we could converse. I cannot downplay how intrigued I am by you right now. But, alas, I am not being paid to be intrigued."

With that, he breaks his hidden gaze and picks up his briefcase. He walks into the living room and lays the briefcase down flat on the floor and lays the broom next to it. I hear the latches pop. What's in the briefcase? I want to follow him, but I sense this is not a man to mess with. I slide through the floor into the basement. Where Jacks and Annika are standing silently against the back wall. The concern they wear on their person looks heavier than the winter jackets the Cartwright kids had been wearing a couple of weeks back.

“What is he?” Jacks asks. “Because...because, you know, I could see him touching things and moving things, but I couldn’t sense a soul in him.”

“He is alive. But I think he can see the dead. Or reach them. I don’t know how. He saw me. I am sure of it. He was talking to me. *To me*. It’s almost like he takes his soul out of the living world and projects it into the world in-between.”

“What’s he doing now, Risto?” Annika asks.

“I think...I think he’s trying to get us out of this house.”

“Can he do that?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Should we wait to find out?”

Jacks moans and starts clawing at his neck. “Get it off!” he screams. “Get it off! Get it off!”

“What’s happening, Jacks?” Annika asks concerned, but without that inflection living human concern carries with it.

“It’s like...it’s like someone just tied a rope around my neck and they’re...and they’re...”

Jacks levitates and is quickly pulled from the basement. If the situation was set up to be comical, he would have looked like an unclashed balloon shooting up the stairs as it loses all its air.

“What’s happening, Risto?” Annika says worriedly. “I feel the rope, too. Risto, I feel it...”

And then Annika is gone.

Before I can be snatched, I voluntarily float upstairs to the living room. There are eight burning candles lined up in two rows of four. Wax drips down onto the new hardwood. The candles are in the center of a circle of polished river rocks placed around them. A different ghost hovers in the air above each candle. Each candle, except for one.

Jacks and Annika are in the front row suspended in a frozen state. Next to them is a portly man in tattered overalls. Dirt and grime cover him from balding head to steel-booted toe. Behind them are three more men and one woman. They are all dressed in clothing from a generation or two back. It is the clothing of lower-

class laborers and city folk. They, too, are in a frozen state.

“Ahhh, the one from the hallway,” Delron Baumgartner mumbles as he winds the key on the back of an alarm clock. He places the alarm clock on the ground next to his open briefcase, picks up a bundle of sage and lights it with a match he had clasped between his teeth. Then he steps in front of the two lines of ghosts and says, “I have saved a spot next to the other two that are just like you.”

He points to the empty circle and the invisible rope tightens around my neck. Tightens. Tightens. This man, Delron, is not like normal sentient men. He straddles two plains of existence, and as intrigued as he is of me, I am just as intrigued of him. Something tugs the rope and I am lifted off the ground. Unlike the other seven ghosts, I believe it is my initial interaction with Delron that sets us apart. That gives me an in. If he sensed me there, could he have heard me had I spoke?

“How are you doing this?” I ask.

Delron startles and drops the burning sage. He stamps out the glowing end of the sage, and the rope around my neck loosens. When he’s sure the sage is extinguished, he looks up at me and says, “Say that again.”

“You heard me. I said, how are you doing this?”

“Well now, this just went from intriguing to truly fascinating. I have only ever spoken at spirits. Never have I spoken words with a spirit. You and the two children...you’re so different. Why?”

I lower myself to the ground and walk over to Delron. I am standing next to him looking up into the eyes I couldn’t see earlier. Their size is relative to his massive frame. Two fried eggs with yellowed pupils. In the living world I would fear what a man this size could do to me with a single blow. But here, his fists have little relevance. Here, it is about words and ritual. And in some circles, those things can be even more frightening than fists. “I will show no respect to someone who shows so little respect for the dead,” I say. “Answer my question first, and perhaps this experience can be made a little more cordial.”

In my time among the living, I was known to put up a few good battles with my words. Being so meek in appearance and disposition, the words were all I had to exert any sort of power, if need be. Some of those words cut so deep, I probably should have been charged with assault. Oh those words. I had forgotten about them.

“I died,” Delron says. Without hesitation.

“You’re dead?”

“No!” he says. “I died. I swerved my car to miss a dog that had run out in the road and I went off a small embankment into a lake. The car filled with water and I was dead for seven minutes and thirty-two seconds. And then a woman named Margaret brought me back to life after her husband and another passerby jumped into the lake and pulled me from the car. And ever since then, I’ve had this ability to straddle the world of the living and the world of the dead.”

“Fascinating.”

“It is, right? Funny this, but I was an accountant before I died. I should have been a wrestler or something of that sort, but I loved numbers. Well the numbers didn’t have anything left to give me after I died, except reminders of the sad man I used to be. Though I don’t see any of you, I feel your shape. Your presence. And when I returned home after a few days in the hospital I saw a dozen spirits in my home. Because I wasn’t a believer, in the past I passed their presence off as the natural effects of an aging house. This allowed me to sleep at night. But they were bumping into me now. I could sense how tall they were. How wide they were. If they were men, women or children. I talked to some gypsies that were traveling through my town and they gave me incantations and techniques to rid the spirits from my home...and to keep them away from my home. These gypsies told me only a handful of the living had the ability to use the techniques effectively. I was now one of these handfuls. Believe me when I tell you I don’t hurt the spirits. I just make them leave the space they are haunting and ensure that they are never able to return to that space.”

He stops talking and awaits my response. But the content of the conversation so far has left me speechless. Those words I was once used so readily as artillery...as protection...are now nowhere to be found.

"I have been candid with you, sir," he says, breaking my silence. "Please be candid with me. You and the two children...why are you so much more tangible, so to speak, than the others?"

"Because...because we are part of a small group of people who eventually died and who, for one reason or another, were given a purpose in the afterlife. We are tasked by the higher power, whatever that is to you, to deliver the souls of dead children to their next life."

"Wait," Delron says. "Just children?"

"Yes."

"I see. But there are no children living here right now."

"We're not here to haunt. We are here to wait."

"For the Cartwright's children?"

"No, we're here to wait until the year 2020. Till the boy who is with me dies."

"Well now I am super flummoxed. Isn't he already dead?"

"Hmmm, yes," I say. I had never contemplated trying to explain life in the afterlife for a wayward Bearer. So much of it, I still don't understand. "Like the living," I continue saying, "we are in a constant forward movement, moving from one Charge to the next, from one tragedy to the next. However, each group of us has one entity that is like a warm blanket on a cold night for the recently deceased children. An extra bit of comfort in a most uncomfortable and confusing time. And they are given the ability to do things the others in the group cannot do. In our group, the young girl can return to one specific place and time. It is that moment in time that brought her the most comfort, and made her feel most safe when she was a child. But the thing is, no matter how long she is in that space and time, she always returns to the second she left. To the very spot she left. We cannot go back to that second or that spot, or we will be permanently stamped out of all existence."

“Now that truly is fascinating. There really is a whole side of death no one knows about, even those of us who have seen the other side. You know, when I died, I saw the white light others who had died and returned noted seeing. I heard the voices of the people who had passed from my life. They were inviting me into the light. It was warm and all I wanted was to go into it. What happens to us when we die? For real? What if we kill ourselves? Is there a Hell?”

“The White is the end all, be all,” I say, knowing so little about the truth of it. “When we die after puberty, the White is where we all go. It doesn’t matter your race, your beliefs, or status. The only Hell that exists is in life itself. Hell is in our heads. It’s our brains always at war with our hearts. Always wanting more. More money. More power. More sex. More attention. Never content with what we have at the time. That is Hell.”

That is the truth.

“Interesting. I sense a lot of good in you. I also sense a lot of the conflict within you right now. The conflict encompassing your reason for being...for being here.”

Good is a misnomer for what actually slithers through me. Conflict, yes, but good is better used to describe the durability of shingles on a roof or the flavour of a slightly overdone steak. Am I a good person? I rarely heard the word ‘hyvä’ in my home growing up. Tiili used it only to emphasize his disappointment in God, in his fate or in his last living child. Good God, why do you continue to make me suffer. I bought a man lunch once...a man who was slumped up against a light pole with a water-drenched square of cardboard in his lap that read, ‘Is this all there is?’ I took him to the most expensive restaurant in the area and gave him free reign. He ordered a bowl of French onion soup, a piece of cherry pie, a la mode, and a coffee. I didn’t order anything. We sat in the restaurant for hours getting stares and glares from patrons and staff. He didn’t say a word other than the words he used to order the food. And when he wanted more coffee. Only when I realized I was late for an appointment with my divorce lawyer, I suggested

we leave. Outside the restaurant I gave him a twenty-dollar bill and wished him well on his journey. He didn't thank me, but he did whisper under his breath as he walked away, 'There is tomorrow.'

"I don't sense anything in you, Delron Baumgartner."

"Hmm. Why this house?" Delron asks.

"It feels like the right place to be until we need to be elsewhere."

Delron steps away from me and points his long nose toward the ghost in overalls. "There are many wonderful homes in this town," he says. "I am contracted to clean this house. It is not personal. It never has been."

"I understand."

"That being said, I have never done this with spirits like you. The barrier may not be strong enough to hold you out. Though I have a million more questions, time is a factor in what I do. I wish you nothing but peace on your journey."

He picks up the sagebrush and relights it with a match from his pocket. Thick smoke fills the room. When the room disappears completely in the smoke, Delron speaks. "Whether thou art a ghost that has come from the earth, or a phantom of night that has no couch," he says, only the red glow of the burning sage visible as it traces circles in the grey. "Or a woman that hath died a virgin, or a man that hath died unmarried, or one that lieth dead in the desert, or one that hath been torn from a date palm, or one that cometh through the waters on a boat, or a ghost unburied, or a ghost that none careth for..."

And at those words, the invisible rope tightens around my neck again. It drags me off the ground and above the empty circle of river stones. Because I don't breathe, it doesn't choke me. But it does cut off my ability to speak.

"Get thee hence!" Delron shouts. "Place not thy head upon his head. Place not thy hand upon his hand. Place not thy foot upon his foot. With thy hand touch him not. Into the house enter thou not! Through the fence break thou not. Into the chamber enter though not. May the man, the son of his god, become pure."

Become clean. Become bright! May his welfare be secured at the kindly hands of the gods.”

The candle below me is half melted now. The flickering flames paint the walls with dozens of distorted versions of Delron’s shadow. Should I fear these shadows? If not, what makes them different than the shadows outside? My mind wanders. If I were visible, I would look like an otherworldly scientific specimen trapped in ethereal formaldehyde. Or a moth pinned to a board with a descriptor below me that reads, “Christopher Samms (AKA Risto Salminen, Collector of Dead Children. Evolved from Sad Child to Sad Man to Sad Spirit.” If Delron’s shadows are to be feared, now is the time for them to reach out and grab me.

“I am cleansing this house!” Delron shouts. “All spirits negative and neutral must leave and must never return.”

He begins an incomprehensible chant and retrieves an armful of twigs and feathers from his briefcase. He tosses them around the room one by one. And as time passes by and the candles blink out and morning light appears on the horizon line, which is now visible through the living room window, a wall is constructed. But this is not a wall built with bricks and cement. This is a wall building up in my conscience, constructed of words and feelings. “The house at 3310 Michaels Street is not a safe house for you. The house at 3310 Michaels Street is a house that eats the dead. It is not the house for you...” And dread fills me when I think about the house. It is similar to the dread I feel when I think about the shadows. Everything in me says, STAY AWAY from this house! Stay away or you will suffer immensely.

The louder Delron’s chant gets, the more I want to flee and never return. Not just from the house, but from this godforsaken city as well. The alarm bell rings and creates a cacophony of discomfiting sounds. And the first ray of sunlight stretches through the window and gives the river stones along the front a gleam. The more they sparkle, the more we evaporate. Like water on cement on a hot day. Out of the corner of my eye I see the ghost next to Annika disappear completely. Our light dims much slower than the other

ghosts, but our lights are no match for Delron's final words. "This house is a clean house!" he shouts. "This house...is a clean house!" These words barrel into us like a freight train with no brakes and toss us out of the living room and onto the front lawn with the other ghosts.

"Not here," one of the ghosts says.

"It's all wrong," says another.

"There are better spots to see the fireworks," says another.

And then they are gone.

Delron is visible through the window. After cleaning the house in the metaphysical sense, he begins physically cleaning it. We're still under his spell, but this has nothing to do with incantations and chants. He is dancing around the living room picking up the rocks as he spins. Then, with a putty knife, he lifts and scrapes the hardened candle wax off the floor. When he is happy with his progress, he sweeps the floor, dipping the broom now and then like it's a dance partner. When he's done sweeping, he gives the floor a shine with a shammy, some floor wax and some old-fashioned elbow grease. Humans, no matter their background or disposition always maintain the ability to surprise.

"We need to get inside, now!" Jacks says, the first to break from our excommunication daze. "Look! Look! Look!"

We had failed to notice the quickly rising sun. And the shadows stretching out behind trees and power poles and cats wandering to and fro. Do the inanimate and the inhuman outdoors bring life to the shadows sent to find us? There was no life in the shadows cast indoors. Who truly makes the rules? When Delron finishes cleaning the house and comes outside, the shadow he casts will surely turn on us. That I do know. "But we've been banished from this house," I say.

"Then let's move on," Annika says. "Besides, I feel nothing but dread when I think about going back in there."

"Me, too," Jacks says.

"But don't you also feel that dread dissipating? The longer we stand here, the more it doesn't feel like such a rotten apple. Don't

you feel like this is where we need to be? Like it's the safest spot in the universe for us? There is nothing that says we can't try to go back in."

"Except for that whole night of being exorcised from the house," Annika says. "Why even bother trying. There are homes everywhere. Why this one, Risto?"

"It has something to do with the children. When they were in the basement a couple of weeks ago, I felt a tinge of that intuition I thought I had lost. It was telling me to be here for them. For the girl. I don't know what it meant, but it has been so long since I've felt that. I've been withholding from the two of you and for that, I apologize. I don't know why I didn't tell you. But I can't just walk away from this."

"You've given up so much for me," Jacks says. "I say we go back into the house. I say we go fast, too, because shadows are peaking out from behind their owners. They're looking for us. I know it. There's really no time for us to go anywhere else."

The shadows cast by trees remain inanimate. The shadows cast by cats and passing vehicles remain inanimate. Far down the road a jogger appears. Just a speck at first. Then a fully formed man. Only I can see him the way I am positioned on the Cartwright's lawn. Only I can see the jogger's manic shadow. But it's not on the pavement where most shadows reside. This shadow sways above the jogger's head like a palm tree in a hurricane.

"Jacks is right," I say to Annika. "The time to act has passed us by. If we don't return to the Cartwright's home, we will have to deal with that."

I point at the jogger and the ominous shadow above him. Annika and Jacks spin around to see what I am pointing at. "The only choice we have is to take our chances."

"It appears so," Annika says and floats toward the house indifferent to the predicament. The indifference changes to discomfort the closer she gets to the house. She stops near the front entrance and looks back at me. "This isn't going to be easy, brother. This house eats the dead and right now I feel like there

are teeth taking bites out of me.”

Jacks stops next to her and buckles over. “It hurts,” he says. “Nothing is supposed to hurt. This isn’t right.”

“Keep moving forward,” I say. “It’s a trick. A magic trick to keep us at bay. We are not like normal spirits. We still have our wits. We still have our ability to fight.”

“Then you go first,” Annika says.

I float up to the front door and feel the pain. Like I’ve been thrown in a tank of piranha. They’re swarming my body. Pulling the skin off me. Picking the meat off my bones. It is an extraordinary pain. But it’s not real.

“It’s not real,” I say and step through the front door just as Delron opens it and steps out onto the front patio.

“Reality really is what we make of it,” Delron says, as though he has heard my words. He chuckles and with briefcase and broom in hand, walks away from us without looking back.

FOURTEEN

The Cartwright's arrive a week later, a caravan of trailers, vans and sycophants following close behind them. The vehicles transport the Cartwright's world of furniture, toys, clothing, mementos, utensils and knick-knacks. Jim and Joy must have enlisted the help of every family member and friend they know. I watch from the living room window as Jim and another man everyone calls Big Doug, disappear into one of the trailers and emerge a minute later carrying a charcoal barbecue. Big Doug takes the barbecue and carries it like an injured fawn to the backyard. When he's sure it's safe, he puts the barbecue down and catches an apron tossed to him through the open kitchen window. "Your mess hall chef reporting for duty," he declares in a booming voice that sounds like it's being pushed through a megaphone.

While Big Doug barbecues hamburgers and hot dogs, the Cartwright's children and the children of the others in the move-in party, run wildly around the backyard playing tag and hide and seek. The life contained in such a small circumference is captivating. The joy everyone exudes...it's still so foreign to me. A language I know

by sound, but a language I can't converse in. I am so programmed to believe joy like this cannot last. Prolonged happiness is a myth. It's not that I am a fatalist or a pessimist; I just never experienced prolonged happiness while living. Or dead. People would tell me to quit being a curmudgeon. To allow happiness to take me over. To stop being, "So god-damned negative!" But as hard as I tried, the Universe always found a way to knock me back down onto my ass and continue to prove the myth of happiness and joy was just that...

A myth.

A cloud of smoke rises up from the barbecue and swallows Big Doug. "Nobody worry about a thing," he booms. "I've got this under control." As he bats at the smoke with a dishtowel, the Cartwright's and their remaining entourage finish the move. They pile boxes up in hallways and bedrooms. They carefully navigate couches and bedframes and tables through doorways and away from the pristine walls. They swear and laugh and shake hands when seemingly impossible tasks are completed without damage or injury. I walk in and around the beautiful chaos and try to absorb the energy pouring off them all. Jacks is now with me, his eyes darting from person to person. "I've never seen so many happy people in one place," he says. "It almost seems fake. Is it fake?"

"I don't really know," I say. Because I really don't. "I strived for this kind of thing my whole life. I was told over and over it could be real. For me. For anyone. But my grief...it kept me on a path I didn't want to be following. And that miserable path just went on and on through life and into the afterlife."

Oh that path.

It was a thorny path of self-destruction, where I'd get one step closer to the happy wife happy life, white-picket-fence fantasy and I would throw a grenade filled with those sharpened words at it. In the carnage I would find my partner, my home, my dog, my life all gone. Just because I thought I was more comfortable being sad. Until I was actually sad again. "This is a circus attraction," I

continue saying. “A freakshow of normals. And I can’t take my eyes off of them. I think what we’re seeing right now is the real thing.”

“Why does it make me feel more uneasy than the witch on the boat?”

“Because we fear what we don’t understand.”

“I didn’t understand her one bit.”

“Yes, but you understood that she was not telling us the truth. That she was a trickster. This here in front of us...”

“I hate this,” he says. “I hate that I got so little of this in my life. And I extra hate how you’re always so darn negative. I don’t get tired anymore, but it’s exhausting listening to you. I’m going back down to the basement to sit with Annika. There’s no one else down there yet.”

He is gone before I can say another word. His words leave me no less hollow than I was before he said them.

The celebrating and unpacking and playing carry on late into the night. When the kids are asleep, Big Doug switches vocation to bartender. Within an hour the eight adults congregating in the kitchen and living room are sloppy drunk. A little after one in the morning, the moving party ends. Sleeping children are carried out to cars and laid gently on back seats, last hugs and congratulations are given, and everyone leaves for their own homes and their own little lives.

Jim and Joy sit down together on the couch in the living room and silently take in their new surroundings. Finally uninfluenced by the opinions of the others, Jim slurs, “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“It’s what I’ve always wanted,” Joy responds and comfortably slumps over into Jim’s shoulder. Jim shimmies out his arm and slides it behind Joy’s neck and over her far shoulder.

“Me too. I love you so much, Joy,” he says before his eyes close and his words are replaced with snores. The two pass out at the same time, legitimately in love and content. So often we tell people we love them so they won’t leave us. So often we beat our heads against the façade of contentment, because the fear of being alone

is so terrifying. Eventually, though, the façade cracks and the walls of those false feelings tumble down on us. Suffocating us. Breaking the relationships apart in the end anyways.

I stay with them through the night, haunting a corner of the living room. Less a voyeur and more an observer of the pure love I have only known as a fleeting emotion. To miss a moment of this display would haunt me. I only wish I didn't have to experience it alone...that Annika and Jacks were here beside me, experiencing what their poor souls weren't given time enough to experience when they were alive.

FIFTEEN

“Brother, I am concerned.”

“Yeah,” Jacks says. “Something isn’t right upstairs.”

It is after midnight, when most nights at the Cartwright’s home, nothing should be taking place upstairs except dreamland adventures and faucets leaking and fires dying. During these winter months, Jacks and Annika have taken to watching the fire burn out in the living room fireplace after the family has gone to bed. I have been more content as a fixture in the basement where stillness and silence rule. But there is motion tonight. I can hear it. Annika and Jacks speak in a calm, almost monotone way, but they look up at me with eyes full of confusion and unspoken questions. They are the eyes of children without a life of human experience and human understanding behind them.

“What concerns you?” I ask.

“Jim and Joy are in the kitchen,” Annika says.

“Other than the late hour, there is nothing odd about that.”

“But...but Joy is taking knives out of the drawer,” Jacks says. “And she’s swinging them at Jim, because he’s blocking her.”

“Well that is out of character,” I say, despite having never been able to judge anyone’s character appropriately. “What is he blocking her from?”

“I think she’s trying to go upstairs,” Annika says. “She is not the Joy we know.”

“Not even close,” Jacks reinforces.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” Annika continues, “because no words are being spoken between Jim and Joy.”

A scream rips through the house. A child’s scream.

We float up through the floorboards into an empty kitchen. If you remove the three specters now standing next to the kitchen table, there would still be an ominous atmosphere in the room. Drawers are pulled open. Utensils litter the floor. Drops of blood are sprinkled all over the white surfaces of the counters, cupboards and drawers.

Annika has seen unimaginable suffering since becoming a Bearer. She has seen death occur every way it can. But always from a distance. Annika’s purpose was comfort, not transition. I was the one that had to look the child in the eyes as the life went out of those eyes. I was the one that had to be close enough to hear the blood hit the ground or the bones break or the skin tear. I was the one...and I am not going to allow that to change. “Go to the basement,” I tell Annika and Jacks. “Let me...deal with this.”

They don’t question me, slipping out of my sight before I finish speaking.

We had seen Bearers throughout our travels in Europe, and many many times on the Queen Mary. Though we hope children would stop dying, they never do. In our early travels, they often passed away from dysentery and infection. From being caught in crossfire, or from stepping on a landmine meant for someone else. What cruel fate awaits the children in this home?

I creep up the stairs expecting to see Bearers hiding behind armoires and half open doors. But there are none. I move wistfully into Billy’s bedroom expecting to see a child taking his last breath, but I bear witness to something much more distressing. Jim is sitting

on the floor rocking back and forth, repeating the words, “Please Joy, don’t.” And Joy. Joy is standing overtop of Billy, holding a cook’s knife with its point down, inches from his forehead. Her hand is shaking, making the blade shake. Billy’s eyes are wide open, locked in a fear not even I can imagine. He looks up into the eyes of a mother he no longer recognizes.

Into darkness.

Where does this darkness come from? When I was alive, I would have said demons: metaphorical and literal. Some say it’s the weight of the world on our shoulders that makes us break. They say, the world can be so damn heavy...

When Annika and I were toddlers we saw darkness in Tiili. He never held a knife to our skin, but that darkness was there. It was in his actions and his reactions. Especially towards us. Especially, when he was teaching us his little ‘Life Lessons.’ Tiili’s ‘Life Lessons’ were less about teaching us through his words and more about us suffering through our mistakes. “Mistakes make us human,” Tiili would say in that dirty Kemi dialect I spent decades trying to wash out of my own mouth. So disgusted by it I spent my conscious life learning and speaking the language of the southern Finns. “By making mistakes we learn to better ourselves,” he would say. “We learn what hurts and what doesn’t. What we like and what we don’t...” When I was six years old, I was touching the livingroom wall, feeling the texture of the plaster. Circling my index finger around grooves and running it over bumps. I’d touch the wall, then touch the carpet, really realizing for the first time just how different everything felt. It was while I was going from wall to carpet that I noticed the electrical outlet a few feet down the wall. The closer I got to the outlet, the more I could see how it looked like two faces, one on top of the other. Their eyes were wide, like they were terrified to see me coming to interact with them. But I was harmless. Maybe it was my father, who was sitting in a squeaky armchair behind me reading the newspaper, who they were actually afraid of. He had the tendency to raise his voice and kick things and I knew even at that age, he was a man to fear. I mumbled something about “little scared men” and

the paper folded down revealing his face above his nose. His eyes went wide when he saw where I was standing. Then they narrowed into a slit. "Make them happy," I mumbled. I picked up one of my metal jacks and moved one of its ends to within an inch of the top man's face. I must have been doing something nice, because my father didn't make a sound. Didn't move a muscle. I guess I wanted to reassure the mouthless little men we weren't going to hurt them. I wanted to share my game with them and show them how friendly I could be. I pushed the jack straight into one of the top man's eye. A spark shot out of the eye and an invisible fist punched me in the chest, knocking me onto the ground. Only then, when the smell of burning flesh and the wail of a young child filled the house, did my father stir. He picked me up and patted down the hair that was sticking up on the top of my head. He bounced me up and down and said, "There there now...you won't make that mistake again, will you?" I always had a hard time with my father calling my action a mistake, for is it still a mistake if someone could have prevented it? I stuck a piece of metal in an electrical outlet when I was six and my father did not stop me. I stuck a piece of metal in an electrical outlet when I was six and I never did it again. Lesson learned. Later in life I asked my father how he knew the shock wasn't going to kill me. He said he didn't know if it would kill me or not, but had I been killed, it would've been his greatest mistake.

We saw that darkness in Tiili.

But there was a flicker of match light in it.

Joy's arms are covered in lacerations. Drops of blood slide down the knife and drip onto Billy's forehead. It is a scene pulled straight out of the horror movies that will be popularized thirty years from now. But I am hesitant to believe this will end with the bloodbath those movies culminated in, because there are still no Bearers present.

"Mom...Mom, what are you doing?" Billy cries. "Mom!"

Candice peeks into the room from the hallway beyond Billy's bedroom door. She sees her mom holding the knife over her brother's head and she shrieks. The sound that comes out of her

mouth is more animal than human. “Maaaahhhhhmmmm!” Joy does not react to her daughter, except to lift the knife even higher, I assume to give it more force when she brings it down. The war inside of her is visible through her shaking hands and through the tears running wild down her cheeks. Visible through the invisible force that’s keeping her from plunging the knife into Billy. Is this why I am meant to be here? To end the war raging inside of Joy? But it is Billy’s life in the balance, and it was the girl’s name I couldn’t get out of my head.

Candice.

Candice runs to her father and tugs his arm. “What’s mom doing?” she screams. “Please make her stop. Make her stop!”

Jim is unresponsive. A string of blood runs out of his left ear and down his neck. It is so well defined and linear, I feel I could reach down and pull it off of him. A white glaze coats his eyes. He’s concussed. Or broken. And no amount of tugging and crying makes him work again. The room is free from Bearers, so I must be the outlier in the scenario playing out in front of me. Time is on my side, for if Joy were going to plunge the knife into her son, she surely would have done it by now.

Gathering substance involves the proliferation of energy in the area of my light that I want to connect with the living world. Gathering this energy is like taking a deep breath in, only it is your whole body, or light in my case, which acts like a million little noses. I suck in the energy molecules from everything around me that emits energy: lights, wind blowing through partially opened windows, frightened children, mad parents, etcetera. The more time I spend sucking in energy, the more substance I gain. But it is fleeting. And when it is gone, I am what we in the afterlife call, Dim. My instinct gets fuzzy and I can no longer pass through solid objects for a period of time that can last from a few hours to months. Being Dim puts a strain on your purpose when your purpose is to deliver children to the Island. This is the lesson I have chosen not to share with Jacks. But in time, his determination will give him all the answers he seeks.

There is a lot of negative energy circling around Billy's room, but in terms of gaining substance, energy is energy, and it can all be used to give me just what I need to make my presence known. My light opens up and becomes a vacuum as I focus it on the energy that is bouncing around the room like corn kernels popping in a pot on the stove. The randomness of the energy becomes more defined as it is drawn toward me. My light brightens even more, to the point where it now catches the attention of Candice.

"Mom," she screams. "Mom, there's someone in the room with us."

Joy lets out a high-pitched howl, like the one we heard when we were in the basement. "There is no one in this goddamn room except your dear brother and your useless father. Not another soul!" she screams. "I didn't pay a lunatic a small fortune to get rid of the evil haunting this place just to have it come back."

"Mom, I'm sorry," Candice says. "I'm seeing things. I really am. Please put the knife down. You're scaring me."

"Oh, now I'm scaring you."

Joy releases her mental strap around Billy and lunges at Candice. This is the split second I was drawn to this house for. I know it. I put my shoulder down and connect with the right side of Joy's body, sending her several inches off course. Candice screams, but is aware enough to take the split-second diversion and run from the room. Joy steadies herself and gives chase after her daughter.

Everything around me disappears, leaving me in a void of black.

I have dimmed.

The action in the house becomes a flipbook cartoon that's missing several pages between each movement. The bedroom reappears and I see Billy jump out of his bed and run out of his room. A faucet turns on in the bathroom next to Billy's bedroom.

Black.

The bedroom reappears, and Billy is throwing a full glass of water onto his father's face. "Dad! Dad, snap out of it!" He screams.

Jim shakes his head. His pupils dilate and a natural shade of red trickles into his face.

"Please, Dad!" Billy cries. "Get up! She's going to kill Candice." Black.

The bedroom reappears.

Jim is speaking. I've returned halfway through his sentence. "... sleeping soundly and the next we're... we're here."

"Dad, stop talking," Billy says, as if he's scolding him. "You have to help Candice now."

Jim pulls himself to his feet using the handles on Billy's dresser drawers. He stumbles around for a few seconds like he's had a few too many glasses of Scotch. He touches the blood on his face. This seems to pull him from his stupor. Jim runs out of the room and Billy follows close behind him.

I try to slip through Billy's floor, but I don't have the energy. The attempt sends me into the black. When I return I am in the front hallway. The front door is wide open, which lets in the faint sound of croaking frogs and Candice's screams. Billy and Jim are looking out the door at Candice who is briefly visible running across the front lawn. She is barefoot, and the dew from the grass has darkened the bottoms of her pajama legs. Joy is a dozen or so feet behind Candice. If Joy didn't have the knife in her hand, you'd think they were playing an innocent game of tag.

"Stay inside," Jim says to Billy.

Before Billy can argue with his father, Jim, who is also barefoot, runs out the front door and straight at Joy. The surreality of what is happening is not lost on me. Only six hours ago the Cartwrights were sitting around the dining room table enjoying an oven-roasted chicken, garlic-heavy mashed potatoes and butter-drenched carrots. They were smiling at each other affectionately and all giggling at the story Billy was telling about the bully who lost his swim trunks when he dove into the public swimming pool. Not an inkling of ill will existed around the table. There hadn't been an inkling of ill will in the three years we had been residing in the Cartwright's home. If I had been a psychologist, I probably would have explained this

away with words like personality split and dissociative disorder. But those are just words I know from having been an avid reader and having watched way too many true-crime documentaries when I was alive. No, this is a corruption of spirit, but God or the devil has nothing to do with it. This is what happens when a schism has occurred in your perceived path and has sent you to the wrong destination. Instead of leading you to the happiness you believed you were destined for, it leads you to the sudden realization of what you have missed out on. The lovers that never were. The travels that never will be. The careers that could have been. How this schism occurs in few, while the majority of us coast through life unaffected, is beyond me. I liken it to a heart attack of the mind. One second you're fine and the very next second you're holding a knife and maniacally chasing your daughter around the front yard of your home at one on the morning.

Black.

The front yard reappears. Jim has lowered his shoulder just as I had earlier. At a full sprint he drives himself into Joy's back, knocking the knife out of her hand and knocking her onto the ground.

"Run to the neighbours, honey," he says while trying to hold Joy's spastic body down. "Billy, you go, too. Get them to call an ambulance. Your mom is sick."

Billy darts from the house and meets up with his sister in the middle of the yard. He embraces her in a giant hug and the two of them run off into the dark night.

Annika and Jacks have appeared at my side. Annika looks up at me and says, "Is this why we stayed?"

"I believe it is."

"Is she crazy?" Jacks asks.

"Other than being subdued right now, I honestly don't know what Joy is."

"Will things ever be the same here?"

"For us, things will, Jacks. For the Cartwrights, a new path has been laid out in front of them. I cannot say where this path will take them. For them, things will never again be the same."

“This is truly a sad night,” Annika says without any of the emotion the statement would carry had it been spoken by the living.

“Other than the night you died, dear sister, I think this might be one of the saddest nights I have ever experienced. Yes, no one died, but lives have been ruined. Good lives.”

“Is it hard to be an adult?” Jacks asks.

The question catches me off guard. It is not a question one expects from a child who has never been an adult, and who will never be an adult.

“It is, Jacks,” I say. “It is one of the hardest things to be in life. The thing is, no one really teaches you the right way to do it. You learn through your successes and your failures. Only as an adult do you come to realize just how prevalent failure is in life and how dangerous it can be if you don’t have the mental strength to manage it.”

Sometimes, when we get stuck in a pattern of failure, which has worn us out, we snap. I remember in the nineteen eighties and nineties there was a phenomenon where postal employees regularly shot up their place of work, killing fellow employees and often killing themselves at the end of it. The media labeled it, “Going Postal!” I never went “postal,” but I always felt sympathy for these people, because I knew just how close I was to the office.

“I’m kind of glad I never became an adult,” Jacks says and disappears back down to the basement.

SIXTEEN

I stand in the front hallway throughout the night fading in and out of the black. Policemen and paramedics eventually arrive and take the pressure off Jim. It takes two officers with their knees digging into Joy's back to keep her from writhing like a wounded animal. A gag in her mouth to keep her from screaming like a wounded animal. With the help of a paramedic, they lift her up off the ground and handcuff her to a stretcher. The paramedic empties a syringe filled with some sort of sedative into her neck. But that only makes her muffled screams louder. The flashing lights and the commotion cause porch lights to flick on up and down the street. The paramedic slides the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and climbs in behind it. He pulls the door shut. When the ambulance drives away, the officers return to the inside of the house. They rush through me, shouting things back and forth at one another.

“Stay out of the kitchen!”

“I found the knife.”

“We need it preserved.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“She’s not coming back from this one.”

More officers in plain clothes arrive and spend the remainder of the night taking photos and evidence from the scene. Jim, Billy and Candice do not return to the house. They disappeared around the same time Joy was taken away. I can only assume they’re at the hospital with her...or they’re in hiding.

I take a cue from the Cartwrights and make for the attic. A good place to hide. If the Cartwrights return, I want to be as far away from them as I can. As far away from Jacks and Annika as I can. I am a slow gas leak and those around me are succumbing to the toxins. I tuck myself behind a box of Christmas ornaments and I try to make myself disappear. I try to silence the misfiring thought neurons filling my light full of holes.

I spend the next three months trying to silence the thoughts. And the doubt. But the doubt, it spreads in me like a cancer. Or like a black hole eating up all the light around it. The witch, who called herself Universe, knew doubt would test me. Knew it would make me break. Doubt is not baggage we are supposed to carry around with us in this afterlife, but doubt is just another shadow, in a different form. Slapping out what makes me “me”, but in a slower, more painful way.

I close my eyes and when I open them again Annika is peeking around the box of ornaments. “You have been up here for three months, dear brother. The inhabitants of the house have changed. There is a dog named Whimsy. I think she’s a cross between a Border Collie and a Labrador Retriever. She’s full of life.”

“I am feeling great discomfort, Annika. I can’t help but think I am to blame for what happened with Joy.”

We sometimes think we are doing the right thing, but it is often our egos and our narcissism and our sheer stubbornness that make us think this. Despite struggling with my own issues when I was alive, I once fell in love with a woman who I thought I could make better by forcing her to deal with her issues. The truth is, I believed that if I invested my energy in fixing her issues, I could put off

fixing my own. In the beginning, she was the woman of my dreams. A woman I could never have imagined being with. Until I somehow actually was... And it was so good for the first couple of years. But when our issues became unmasked after the lust died down, I began steering our relationship in a direction only I knew. And it was killing us. She was slowly losing herself...losing her essence. Beyond her looks and her energy and her spark, it was her laugh that made me fall in love with her first. It was the type of laugh that would rise above the heavy chatter in a cafeteria or restaurant and make people stop what they were doing to look for the source. When she stopped laughing and I didn't notice, she began to slip away from me. The more my problems grew, the harder I worked to fix her. And through it, she continued to smile at me when she saw me in a crowd or at the end of a long day of work. Because of the things I was taking away from her, though...because of the things I was making her do, she began lying to me and lying in public about me and hiding her transgressions from me. When she finally cracked under my pressure and she stopped smiling at me, only then did I realize I had gone too far. By then it was too late. I was now the villain in her story. And no one wants to be with a villain. She was gone, and the only person left to project my problems onto was myself. I hated myself for the ease at which I could project. I was depressed all the time and I wanted to die more than I wanted to live. Doing the right thing, in my mind, destroyed what could have been the great relationship of my lifetime. By doing the right thing now I could be destroying much more than a relationship.

“Brother, I feel your pain as deeply as you do, but as you said, the madness of the world is inevitable. You play no role. And I believe that. I believe that with all my heart. It's all about point of view. About worldview. The same story told from different sets of eyes is not the same story. Often, the protagonists and antagonists are not the same.”

A ghostly green haze rolls into the attic and settles above me, only inches from the ceiling. The haze sharpens and blurs. It twists and turns, taking on a familiarity that elicits both wonder and dread.

“What story are you talking about?”

“Your story, brother. She’s making you the villain. But to us, she is the villain.”

“Whom are you referring to?”

“The Universe. Or that woman you loved. Her name was Elizabeth, right? Your thoughts run through me as clearly as my own.”

“Have you always heard my thoughts?”

“We are twins, brother. Our connection is hard to break. In our case, not even death could break it.”

“But I can’t hear your thoughts.”

“No, you can’t. Because you think for us, just as you often thought for others while you were alive. When you were designated the lead bearer in our group, you took over our need to think. Lar and I, we just did what you directed us to do.”

“But you always offered opinions.”

“We told you what you had already concluded to be the answer.”

“I never knew that.”

“There wasn’t any need for you to know. We exist for one reason.”

“So you really did know everything I was going through.”

“We both did. It’s why Lar did what he did. I don’t know how he gained control of that moment to take Jacks, but it’s why I had to be on the cliff in Rovaniemi to talk to you about your thoughts. That place and that moment in time belong to me. I am in complete control of my being...of my thoughts there. It’s why I had to open up a window to that space and time now.”

Above me the aurora borealis dances in a distant northern Finnish night sky. I refused to look at it when we first returned to the past, but now I can’t pull my eyes away. The dance of the vapour is more sensual now. A woman on a dance floor wearing green silk, giving up her inhibitions to the music.

“How are you making this happen?”

“I just am.”

“We’ve been at this so long and there’s still so much mystery behind it.”

“The afterlife is really no different than life, in that regard: mysterious and beautiful and awe-inspiring and sad. Full of more questions than answers. Full of two-sided stories.”

“I love you, Annika.”

“And I love you, too, Risto. And that’s why you need to listen to me...to my real opinion. You need to stay the course.”

I break the trance and look at Annika. “But sweet sister...Her words cling to me like leaches, sucking the light from me every time I hear about, or witness another atrocity.”

“You have lived through it all before, Risto.”

“Not that. Not Joy going from mother to maniac in a matter of hours. Can you not see that I am a slow-releasing toxin, driving the world around me mad?”

“The Universe, or whatever she wants to call herself...she’s a trickster. This is what she wants you to believe.”

“She didn’t curse you, sister. She didn’t lay the weight of the world’s chaos on your shoulders.”

“It’s a trick, brother.”

“If that’s so, it’s starting to trick me. Annika, I don’t want to be a world destroyer.”

“That is a little dramatic, dear brother. Remember what you said on the Queen Mary. You said a woman wrapped in plastic with fire coming out of her face wasn’t going to convince you that you were to blame for the world’s slow destruction. You are stronger than this. You always talk about paths. We are on the only path we were given. We can not doubt another path... because there is no other path.”

“But if I...If I stop this now, maybe Kennedy will live. Maybe the wars in Viet Nam and Iraq and Afghanistan won’t happen. Maybe Nine Eleven...”

“I don’t know what any of those are, Risto. But I know you are not the reason they happened. You are succumbing to her lies. I intend you no harm, but she wants you to believe you are more

important than you really are. And if you begin to believe the importance she has placed upon you, your judgment is lost and the decisions you make going forward will move us off this path, and we will be in limbo. Like Fades. Like ghosts.”

She flickers, like she is attached to a switch. A switch that is quickly being flipped off and on.

“Being attached to Rovaniemi is dimming you. Close the window, Annika. Close it now!”

“I have decades to get my light back, brother. Tell me you’ll stay the course.”

“I’ll...”

The green haze above me expands the length of the attic ceiling. It takes on the appearance of bubbling water. Turning. Restless. Angry. And ready to burn.

“Tell me,” she says and flickers in and out again.

There is no sound, but the chaos in the attic is akin to being in a hurricane or a sinking ship.

“Please just stop this,” I say. “I’ll...”

The switch flips to the off position. And Annika is gone.

SEVENTEEN

The green haze evaporates. Stillness settles in. Stillness, like a frozen girl sitting on the edge of a cliff. Annika is gone and Jacks appears in the spot she previously held. "I've been listening," he says. "I know Lar is gone because of me. Annika is gone because of me. People are going mad because of me. I won't be upset if you choose to return me to the Island. If I were you, I'd take me back."

I am a world destroyer

"The doubt is dimming me so much, Jacks. It's keeping me from shining. From following through with all I have set out to do. The doubt...and the guilt, they're eating me up, and soon there will only be darkness in my place."

"It's okay," he says and holds out his hands like he's expecting me to cuff him. "It's okay. Let's just go and get it over with."

I rise and approach Jacks. I have control over this situation. Like the Universe said, I just make the choice and my instincts will return. Make the choice and all will be right with the world again. I'm still in the attic, but I smell the ocean air. I feel the light breeze

against my face. Hear the children playing. I take hold of Jacks' hand and a great white light washes over everything.

When our eyes adjust to our new surroundings, Jacks is the first to speak. "This doesn't look like that Island place."

We are in the middle of a road, but it's not lined with luscious green hills. There are no children flying kites or doing cartwheels or playing hide-and-go-seek. No, the road is lined with empty houses, all different shapes and sizes and styles. The windows are smashed and the doors are kicked in. The paint on the houses is peeling and bubbling like it has been subjected to great amounts of heat. The houses look like the shed husks of once living things. The sky above us is a rusty orange colour. It is sky that belongs to an earth that has been caressed by nuclear fingers.

I let go of Jacks hand. "This is not right."

Jacks' head snaps to the right as though he's caught a glimpse of something.

"What?" I ask.

"That house right there," he says as he points at a rundown rancher with two wheel-less cars dead on its front lawn. "That's... that's my house."

"Your house?"

"The one I grew up in with Suze. You've been there. You were in her bedroom, remember? It's my house. I know it is. Look at the stump in the front yard. There's a little orange flag sticking out of it. I put that there. I found it sticking out of a pylon next to an open manhole. I took it and I jammed it in the stump so if I ever had to call the police, I could tell them it's the house with the orange flag in front of it."

"Just make the choice, She said, and my instincts will return. As long as the boy is with me. We will return."

"But...to where?"

"It was always about the Island. She said that's where we'd return to."

"But did She? She's a witch. She'll say anything to get what she wants."

Footsteps behind us.

We both turn and see a boy, seven or eight years old. His left arm is in a sling. In his right hand he's clasping a toy robot that's missing its left arm. The boy's blond hair is clumped with orange-tinged blood and mud. Only one muddy sneaker is on his feet. The sock of his exposed foot has a hole at the end of it, which his big toe sticks out of, bobbing up and down like a worm that has risen from the damp ground. "Excuse me," says the boy.

"Hello there," I say.

"My mom told me never ever talk to strangers, but you two are the first people I've seen in days. And you don't look like a danger, because stranger rhymes with danger and therefore, you should stay away from strangers. Did I say that already? I'm sorry, I'm a little lost. Can you help me find my mom?"

"What's your name?"

"Ollie. Well it's Oliver, but my mom only calls me Oliver when she's mad at me. My Nan, she calls me Twist. I don't really know why. But she's the only one that calls me that, so it's okay."

"You said you've been wandering for days, Ollie. Where did you lose your mom?"

He scratches his head and loosens an avalanche of blood and mud that rolls down his face and the front of his shirt before sprinkling onto the ground. "The last thing I remember was being at *Pa Randall's Big Time Adventure Park*. Mom said it wouldn't be fun to go there right now because I have a broken arm. She said I wouldn't be able to ride any of the rides. I said I was strong enough to hold on with one arm. But mom was right. Moms are always right, aren't they? The ride people wouldn't let me on any of the rides. Not even the baby ones. I remember crying and mom telling me she'd bring me back when my arm was healed. But I ran away from her. All I remember after that was tripping over a rock that was where it shouldn't have been. I remember seeing a lady dressed up in a crossing guard's uniform reaching her hand out for me. It made me chuckle in my head, because there were no crosswalks at *Pa Randall's Big Time Adventure Park*. I was falling too fast and I

missed her helping hand. I hit the ground hard. I remember saying 'Ooof' and everything went black. When I opened my eyes again, I was on this road. But way way back there."

He turns and swings his toy robot in the direction from where he came.

"Oh no," I say. "This can't be."

Jacks inches closer to me. "Where are we?" he asks.

"Oh wait," Olly says. "Wait! Wait! Oh my gosh. I know the proper saying is oh my god, but I say gosh because Mom says saying God is taking the Lord's name in vain. That's a funny thing to say, because this is a vein and I sure don't see God in there."

He shows us the blue line running underneath the egg white skin of his unbroken arm. "But Mom insists saying it is a bad thing, and like strangers, I should stay away from it."

"Olly," I say. "What were you getting excited about?"

"Oh, yeah. I get a little sidetracked sometimes. My Mom says I have the attention span of a gnat. That one always makes me laugh, too. Have you ever seen a gnat?"

"Olly, what were you getting excited about?"

"Over there," he says and swings his robot in the direction of a two-story Tudor-style house. "That's where I live."

Olly forgets about us and makes a dash for the house. "Mom!" he yells. "Mom, I'm home!"

"I know that's not really my house," Jacks says, "because these aren't my neighbour's houses. So if that's not really my house, then that's also not really that kid's house. I'm scared, Risto."

It's the first time in all our years together Jacks has said my name. The timing is not lost on me. Our great fear in life is dying. So once that act has passed by, fear should no longer exist. But in this place, whatever this place is, our light...our very being is infused with fear. I feel it, too. And it reminds me of Tiili and walking through the forest the night Annika died and horror movies and airplane landings and suspension bridges and public speaking. It reminds me of everything I tried to hide from my whole life. "Jacks, I'm scared, too."

Olly drops his robot on the front porch of the house he thinks is his and steps through the front entrance. His squeaky rambling voice drifts out into the street. He's talking to someone.

"Let's keep walking," Jacks says.

"I don't think we're going to get anywhere."

"Anywhere else is better than here. I don't want to know who... or what that kid is talking to. I just want to keep going."

"Jacks, I don't think there's anywhere else to go until we fully understand where we are."

"How do we do that?"

"We have to go see who Olly is talking to. Maybe it's Her. Maybe She can reset our course. Get us back to the Island."

"Maybe we made a mistake," Jacks says and looks up at me with those hazel green eyes that lose nothing under reflection of the orange sky. "What if we aren't supposed to go back to the Island yet?"

"She wants you back?"

"I just don't think She's who you think She is."

Standing here next to me, personified through this child: my conscience outside of my conscience, the voice in the back of my head. These things stay in the shadows for a reason. My only response for Jacks is to walk away from him.

He catches up to me quickly. "Were you just going to leave me there in the middle of the road?"

"The only place I can leave you is on the Island."

"Then why are you walking toward that kid's house?"

"Because I want to know who's in there. If it's not... Her, maybe whoever it is can help us get back on the path."

"You and your stupid paths."

We're on the front porch to Olly's house now. The front door is broken off the top hinge and leans outward, barely held up by one remaining screw in the bottom hinge. The inside of the house is ink black.

"Jacks, you'd be reborn now if it wasn't for my paths. There'd be no hope for Susan if it wasn't for my paths."

“Listen to what you’re saying.”

I ignore him and step into the house.

“I don’t want to do this,” he says as he steps in with me.

“Listen,” I say.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Jacks snaps back. “That’s what Jerry always said. ‘Pull those goddamned wads of stubbornness out of your ears and listen to me.’”

“No, listen. It’s coming from upstairs.”

We stop in the front foyer to the house, which is now lit in natural daylight from sunshine that pours through the windows. Windows, which are no longer broken. The door behind us is closed and undamaged. Laughter echoes through the house.

“Olly,” I say above a whisper.

“I’m up in the attic!” he shouts back. “Come on up. There’s a bunch of us up here. Everyone wants to meet you.”

“Please don’t make me go up there,” Jacks says.

“There’s nowhere else to go.”

“How do you know that? You know where we are, don’t you?”

“I just want this to end, Jacks. I’m sorry.”

In this foyer I feel corrupted. I am a computer filled with malware. It’s reprogramming my code, making me move toward termination. I take one hesitant step up the stairwell. My next step comes much easier. Like it was told by an outside force to do it. I’ve never been here, but I know where we are. I know what Olly is. Or is about to become. And I can’t stop myself from getting closer to it.

“Where are we?” Jacks screams as I climb another five steps.

“Our destination,” I say, but the voice coming out of my mouth isn’t mine. “Now get up here.”

I want to scream at Jacks to run away. To get out of this house and keep running and never stop. But I am no longer in control. “Get up here now!”

“Hurry up guys!” Olly shouts. “They have ants in their pants up here. They want to meet you so badly.”

Jacks drops his head and slowly makes his way up the stairs to

where I am waiting. We take a step together, but we don't land on the next step up. We are at the base of the ladder leading up into the attic. I have a firm grasp on Jacks' hand. I can feel it like I felt hands in the living world. It is clammy and hot.

This is where the Fades go. We can't be here, I say. But the words that come out of my mouth are, "Just a little further."

I start climbing the ladder with one hand, pulling Jacks up with my other. The higher I climb, the louder the sound of small animals being stepped on gets. The louder the sound of vomiting and defecating gets. Of starvation and dehydration and asphyxiation. Of loneliness. And helplessness. It is all agony, inside me and above me. But I still climb.

Jacks has stopped fighting, allowing himself to swing like a piñata below me. How will they break him open? What will come out?

Olly peeks his head over the edge of the attic opening and smiles. "Oh, they're so happy you made it," he says. He reaches his hand down, and motions for me to pass him Jacks.

A dark smudge appears above him, like the air itself had been stroked with coal. The smudge morphs into the shape of a hand and grabs hold of Olly's grubby hair.

"The shadows," I say. This time it's my voice.

I try to climb back down the ladder, but the hand I'm using to climb is stuck. It has molded itself into the ladder. The ghostly white skin of my hand now a polished wood brown, lined with striations.

The coal-coloured hand rips a patch of hair and skin off of Olly's head and tosses it at me. "Wait," Olly says and retracts his hand. "You said you were my friend. Friends don't hurt each other."

Another larger patch of scalp is torn off. Olly is screaming. I can see his skull now. Another hand appears and the two hands take a hold of Olly's head, like they're going to squeeze it. Olly's eyes burst and a black mist explodes from his eye sockets. The mist hangs in the air above us. Trillions of black specks like pepper

spilled in zero gravity. The specks start to attract to one another, forming a more solid mass.

"The lost kids," Jacks says. "They're the shadows?"

The rest of Olly's skin is peeled away from his body and tossed at us. No more bones, or muscles or organs beneath it. Just black mist, which has enveloped us. The black mist hangs in the air momentarily, then slowly comes together with the mist from his head, filling out the remainder of the shadow.

I can't look anymore

"I'm sorry, Jacks. I'm sorry this is how it ends. I wish I could have just said the words to Annika and meant what I said. I wish I had one more chance."

Olly's fully formed shadow floats in the air two feet or so above us, stretching its neck, bending back in a half circle, like it has been dormant for millions of years and needs to loosen up before it attacks.

The smell of death and torture and decay dissipate, and are replaced by the smell ocean air and fresh green grass. A light breeze smacks up against my face. I hear children playing. Olly's shadow drops. A great wash of white light erases the shadow and we are back in the attic of the house that resembles a red barn

"Look up," Jacks screams. "Look up!"

A fine focus comes to the present moment. The ocean air I smell is coming from the Atlantic. The breeze is from the wind blowing through small holes now blotting the roof. The children are screaming not from joy, but from terror. More of the roof rips away from the house and all the dark corners of the attic become visible. Someone downstairs yells, "It's a tornado. To the basement!"

Jacks and I drop through the floor and join the family huddled together and terrified.

"It'll be okay, Agnes," the man hugging the young girl tight against his chest says reassuringly. "It'll be over in a minute."

Glass breaks. Wood splinters. Whimsy barks. Agnes screams again. Her father covers her ears with his hands and steals her

attention with his eyes. His eyes have more comfort in them in this moment than Tiili gave me my whole life. Than I ever gave Jacks. The tornado does not pass through the house, but it's close enough to cause it to shake like jelly.

And then it's over. Just like that. Two minutes that felt like a lifetime.

Agnes' father releases her and smiles. "See," he says. "It's all over."

"Are you sure?"

"Sweet Agnes," he says and wipes away a tear running down her cheek. "Bad things like this have happened since the beginning of time. We have no control over them. But we do have control over how we handle them. We stay strong. We stay positive. And we live a long, happy life."

We have no control.

We never did.

Terrible things happened in the world before I was born. My actions had no bearing on them. How can my actions have any bearing on the events that will happen in the future?

"I will stay the course."

EIGHTEEN

The house shaped like a barn, once painted bright red, fades in colour. It comes to resemble the worn-out barns you might see down gravel roads or in overgrown, forgotten fields on roadtrips across the prairies. The inside walls show the cracks and holes formed through years of abuse...or better put, through years of life. In this house, I relive history from a distance. I relive it through the hushed voices of current occupants. Through discarded newspapers. Through television speakers muffled by the walls between us. I relive history and it is so strange knowing how major events will play out. Yet being unable and unmotivated to warn people when these events take a turn for the worse. Though we are in Canada, there is great excitement in the house and in the streets when John F. Kennedy is elected as the youngest president in American history. That excitement is replaced with nerves as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the impending threat of a third World War looms heavy a couple of years later. And then sadness and shock when a year after that Kennedy is assassinated. It's like flipping through a history textbook, each page a new event, but

all the time inbetween those events ignored, or simply blips that never happened.

"I miss Annika," Jacks says. "But the feeling...it's different than when I was alive."

"How does it feel, Jacks?"

We're standing in the doorway of Agnes's room watching her sleep. It's been six years since we last saw Annika. Since the storm. Since Olly. We've found a kind of comfort watching over the inhabitants of the house. I like to think we're keeping them safe. But Jacks likes to think they're keeping us safe. From what, I still do not know.

"Mom used to get really angry at Suze and me," he says, never taking his eyes off of Agnes. "Like if we broke the television remote or we were too noisy and woke Jerry up, because you know, Jerry worked through the night lots, so we'd have to be ghostly quiet through the day. Ha. Ghostly quiet. That's kind of funny now, isn't it? Anyways, as punishment, she'd take Suze away. Usually to her friend Martha's house. Martha Barfa we called her. That place was awful. It smelled like burnt toast and rotting bananas. Mom would leave Suze there for days. Once she even left her there for three weeks. After that three-week stint I put locks on the inside of our closets. I thought, if we locked ourselves in our closets, we wouldn't have to go to Martha Barfa's. Of course, I never got to test that out. And we all saw how well those locks held up, didn't we?" Jacks stops speaking momentarily. We are both caught in that memory. A memory so powerful it rewrites the code of the Universe.

"Each day Suze was at Martha Barfa's house," Jacks says once he's found his way back from the memory, "it felt like a little chunk of my heart was being cut out of me. Teeny tiny at first. Like the size of a BB gun pellet. But with each pellet-sized piece removed, that hole in my heart got bigger and bigger. And the pain got harder and harder to bear. To the point where I sometimes felt like I might die if I didn't see her soon."

"Imagine a lifetime of having BB-gun-pellet chunks cut out of your heart."

"I can't. A heart is only so big, right? There'd be nothing left pretty darn quickly."

"Mmmm," I say, wanting to say so much more. "How is it different with Annika?"

"It's like...it's like when you get used to something, like a TV show or the characters in a book you're reading and then that show gets cancelled or you finish the book. You just miss their presence in your life. You miss knowing that they'll be there again next week or the next time you pick up the book. It's a bummer, but it doesn't hurt the same way. That's the best way I can describe it. Is it bad that I don't hurt the same way for Annika as I did for Suze?"

"We're not meant to hurt in the afterlife, Jacks. Hurting is a byproduct of living. When we die, we let go of everything that hurts us. It's not bad that you don't hurt anymore. It's a good thing. It's good."

"But you hurt, right?"

"I..."

"Hey, I want to show you something," Jacks says, not letting me answer his question. I can't tell if it's by choice or by the wavering child's attention he still carries inside him.

He sinks down through the floorboards and into the kitchen below. I follow close behind him. When I appear in the kitchen he is standing next to the kitchen table with his arms crossed. He is staring at the pantry door. "What is it?" I ask.

"Just wait."

"Wait?"

"Yeah, till the morning when they all get up."

"Are you going to give me a hint?"

"Nope."

"Jacks, it's six more hours till anyone gets up."

"You got somewhere you need to be?" He laughs.

"Okay."

I walk over next to Jacks and cross my arms, too. We stand there through the night listening to the clock on the wall ticking, the motor in the refrigerator starting up and shutting off, grasshoppers

bouncing into the windows and water pipes moaning. Around six o'clock we hear footsteps above us. Jacks looks up and smiles at me. "Ready for this?" he asks.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Agnes steps into the kitchen rubbing her eyes. She's up earlier than usual. She opens the fridge and removes a bottle of milk, which she places on the table we're standing next to. She gets a bowl from the cupboard and a spoon from the drawer and she places these next to the bowl.

"Look. Look. She's heading for the pantry," Jacks says, as excited as I've heard him in years.

"What's in there?"

Agnes pulls the pantry door open revealing a shelf full of Apple Jacks cereal. I count eight boxes. "Look! Look!" Jacks says. "Every night after you return to the attic I've been crouching by her ear saying, 'You want Apple Jacks for breakfast. You want Apple Jacks for breakfast.' All night long I said it. For months. And look, she convinced her mom to buy some."

"Some? I think you mean everything the grocery store's got."

"She heard me."

"Jacks, you have to be careful interacting with the living. Don't ever forget about Delron Baumgartner. He happened, because we let our presence be known."

"Oh that's silly. It wasn't us. It was all those other ghosts. This... this here is proof I can reach back into the world of the living. Yeah, it might just be with my words right now. But soon...soon it'll be with my fists."

Tell anyone laying on their deathbed that life doesn't fly by in an instant and they'll laugh and remind you, "you aren't laying on your deathbed, so you haven't really got a clue. Do you?" Only on our deathbed do we see just how empty most of our lives really are and just how meaningless time is. Say you live a good eighty or so years...that's more than twenty-eight thousand days. At the beginning, reaching the end almost feels unattainable. Impossible

to ever do. But we always reach the end, whether it's eighty years or fifty years or eight years. And we always look back over those thousands of days and we try to remember what we did. Sure, we might have graduated from university and went on a few vacations and gotten married and had a child or two, but most of those days were filled with the mundane. The waking, showering, eating, going to work, coming home, watching prime-time sitcoms, doing the dishes, going to bed routine. The difference for us here in the afterlife is we don't age. We don't grow, physically or mentally. We just are, standing in the corners of rooms or behind the blouses and skirts hanging in closets, or sitting cross-legged on floors in basements and garages and attics. We don't get bored or restless or envious of what we no longer can or can't do. We just are, as we wait.

Days pass.

Years pass.

The Viet Nam War happens. The first men land on the moon. The Beatles break up. The Twin Towers are built. Pong enters the lexicon. Nixon resigns. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs start up computer companies. Star Wars is released. Elvis dies (and I still say it was disco that killed him). So much history happens in such a small compartment of time. And it all happens the same way it happened the first time I lived through it.

The night after Prince Charles marries Lady Diana Spencer, Jacks appears in front of me in the attic. He spots the stack of four leaning boxes he's had his attention fixed upon since the current occupants moved in seventeen years ago. The stack of boxes needs only a gust of wind or a graze from a hand to knock it over. Watching Jacks figure out how to project his physical self into the living world is one small history I get to live for the first time. "I think tonight's the night," he says.

"I think it might be," I reply, as I have replied for the last fifteen years.

"No, I think tonight's the night," he says firmly. "Annika is back."

“What?”

“I saw her appear in the basement for more than a minute. I even talked to her.”

“What? What did you say? Is she okay?”

“She said she knew you would, whatever that means.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“She asked how the dog was doing. And then she was gone.”

“The dog?”

Jacks shrugs his shoulders.

“Oh, Whimsy,” I say. “That was the dog that was living here when Annika’s light went out.”

“Oh yeah,” Jacks says. “She was a great dog.”

“You said she was visible for a whole minute?”

“Who, Whimsy?”

“No, Annika.”

“Oh...yeah. She was. I counted.”

“Other than a few flashes here and there over the years, that’s the longest she’s stayed lit since she went away. She must almost have all her energy back. This is such good news.”

“That’s why I think tonight is going to be the night.”

“Don’t exert yourself too hard, Jacks. I don’t want to lose you for thirty years. That would really be cutting it too close for us.”

“I’ve got this under control,” he says and floats over to the leaning boxes. There’s no force or frustration to his attitude. He doesn’t bite down on his lip or turn red with misguided focus as he hones in on the boxes. He simply looks at the top box and slowly moves his finger toward it. He has spent decades learning that it is the energy from the living world he must harness in order to impact the living world. He has spent decades learning that there is little difference between the energy we are made up of and the energy flowing out of a light bulb. I can feel the energy in the room being pulled toward the tip of his finger. I feel the density forming. Power throughout the house is draining. Someone downstairs yells, “Who’s messing with the lights?” Jacks doesn’t swing his arms as he has in the past. The knowledge he will most likely fail doesn’t make

him hesitate. He touches the top box and his light flickers. The box tumbles over causing a chain reaction of boxes beneath it to tumble over. Lids pop off and papers and pictures and mementos spill out onto the floor. It is only when a glass ornament that was tucked into one of the boxes rolls out and smashes into a million little pieces does Jacks realize he has finally physically propelled himself into the world of the living. He wants to scream for joy, but just as he opens his mouth, he fades out.

Where do we go when we fade out like this? When we use up too much of our energy and have to recharge? I'd like to say I have an answer for you, but the truth is, we don't go anywhere. We simply cease to exist. Darkness, then light. And when we fade back in, time has passed. As I have said, mostly, it's a short period of time where we cease to exist: an hour, a day, six months. It all depends on how much we put ourselves into the world of the living. If we blow on a person's neck or make a chandelier sway, we might fade away for a day or two. If we bang on a wall, or knock a chair over, we might be gone for a week. Or if we open a window to a place thousands of miles away, we may be gone for decades.

Jacks fades back in and the scream of joy leaves his mouth. He jumps up and down and pumps his fist in the air. He is a child who just won first place in a 100-meter dash. He is a child who just got a new gaming system for Christmas. He is a child again, exerting childish joy at accomplishing an amazing feat. And I can't help but absorb some of the joy he puts out. "I knew you could do it," I say.

The attic door swings open and a head pops up from the hallway below. It's Marvin, the current occupant of the home. He shines a flashlight around the attic, quickly spotlighting the tipped over boxes and broken glass. "Jesus Christ," he says to himself. "What a mess."

"When the lights dimmed, did you feel the house move, June?" he yells.

"No," June's voice echoes back from the kitchen two floors below.

“Well, that’s a little spooky,” Marvin says to himself.

He climbs up into the attic and pulls the string on the lone bulb that hangs down on the space. It lights up months’ worth of cobwebs and mouse feces. It lights up an attic almost completely forgotten. “How long has it been since I’ve been up here?”

Seven months and twenty-one days, when you put away the Christmas decorations. That’s how long it’s been, Marvin.

Jacks claps and spins circles around Marvin as he tidies the mess, repacks the boxes and restacks them a little less precariously. Now and then, Marvin stops what he’s doing and follows Jacks movement with his eyes. A sense of something there with him. The cold air people speak of when they talk about their experiences with ghosts. Marvin shivers and says, “Forgot how creepy it is up here,” before giving the attic one last look and pulling the string on the light bulb, once again leaving us in darkness.

“When people are open to the idea of spirits,” I say after Marvin closes the attic door, “the spirits become open to them. You may not be able to push these people over, or easily move something around them, but they can feel you there. Just like Marvin felt you dancing around him. And that can lead to a myriad of outcomes. I know I sound like a broken record, but please don’t forget about what happened when we first came to this house?”

Jacks feels the weight of my words and brings his celebration to an end. “Yes, I do remember,” he says. “I was just...”

“I’m excited for you, Jacks. I really am. However, we need to be a little more discreet when we celebrate. That’s all I am saying. I don’t want anything to throw us off our path.”

Jacks kicks his foot through the newly stacked boxes without affecting them. His energy is now directed at me. “Have you...,” he says, and stops for a moment to think about how to properly phrase what he’s about to ask. “Have you ever had fun? Has anything ever made you so darn happy you couldn’t contain your joy?”

People used to tell me to find joy and I’d say, “I think she’s a waitress at the diner down the street. When I find her, what should I do with her?” I never was funny either. To be called out by a

child elicits a small sting, but it is well deserved. I was poking my fingers in the hornet's nest. "I tried to have fun, Jacks. All through my life. When I was in fun situations, I always gave the appearance of having fun."

"Well that doesn't count. I can't believe there isn't one time in your life you had fun. That would make you a robot. And I know you're not a robot."

But I am.

"I struggled with my emotions, Jacks. A lot of it had to do with Annika and with my childhood. A lot of it had to do with bad decisions I seemed to make all my life. Fun was a word I reserved for people who were happy. I wasn't one of those people."

"I wasn't either, but I still managed to have fun now and then. I was still able to see the value in that. Suze and I used to play this game where we'd go down to the Wal-Mart and follow families around and we'd make up stories about being a part of those families. Like you know, I was in Tae-Kwan Do and I had the big championship that afternoon and we were just getting all the supplies for the party my parents were going to throw me for winning the championship. We loved imagining ourselves living different lives. It made us so happy, if even for a minute or two."

If I had a heart, it would have skipped a beat.

"Please tell me there was one time in your life you were genuinely happy," Jack says.

"I was..." The night I got married. After Annika died, that was the happiest moment in my life. Lenora and me, we had so much potential. At that moment there wasn't a more beautiful woman on the planet, and I was about to have her in my life for the rest of my life. I held her hands and I looked into her eyes and I had never felt joy like that before. It was an alien rushing through me, finding it's only exit through my tear glands. I had cried so much in my life, but that night I cried happy tears. "Yes, I was happy once, Jacks."

"Well that's just sad," he says, as a brutally honest child would. "I think we need to play more. I know happiness and play and those types of things aren't a part of this afterlife, but that doesn't

mean we can't still try to achieve them. When I knocked over those boxes, I might not have felt the same sort of joy I would have felt had I been alive. But I know I achieved something great in that moment...and achievement is worthy of celebration. Right?"

"Yes."

"Look what you have achieved in the afterlife. I am assuming no one else has ever done what you and Lar and Annika did for me. Let's celebrate a little. Instead of just waiting, let's try doing fun things. Maybe the change in our attitude...in our routine will bring Annika back for good. Maybe she needs positive energy from us, instead of this neutral energy we've been giving off for decades."

"You're right, Jacks." And he was. But he had no right to be. "Give me some time. Give me a few days. I just need time to..."

"Hey," Jacks says, "all we've got is time, right? I'll check back with you in a few days. Maybe we can let go of all the things that don't matter any more and we can try to find a little joy in this big afterlife of nothing."

Jacks doesn't drop through the floor or walk away. He simply disappears, leaving me with a great sense of disorientation. How am I so good at taking moments that are positive and spinning them around to the negative with a mere sentence or two of dialogue. How is it I can still achieve this after being dead for so long?

Eight days later Jacks and I are together again in the attic. He appears a long time before I notice him there. He says he's been watching me. He says the way I stare forward like I'm trying to look through the things in front of me, instead of looking directly at those things is discomfoting. "Did you ever really see anyone?" he asks me.

The question is legitimate, but the vessel that delivers it is deceptive. A living child around the age Jacks had died would never ask such a question. And if they did, it would have a much different context. But Jacks has fifty years of existence behind him. In my mind I have to costume him in the body of a man in his fifties. Just to take him serious. Just to give a response.

"I guess I only ever saw Annika."

“Caused a lot of hurt through your life, I bet. I know people want to be seen. For who they are. For who they can be. They want you to look at them. Not past them at something that might not be achievable.”

“Do I deserve this, Jacks?”

“I’ve been around you a long time. I still can’t figure you out. Annika was easy. She is love and comfort personified in the body of a nine-year old girl. Lar was compassion and safety. You...you seem to be everything that is opposite of those characteristics. You are an intense, draining energy that is hard to be around for long periods of time.”

I am flawed. I have always been.

“Understand your flaws and you will know the perfection of the Universe.”

“Why did you say that?”

“Your thoughts run through me.”

“Are you really Jacks right now?”

He smiles and says, “Let’s let it go for now. Let’s just move things and see if we can’t have a little fun. After all these years of waiting and keeping my distance from you, I feel like you owe me this.”

He points at a stack of paid bills that were hastily shoved in the attic a week prior. “Let’s see who can move them the most without fading out for more than a minute.”

“We don’t know how long we’ll fade out for, Jacks. It’s a dangerous game you’re initiating.”

“It’ll be fun. Look...”

He drops a finger on the top bill in the pile, which is on a slight angle from the remainder, and it flutters ever so slightly. His light flickers. But does not fade away.

“See,” he says, “the more you do it, the more strength your light gains. I would have been gone for a minute or two had I done that a couple of weeks ago.”

“Have you been practicing, Jacks?”

“Maybe a little. Just late at night when everyone is asleep. On the curtains in the living-room windows. They’re so light. So easy

to move. So now it's your turn. Let's see you move the paper and not fade out forever."

Excitement energy manifests itself as jolts of light, which shoot across the visible surface of his eyeballs. He's waving me up and toward him with his right hand. It's time I let go of my intensity. It's time I give over to the elements and open myself up to a lightning strike of my own. I float over to the stack of bills and without hesitation flick the top bill off the stack. Everything around me disappears. I am in black and then a moment later I am back.

"That was amazing," Jacks shouts as he pumps his fist. "You were gone for like an hour, but look how far you moved that piece of paper."

The bill is on the attic floor several inches away from the stack.

"I guess that was pretty good."

"Fun, right?" Jacks says and spots his next target. "Look in the corner over there. It's a Christmas ornament Marvin missed when I made the boxes fall over. Let's see who can roll it the farthest."

An odd feeling rushes through me. A feeling of compliance. Of wanting to comply with Jacks request.

"I'll go first," he says.

Jacks takes a floating step toward the ornament, but Annika's flickering presence stops him several feet from the ornament. The flickering lasts fifteen or so seconds, then ends with the reappearance of Annika in her after-life whole. She notices both of us and gives us each a smile.

And I feel whole.

"It's so good to see your face," I say. "I was beginning to wonder if I ever would again."

"Me too," Jacks says.

"That took a lot longer than I ever imagined it would"

"Funny that," she says with no hint of humour or sarcasm. "It felt no different than when I would take the charges back to Rovaniemi. A moment of darkness, then back."

"Well that moment of darkness lasted more than thirty years."

"Really?"

NINETEEN

We're standing in the backyard looking southeast, heads tilted upward. It's a little past three in the morning and the sky is still full of stars. The moon still hangs low like a lone mobile strand lulling us into peaceful contemplation. Three thousand kilometers away a baby boy is entering the world. A loving family welcomes his entrance with tears and silent thank yous: a father, who never imagined he'd get to experience a day like this; a mother who's childhood dream of being a mother is coming true; grandparents, who spent years teasing their children that they were content just being grandparents to dogs and cats, but wanting so badly to right the wrongs of their own parenting failures through a grandchild...or two. It is a hospital room full of happiness, hope and potential.

"Happy birthday, Jacks," Annika says.

"Yes, happy birthday," I second.

Jacks doesn't take his eyes off the stars. "I kind of wish I was there right now," he says in a voice that seems so small in relation to the scope of the universe on full display above us. "I've heard

stories about those people down there right now. I've heard about how happy they were when I was born. You know, I've never seen my mother happy. I don't think I ever heard her laugh. That's strange, right? I kind of wish I was down there right now so I could see my dad. Mom told us he was the funniest, most handsome man in the world. But she never smiled when she said this. Gosh, I wish I was down there right now."

"We could have planned to be there, Jacks," I say.

"I know," he says, then breaks his connection to the stars and connects with me. "Why is there so little happiness in life? Over the years, watching the people in this house come and go, live and die, it seems like misery is the lake and life is built upon trying to fish little nuggets of happiness out of the lake. Shouldn't it be the opposite?"

"The lake is empty when we come into the world, Jacks," I say, trying to come up with a more objective answer, when I know Jacks isn't wrong. "Along the way we choose what we want to fill it up with."

"Maybe the lake is a bad analogy," he says. "Maybe life is more like a...maybe it's more like baking a loaf of bread that never comes out right, because the ingredients are always changing. Change out an ingredient and the consistency changes. The flavour changes. Or it just doesn't rise. I know we were happy once, because mom always reminded me and Suze that those three years as a family... they were the happiest three years of her life. The bread was poised to be fluffy and full and perfect. But then the ingredients changed. Then dad was gone."

It's rare for us to shed tears in this afterlife, unless it's part of the transition process when we take hold of a Charge. To help us appear sympathetic to the Charge's disorienting situation. But as Jacks speaks with a wisdom that far surpasses his child-stunted appearance, ghostly tears slide down the sides of his nose. "Why does She allow the ingredients change?"

"I don't think your mother had any control over what happened to your father?"

“I understand that. I meant the Universe. That witch. She says She has control over everything. Why would She allow my dad to die like that and make...and make our bread so awful? I hate Her so much.”

Annika takes hold of his hand. “I don’t think we’re supposed to understand why the Universe does what it does,” she whispers. “If we understood the Universe, there would be nothing more for humans to strive for. It is that lack of understanding that pushes us forward as a species. Don’t you think? To learn. To grow. To evolve. The Universe is more like that lake you were talking about, except it’s not only full of misery; it’s full of chaos and confusion and love and happiness and discovery. By searching for meaning in that mess, we’re able to fish out little morsels here and there that help us define our own purpose. That give us joy.”

“Do you think I would have grown up if my dad hadn’t died? If Jerry hadn’t come into our lives?”

“I don’t think you can pine over things that were never going to happen,” I say. “Your father was always going to die when he did. It might not have happened in the same spot, but it was always going to happen at that time in his life. And Jerry was always going to take his place. It might not have been the same Jerry, but it would have been someone just like him that would eventually send you to that intersection where that car killed you. When we are alive, we never know how the bread is going to turn out, but the Universe does. And She doesn’t care how it tastes or what it looks like. Just that it’s there in the end. With Her.”

“But we’re going against the Universe. We’re going to change Her plans. How does any of this make sense?”

“I think we’re doing what we were meant to do. If we weren’t, I don’t think we would have gotten this far. Have you heard the expression, God moves in mysterious ways?”

“No.”

“Sometimes God tells His people to do things that seem strange or even meaningless, but these things end up being a redemptive or victorious part of their story. God appears as many things to

different people. To us, She is the energy that creates the Universe. And I'd like to think we're still here because we haven't reached the rightful conclusion the Universe planned out for us."

"I don't think we should refer to her as the Universe anymore?"

"No?"

Jacks shakes his head and points at the stars we're already looking at. "That's the universe," he says. "It's full of beauty and mystery and wonder. She's full of malice and deception and self-doubt. She's not the universe. She's the devil."

"But what if..." I stop verbalizing my thought.

"But that universe up there, it's also full of emptiness and darkness and the unknown," Annika says. "It's no less dangerous than She is."

"I want to go down there," Jacks says.

We are all quiet for a moment. An alarm clock rings through an open window in the house next door.

Nothing is stopping us from going to Biloxi now, Jacks," I say. "But I do need to be honest with you, having once been an adult who told people what they wanted to hear. Or what I felt they needed to hear. Everyone has their own version of the truth. Your mother may have recalled life being happy when you were a baby, but it might have been an exaggeration of the truth or even a fabrication of truth. The risk of us going down there now is that you may come to find that none of the life she described ever existed. I will plan our trip tomorrow if that is what you want, but I implore you to take a day to think about it. The last thing I want is for you to be let down one more time."

A lifetime of years with Jacks has given way to ten years worth of Jacks' living memories. His mother Samantha was a drinker. The kids referred to the red liquid that always filled her cups as "Mom's Kool Aid." They found bottles of "Mom's Kool Aid" hidden around the house: at the back of kitchen cupboards, underneath t-shirts in dresser drawers, behind laundry detergent bottles in the laundry room. I used to hide my alcohol, too. I

wouldn't have called myself an alcoholic, because I, in no way wanted to share anything with Tiili. Even a classification. But I did like to drink. So if people can't see you drinking, they can't call you a drinker. Right? Where Vodka poisoned my father, I allowed Scotch to do the same to me. And when I drank, I perceived the world a certain way. To me, that perceived world was my true world. To those who loved me, it was a nightmare they couldn't wake from. It was a world where their reality became altered, because I was just so damn sure about mine. When I sobered up, I asked them about certain events I remembered one way. I asked about the time I ended up in jail for a night, because my wife felt threatened by me being in my own home, and she called the police on me. The truth is, I was drunk and throwing chairs and tables in a rage, and a neighbour called the police, worried that I was killing my wife. When they arrived and questioned me about what was going on, I was belligerent to them. They dropped me to the floor, handcuffed me and threw me in jail. I told people for years that my wife had called the police on me. I asked about the time my car hit black ice and slid off the road through a front-yard fence. The truth is, I was driving home drunk and fell asleep at the wheel. For years I blamed black ice and shoddy breaks. I asked about the time I was punched in the face for no apparent reason. Apparently, there was a reason. A drinker's ability to shift reality for themselves and for those around them to fit a narrative that makes them live guilt free is almost magical. Often to the point where those who are in close with the drinker begin to believe the false reality.

Maybe...just maybe, I wasn't the man I thought I was.

Jacks mom may have been telling the truth as *she* knew it, but we will never know the reality of her truth. And at this point, it doesn't really matter, does it? What matters is being at a certain point at a certain time. It is all that has mattered since 1943.

"Okay," Jacks says, "I'll think about it."

Happy Birthday, Jacks," Annika says again. We all turn our eyes skyward and stand there in silence till the stars disappear.

The next morning Jacks rises into the attic where I often spend my days looking out a small hole in the roof at the daytime clouds floating by. "I like the way I imagine it," he says. "I want to keep it that way."

I want to keep it that way, too.

I smile and then he drops through the floor. Back to where he waits.

TWENTY

And like that, ten more years are gone.

The world comes out the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression of 1929 only to go back into another one when an overly bronzed fool takes over as leader of the most powerful country in the world and allows narcissism, ego, ignorance and profit dictate the mishandling of a time-honoured government institution and a global pandemic. The virus sweeps through the Americas unlike any seen since the turn of the twentieth century, killing hundreds of thousands of people and financially crippling tens of millions more. The fallout isn't as bad in Canada, but it does change the way people live their lives. Makes them face their mortality and their true standing in the universe. I am glad I didn't live through it the first time. I passed away two months after 9/11, and the fear of how that event would change the world made my passing more welcomed than it probably would have been had the events of 9/11 not happened.

Ten years. How much can happen in a single decade and how defining those events can be...

Annika, Jacks and I stand in the backyard looking up at the twinkling stars. We've spent a second lifetime consciously looking up at the stars, and each of us knows it's a luxury afforded to no one. Of the thousands of nights doing this same thing in the past, we have not taken a second for granted. Tonight, we will absorb as much of the visible universe's beauty as we can, because when night slides into dawn, we leave Halifax and we head to Biloxi, Mississippi, where in less than three days, the Jacks who lives and breathes on this same earth we haunt, will succumb to the carelessness of a person behind the wheel of a speeding car. What will happen when we arrive is a grand mystery...a mystery we've all tried to figure out over the years. We've each had opinions and theories about the outcome of the mystery. One thing is common in all of our theories and opinions: we always end up wiped from existence. But this deterrent brings with it a proper sense of closure. At least, for me.

"Are you ready for this?" I ask.

"I am," Jacks says.

"Are you ready for this, dear sister?"

"I am, brother," Annika responds.

The ringing of the alarm clock in the upstairs bedroom of the house next door breaks through the silence of the early morning. The bedroom light turns on and silhouettes move back and forth behind drawn curtains. We have thirty minutes left in the space we have existed for more than seventy years. We may be void of sentimentality in the afterlife, but we conceive importance as much as we did when we were alive. This has become an important space for us: the house shaped like a barn, the backyard in the early hours of the morning, the position of the stars to our position on earth. We all take in these last moment in our space in our own way. Annika hums "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and spins around the yard with her arms outstretched. They look like oars lifted out of the water. Or propellers. She floats up to power line height, then light as a feather, falls back down onto the grass. Jacks points at stars he has pointed at thousands of times. Where before he

would name the stars (having learned them from the children who inhabited the house over the years as they read astronomy books aloud while studying for tests), now he says, “Thank you for always being there for me Betelgeuse. Thank you for always being there for me Canopus...”

These children next to me, children in appearance only, have experienced a lifetime of time. It is such an odd contradiction. I wish I could put my head in theirs for a moment to see how they see the same world I see. But I can’t, so I will watch them take these last moments and make them the best moments of our journey so far. Another end that felt like it would never come has arrived. Time continues to be that cruel creation of man to remind us that there will never be enough time. I embrace this moment as the children do and kick away the doubts that surface whenever joy slips into the frame. I know if I was not here now...if I had given Jacks to the Island when it was his rightful time, the world would still be mad. I know my actions have nothing to do with the degeneration of humanity.

I am not that important.

A van pulls into the neighbour’s driveway and the engine shuts off. Knowing we have three more minutes, our conversations with the stars stop. Our humming and dancing stops. Our justifying our actions stop.

The neighbour’s name is Dan. “Dan the Man!” Dan works at the docks where he loads cargo containers full of rubber tires and freeze-dried crustaceans and paper products onto ships that travel around the world. For twenty-two years, five days a week, he and his buddy Mel have carpooled the 45 minutes to work.

We have no luggage. No furniture. No mementos. No reminders of a past lived. We are three ghosts leaving the home we’ve haunted for 73 years with only the energy and light that gives us shape. We are leaving by choice, which, by the laws of nature wouldn’t make us ghosts. Ghosts are carbon copies of the humans they once were. They are the presence of that person, minus everything that made that person who they really were; their personality; their

tastes; their opinions; their ability to love and hate; their ability to choose. No, choice is a function of a sentient being. And by the laws of nature, only the living are sentient. So I ask myself again for the ten thousandth time, what does that make Annika, Jacks and me?

None of us look back as we walk away from the house, which to this day still looks like a red barn, and we walk toward uncertainty with certain bravado. A security light pointing out over Dan's driveway clicks on as we approach the van. I want to think it senses us, but it's most likely sensing a gust of wind. The van is windowless. It's also white, but so caked with dirt the only white that pokes through is in the words someone has written into the dirt with their finger. "Even a potato gets washed once," it says.

We slip through the wall of the van and position ourselves cross-legged inches above the trash-covered floor as close to the back as we can get. When devising a route to Biloxi, I knew the first part of the journey had to be in this van. Through conversations overheard between Dan and Philip, Philip being the current occupant of the house shaped like a barn, I had learned a lot about the operations down at the port. Including the fact that many of Halifax's exports traveled only a few hours south to the United States. The van makes for a perfect shield from the sun and we can wait in it till the workday ends and the sun starts to set again.

Dan tumbles into the passenger seat and nods his head at Mel. Mel nods back and puts the van in reverse. Once on the road, he puts the van in drive and turns up a country song playing on the radio. As it buzzes through blown-out speakers, the only other sound, besides the awkward silence, is the empty beer cans and random screwdrivers rolling around. After twenty-two years of driving to work together, I guess everything that can be said between two men has been said.

When we arrive at the port, Mel and Dan nod at each other and exit the van without a word. A silent language spoken in gestures and familiarization. When we work the same job our whole life, do we end up spending more time with our workmates than with

those we love? When, in the end, we judge the importance of those we associated ourselves with, how many would say the ones they worked with had a higher importance than the ones they loved?

How many?

Through the day, as the sun creeps from east to west, as the dust particles dance around us and the bustling port visible out the front window writhes and rolls like a living creature, we mostly keep to ourselves. Now and then I catch Jacks staring at me. Or through me. Or into me. And I wonder. All these years together and he knows next to nothing about me. I have kept it this way, not for selfish reasons, but to keep the focus on saving Susan. And yet I wonder. What does he think when he starts to dissect me? Starts to peel away the surface narrative? What does he really think of me? I struggled with that nagging thought often in my living life. We are so quick to judge those when we first meet them. Oh, he's abrasive, or holding back, or witty or sad. It's sad how often potential friendships or relationships or job prospects are trashed in the first few seconds of meeting. I was always a difficult personality to place on first meetings. I once interviewed for a job as a journalist at a small daily in Prince George, British Columbia. I think it was 1967 or 68. I was the perfect candidate: education, Journalism school, check; experience, managing editor of college newspaper and reporter for one year at a weekly in Salmon Arm, British Columbia, check; a passion for Journalism, triple check. The editor-in-chief was a mustachioed caricature of journalists from days of old. His name was Garrety. Garrety James. Who can forget a name like that? I kept imagining a ratty fedora on his head with a PRESS placard sticking out of the band around the hat. His excitement for journalism was palpable and though I felt the same way as he, my demeanor gave off smugness and discontent. I know it did, because my whole life people who didn't get to know me used those words to describe me. Smug and discontent. I answered each question Garrety fired at me with the answer he expected to be fired back. But there was no rise in my voice. No smile on my face. No sparkle in my eyes. I could see

his frustration trying to figure me out. Trying to assess whether I was sincere or messing with him. When the interview was over, he shook my hand and said, 'Never met such a tough nut to crack. Like the credentials, but the cut of your jib is causing me some concern.' I stayed in Prince George a few days awaiting a response to the interview, but one never came. The day I was to leave, while shoving my suitcase in the front of my VW Beetle, a car swerved to miss a pedestrian who had walked into the street. The car went front-bumper first into a power pole. Of course, safety features in cars, like airbags and gas tank viability weren't as important back then. Cars tended to catch on fire and explode more often than not. So when I saw smoke rising from the crumpled in front of the car, I didn't hesitate. Not even for a second. A woman was face down, unconscious against the steering wheel. I knew I had to get her out of the car before it burst into flames. As I neared the car, it was the small wail of a child from the back seat that made me stop. And it was the first flame sneaking its way out from the engine that made me stop. Cars were now pulling over and a woman was yelling out her apartment window that she had called an ambulance. Yelling at me to get away from the car. It was an anxiety dream come to life with a ticking time bomb, where the time until the explosion was a mystery. I pulled on the driver side door, but it was locked. The woman was still breathing, but she was out cold. I banged on the window, but this seemed to only invite more flames from the engine. People all around me were now screaming to get away from the car. I can still hear their voices in my head. 'Get away! It's going to blow!' The baby in the back seat was squealing now, like a baby pig looking for a teat. Like a mouse whose tail was just crushed by the trap that just snapped on it. The baby or the mother first? The baby or the mother? I pulled on the back door and it was locked, too. I punched my fist through the back window breaking all the bones in my fingers. Spraying blood all over the seats and the baby from the lacerations. But the pain was nonexistent. The true pain was not knowing if any of us would survive. I pulled the door open

and unbuckled the screaming baby and ran from the car as fast as I could. There was a woman standing across the street with open arms. I handed her the baby and turned back towards the car. And that's when it exploded. The force of the explosion pushed heat underneath my eyelids and into my brain. It dropped me to the ground. And that's where I stayed. Paramedics came. They wrapped my hand in bandages and gauze. People patted me on the back and praised me for heroism and stupidity. It was a blur of time and faces and words that meshed into one solid drone of sound and colour. Until a familiar voice snapped me from it. 'It's quite the thing you did today. 'Magine my surprise when I get here to cover the story and it's you they're talking about. Folks around here got a lot of nice things to say about you.' Garrety put out his hand and helped me up. 'Mr. James,' I said, 'is there ever a happy ending?' He smiled and said, 'Let me buy you a drink, partner. And please, call me Garrety.' We sat in a pub around the corner from the accident through the night. We drank dirty well beer out of fingerprint-stained mugs. Garrety saw me laugh and smile and cry. He got to know me. And when we were tossed from the bar at the end of the night, in a stupor, he hired me for the job I had applied for days earlier. I turned down the offer. Yes, when people took the time to know me, when they gave me a chance, I was able to push away my cold exterior and push my dourness back a little, allowing a man with a sense of humour to be revealed. The same man who often put others ahead of him to be revealed. The man who struggled with his emotions, but who knew the power of empathy. The man who could listen and not judge.

The man...

Who.

Am.

I?

As the sun sets and a long day at the port comes to an end, we slide out of the van and into the night. Only Jacks stays and watches Dan and Mel drive away. "Nothing lasts forever, does it?" he says when he catches up to us.

“Just salt and bad experiences.”

“Risto, that’s not what he meant,” Annika says in as scolding a tone as she can muster.

“I know, I’m sorry.” I stop moving toward the shipping containers and I look down at Jacks. “We last forever, Jacks. We do. Our energy is dispersed through-out the universe and is absorbed by something else living. Over and over and over again. When our bodies die, most of us are returned to the earth. And we become part of that earth again, that earth from which we originally came. I know it’s not as clear an answer as you are looking for, but it is the truth. We last forever. Just in different forms.”

“Hmm,” he says, ending the conversation as abruptly as it began.

Satisfied with my on-the-spot answer to his existential, most likely hypothetical question, I continue us forward. “We’re looking for anything along the East Coast,” I say as we approach the labyrinth of shipping containers waiting to be placed on ships and transported to wherever.

We play a game of hide and seek with the inanimate as we wander from container to container reading the fine print on the manifests attached to the doors. An hour into our game I find it. A container of tires going to Savannah, Georgia. In two days. And as if that isn’t enough convenience, the final destination for the container is Biloxi, Mississippi via transport truck. I call the other two over and point at the manifest.

“Seems a little too easy,” Annika says for all of us.

“Yes, it does,” I say and look up at the stars twinkling in the sky above us. “But easy is a welcome relief after so much complication getting to this point.”

“You don’t think...”

“I think it’s just something on our path, like a rock or a fallen branch or a dead mouse,” I say, stopping her from saying what I, too, was thinking.

She considers my words and gives in to the convenience and coincidence.

Together we glide through the heavy metal doors into the container, which is packed from front to back, from top to bottom with vehicle tires of every size. Luckily, we don't need space. We just mesh with the tires and begin another period of waiting. Unlike the Queen Mary seventy-five years earlier, on this trip over the ocean there will be no sunsets on view, or spirits to eavesdrop on or spaces to explore.

There is only darkness.

TWENTY-ONE

Jacks, Annika and I stand side by side a few hundred meters away, under a gazebo that is shaded by a half circle of oak trees, which rise up around it. A movie we have all seen before, but a movie none of us particularly cared for the first time we saw it, plays out in front of us. Lar, Annika and the me of this moment in time appear. They take their positions. Lar against a tree on the other side of the street. Annika cross-legged on the grass a few feet in front of him. And me. I am standing next to the stop sign that the living Jacks and Susan approach on their bikes. The two children stop at the line and drop their feet to the ground to steady their bikes. "Jacks," Susan says. "I don't want to go home yet."

Being so far from us, their voices are muffled, like they are speaking through down-filled pillows. I know the words they speak, though. I know them so well. The living Jacks, looks left to right, then back at Susan. "I don't want to go home yet, either, Suze," he says, "but we have nowhere else to go. Maybe mom will be home. Maybe she'll..."

“She’ll what?” Suze shouts. “Tell us to stop lying, like she always does.”

“She has to believe us this time. We have proof.”

“We’ve had proof before,” Suze says sadly. “She never believes us.”

“Maybe it’s time we go to the police,” Jacks says. “It’s their job to believe us, right?”

Jacks looks up and asks the question of me. “It is their job to believe us, right?”

But the living Jacks is quick to respond, cutting off the, “Yes,” I was going to say.

“They’re adults,” Suze says. “Adults don’t believe children. Ever. You know that.”

“Don’t think that, Suze.” Jacks puts his foot on the pedal and moves his bike over the stop line and into the empty intersection.

The complexity of the situation playing out in front of me right now is discomforting. It’s like watching your own colonoscopy and having the doctor whisper under his breath, “ooh, that’s not good.”

I am having an “out of body” out-of-body experience.

I steal a glimpse of Lar standing against the tree across the street. This is the first time I have seen Lar since he saved us on the train platform. I think...I think this might be the first time I have thought about Lar since shortly after he saved us on the train platform. A great sorrow ignites in me. I smuggled my grief for Annika into the afterlife and it made me more alive than I ever was while living. Where did I hide it when I died and why didn’t I carry it for Lar when I was dead? He was so integral to what we did as a unit. Hell, we shared the same energy. Do we need something to be tangible to grieve it? Because I couldn’t touch Lar or hug him or tell him I love him, did that put grief for him out of reach?

Jacks looks back at Susan as he rides. “To the...” This moment feels like it took place only a day ago. I see Jacks seeing the other me. I hear a word or two from Jacks’ mouth, but the word is lost in the sound of the car coming out of nowhere. It is an orange car

and the woman driving it is looking down at a cell phone placed on the horn of the steering wheel. Everything is going so fast. The car hits Jacks so hard that he and his bike are propelled into the air.

Susan screams. The car is out of sight before Jacks and his bike hits the ground. Susan drops her bike and runs to Jacks. She screams the whole way. The other me is with Jacks. Waiting for him to die. Susan falls to her knees and lifts her brother into her arms. "Jacks, please..." she cries. "Jacks, don't leave me. Don't you dare!"

She can't see the other me lifting Jacks' light from him, but she feels it. Her screaming at Jacks, turns into wails of agony, like Jacks is a sharp knife slowly being pushed into her gut.

Cars are pulling over. People appear out of nowhere and huddle only yards from the scene. Their arms are crossed. Some of them are leaning into the person standing next to them. Speaking words I can't even imagine. A woman running toward Susan and Jacks is on her cell phone screaming about, "An accident!"

Minutes later an ambulance appears. Two paramedics rush over to Jacks, but when they see his skin is blue, their pace lessens. We can't hear what they're saying to Susan, but her reluctance to let her brother go makes them step back and lean into each other whispering words only they can hear. One of them kneels next to Susan and says something to her. A few seconds later she gently places Jacks on the grass and stands. As the paramedics go through the motions of trying to revive Jacks, Susan slowly backs away from them. She lifts her shirt and dabs away her tears with the bottom of it. She looks around the park and for a second, I think she catches sight of us under the gazebo. A slight smile appears on her face, only to disappear as she starts to cry again. The woman who had called the ambulance runs over to Susan and wraps an arm around her shoulder. Susan startles at the comfort the stranger is offering her, but quickly allows herself to melt into it. The woman leads her to the curb in front of the ambulance and directs Susan to sit. The woman sits next to her, holding her in a quiet embrace until an old Toyota Tercel with rust holes in its doors screeches to a stop next to them.

A man and a woman jump out of the car. The man looks up at the sky and screams a series of incoherent words. His face is two shades redder than cool as a cucumber. The woman is hysterical. She runs around to the back of the ambulance and peers through the window. "Jacks! Where are you, baby?"

"It's my mom," Jacks says. "And Jerry."

Samantha runs back to her daughter and starts yelling in her face, "Where is he? Where is he?" The frantic actions of Samantha and Jerry cause the woman who had been comforting Susan to up and leave.

"I need to go to her," Jacks says.

"We can't step out from under this gazebo," I remind him.

"How are we going to do this?" he asks. "With the sun shining, it's next to impossible."

"Next to," I say. "But not."

Jacks fails to notice the clouds rolling in. The convenience of the occurrence is not lost on me. I recall it being clear of clouds the first time we experienced this. I spot the other me, Annika and Lar circling around the newly deceased Jacks. They fade away. Maybe I was too consumed with the moment and the unsettling feeling coursing through me that, I too, failed to notice the clouds the first time around.

But that's not it, is it?

"Look," I say and point to the sky. "In another few minutes it will be overcast. For how long, I do not know. But we will have a period of time where there are no shadows. And that's when we have to make our move."

And as if the clouds were listening to me, they quickly blank out any blue in the sky that may have existed only minutes earlier.

Jacks notices the atmospheric change and runs for his sister.

"Jacks," I yell. "We'll be in the car. It's our only way to Susan's room."

I cautiously step out from under the protection of the gazebo roof. And Annika willingly follows me. "Jacks is still okay," I say. "We need to get to Jerry's car."

"I know, Risto. I can see the path very clearly now."

I stop and look down at Annika. "The clarity that has so quickly arisen. Do you find it discomforting?"

"No," she says passively. "I am oddly comforted by it. There is an inevitability to what is about to happen. When you know you can't change future events, you are less inclined to be distraught about your helplessness."

"Do you feel helpless?"

"I feel..." she stops as Susan stands and runs for her bike. The girl who just saw her brother die can't stand to be around the indirect causes to her brother's death. She hops on the bike and pedals away from the scene as fast as her nine-year-old legs will take her. When Susan disappears over the other side of a hill, Annika continues speaking. "I feel like my part in this was over long ago. I am a bystander once again."

She takes my hand and allows me to really feel her touch. Her skin is warm like bread just out of the oven. I used to say that to her when we were kids. Your skin, it feels just like bread out of the oven. "Did it ever make you mad that everything was always about me?"

"Oh, Risto," she says. "Grief is a battle we must wage alone. Yes, we can lean on the shoulders of friends for support and advice and comfort, but the ultimate battle is between our brain and the emotion. I've only always been here for you. For you to understand that I never was mad at you for anything. Ever. I came to terms with my fate the night I reached out for mother on that cliff. I reveled in the chance to get to spend time with you again, even if it was only to be on this ethereal level."

She lets go of my hand and makes for Jerry's Toyota. The smell of fresh-baked bread hangs in the air. This time I follow her as she glides overtop of the grass and through the back door of the Toyota into the back seat. "Come," I call out to Jacks before gliding through the door and joining Annika in the car.

Jacks slides through the door pushing me to the middle seat. The front doors open and Samantha and Jerry slide into the front seats. "This is mental," he says as he starts up the car.

“You don’t think he’s really dead, do you?”

“If he is...”

“Don’t you dare say it. He’s not dead. He can’t be.”

“What matters is getting that rotten daughter of yours to stop being so god-damned rotten.”

Samantha looks out the back window, through us, at the ambulance shrinking behind us, as we drive further and further away from it. “How did it get to this?” she says, looking directly into my eyes. “How does it go from okay to so horribly bad in such a short period of time?”

“Don’t act so naïve,” Jerry says. “It has been building up to this for years. You...you allowed yourself to think things weren’t as bad as they actually were. I don’t know what you ever expected of me, but whatever it was, you had to know that never was going to come. You had to or you’re just stupid.”

She breaks her gaze with me and stares at Jerry. “Don’t call me stupid, Jerry.”

“Whatever,” he says and accelerates the car another twenty miles an hour.

It’s only a minute later when the car comes to a stop. Susan’s bike is lying on the front lawn. The front door to the house is wide open. Jerry parks the car and exits without turning it off. Samantha reaches over and finishes the process of turning the car off before she exits and runs after Jerry.

Calmness has settled over Annika, Jacks and me. The sky is still overcast, so I nod and we three ghosts slide through the car doors and glide over to the house. When we reach the front door Jacks says, “I’ll lead us from here.”

We glide through a front hallway with pictures of the kids on the wall. We glide through a kitchen with a basket of over-ripened fruit on the kitchen table. Nothing indicates a house of horror. Down a hallway lined with framed pieces of art from the children’s childhood, we hear commotion. The one thing I notice is there isn’t a picture of Jerry anywhere. Jacks leads us into a room that is filled with people and ghosts. There’s Jerry and Samantha, and

there's Lar, and the other three versions of us. Our arrival goes unnoticed.

"Damn-it, Susan! Get out of there, or I'll...I'll break the door down," a red-faced Jerry spits. He shakes the closet door handle and pulls at the door, but it won't open. He steps back and says, "I just want to talk to you, honey. Everything is okay."

I forgot how scary a sudden calm demeanor could be.

"Go away," Susan yells from inside the closet. "Leave me alone. I've already called the police. There's nothing more you can do to me."

The other Jacks runs at the man. We can't hear, or remember his words, but we can't deny his intentions. The other Jacks fruitlessly swings his arms at the man.

Samantha appears at the bedroom door. "Maybe we should go," she says.

"Go? Go where?" Jerry screams. "If she's telling the truth, we can't get far enough away from here. They'll find us easily. How stupid are you?"

"I told you not to call me stupid."

"This whole situation is stupid," Jerry says. "And it's ending now."

He steps back from the closet and puts his shoulder down.

"Stop him!" Our Jacks mouths, mimicking the words the other Jacks is speaking. "Mom...why are you letting him do this? Why?"

Jerry sucks in a series of quick breaths and runs at the door. When his shoulder hits the door, it opens it easily. Susan's scream is feral. The other Jacks' silent scream invokes dread in us all. Then the other Jacks, Annika, Lar and I are gone. The bedroom feels like it has grown ten times in size with the open space.

Everything is suddenly new.

Happening for the first time.

For the first time in our existence, true unpredictability lies ahead of us.

Susan tries to crawl through Jerry's legs and make a run for it, but Jerry squeezes them shut, trapping her in a twisted yoke hold.

Annika takes hold of Jacks' hand and says, "Wait."

"Wait?" he replies exasperated. "Wait! All we've done is wait. This is why I am still here. This moment..."

"No," Annika says. "It's not...something's about to happen. I can feel it. I don't know how or why, but this feeling is running through me like an electrical current. Like my instinct has been given back to me."

And I feel it, too. But Annika's demeanor is so much more comforting than mine. More believable. So I leave her words as the defining words.

"Don't hurt her," Samantha whispers almost to herself. So low, it is inaudible to Jerry, who's fighting to stop Susan's thrashing between his legs. Samantha's shaking bottom lip and eyes pooled with tears ready to break free convince us that the gravity of the situation has finally squeezed out an ounce of her maternal instinct. Convince us that Annika is right. Something is about to happen.

"I can't breathe," Susan says.

"Don't hurt her," Samantha says again, this time loud enough to steal Jerry's attention.

"Are you kidding me, Samantha? If we don't do something with this brat, we'll both be in jail. You really are a stupid bitch."

"I told you...I told you not to call me stupid."

"Stupid!" Jerry screams like a child having a tantrum. "Stupid! Stupid!"

Samantha's timid demeanor evaporates. She scans the bedroom with wide, wild eyes and spots a lava lamp bottle on the floor that had rolled away from its base. She grabs the bottle and without hesitation throws it at Jerry's head. But the bottle misses and shatters against the wall next to Jerry. It's enough to startle Jerry and make him loosen his grip on Susan.

She doesn't hesitate for a second. She crawls out of the room fast as a fleeing mouse.

"Jesus Christ, Samantha! What the hell was that all about?" Jerry shouts as he lunges at Susan, misses her and tumbles to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Jerry," Susan says. "I don't know what got into me."

Jerry stands, adjusts his shirt and punches Samantha in mouth. The action catches us all off guard. Samantha falls to the floor like all the bones and muscles in her body had suddenly disappeared. Just a sack of parts waiting to be formed into a whole. Jerry runs from the room shaking the fist he just hit his wife with. Swearing under his breath. Jacks can't stay still anymore. He breaks free from Annika's grip and runs to his mother. Blood bubbles and pops from her nostrils. He kneels down next to her knowing she can't see him or hear him. "I don't blame you, mom," he says. "I don't blame you for anything. I've experienced so much life. I know we sometimes get ourselves in situations we never imagined ourselves being in. I know how hard it is to get out of those situations. I don't blame you for just wanting to be loved by someone. It's all I ever wanted."

Samantha's eyelids flutter. She turns her head slightly in the direction of Jacks kneeling above her. She's looking at the ceiling, but she's also looking into his eyes. Hearing him. Feeling him. The moment makes me tremble.

"I wish..." she says and swallows down a mouthful of blood. "I wish I could have been better."

Jacks puts out his index finger. He draws energy from his mother. From the lights in the room. From the alarm clock and the residual pain. He moves his finger towards his mother's cheek. It is a millisecond where he connects his skin with hers. But in that millisecond a lifetime of confusion and neglect and sadness collapses around them, lost amidst all the other garbage cluttering the floor of Susan's bedroom. The tears flowing from her eyes meet the blood flowing from her lips, thinning it out, making the pool of liquid under her cheek a little larger. "You're my mom," Jacks says. "And you're human. I know how tough it is to be a human. I can't imagine how much more difficult it is when you have to be a mother, too."

Samantha swallows another mouthful of blood, then uses her hands to prop herself up onto her knees. She reaches around to her back pocket and slides out her cell phone. Jacks backs up and

takes hold of Annika's hand again. I want to do the same, but I am too stunned by the connection Jacks has made with his mother. Frozen behind the many walls of what is and what is supposed be that are cracking open around me. Revealing a million more questions I'm not ready to ask.

"Help," Samantha says into her cell phone. "My husband is trying to kill my daughter."

She stands up and stumbles into the doorway, before stumbling out into the hallway. "Please," she says, her voice trailing off into a gurgling sound. "He really is going to kill her." And then the sound of the phone hitting the floor echoes through the house. Jacks lets go of Annika's hand and runs from the room.

"This is the path we were always meant to be on," Annika says. "Everything in our living life and in our afterlife happened to get us to this moment. You and me, here and now."

"I know."

I take Annika's hand like I had wanted to only moments earlier and together we walk out of Susan's room and into the last few moments of our journey through existence together.

The front door is wide open. Police sirens wail away in the distance. Sparrows chirp in the magnolia trees that line the front of the Caslow home. It's a strange mix of madness and serenity.

Samantha is unconscious on the kitchen floor. A trickle of blood falls from the corner of her lips onto the linoleum. Her exposed cheek is swelling and a large red spot that runs from her jaw to underneath her eye is forming. Jacks is sitting cross legged on the floor next to her. "That was the only chance we had left," he says without looking at us. "He's going to kill Suze now, I just know it. I don't know...I don't know if I can wait another seventy-six years to try this over again. I think the witch was right. I think nothing ever changes. We always lose everything. Until the one time you and Annika and I decide to leave me at the Island."

"She's still alive, Jacks," Annika says. "They're across the street right now."

“But it’s...it’s the afternoon, Annika,” he says. “There are no clouds in the sky anymore. The sun is casting shadows everywhere. We’ve hidden from those monsters for decades. There’s been no reason for us to go into the light...”

“Until now,” I say.

“But they’ll wipe us from existence,” Jacks says.

“Jacks, look at us,” I say. “What have we existed for over the last seven decades?”

He scrunches his face into a pained smile.

“What have you spent thousands of days and nights waiting for,” I continue. “Tens of thousands of hours focusing your energy on?”

“This day,” he says meekly.

“This day,” I repeat. “Why do we exist, Jacks? Not just us, but everybody? It’s to be there for the ones we love when they need us the most. At whatever the cost.”

“He’s right, Jacks,” Annika says. “This is what we committed ourselves to. It’s what Lar committed himself, too.”

Jacks stands up and walks over to the front door. We join him under the arch. The sparrows flutter off, leaving only the sound of the sirens and Jerry’s fury emanating from across the street. Jerry’s hands are wrapped around Susan’s neck. He has lifted her up off the ground. Pushed her up against a tree. It’s clear she can’t breathe. He’s yelling at her about “respect” and “disobedience”, about “being so goddamned nosey!” Angry spittle showers her pale face. Two police cars screech to a stop and the officers driving them exit with their guns drawn. “Drop the girl!” one of the officers yells.

A small group of neighbours and passersby has gathered on the sidewalk behind the police officers. “Jesus, Jerry,” one of the women in the group yells. “What are you doing?”

Susan has stopped fighting. Her skin has gone a shade of light blue. She is now looking past Jerry. Past the officers. She is looking at a woman who has appeared in the middle of the street. A woman who wasn’t there only a few seconds earlier. The woman looks to be in her late teens or early twenties. She has auburn hair that

stretches down to the back of her knees. She is wearing armour... armour that is scuffed and dented, but still gleams from some otherworldly sun. Stoically, the woman marches toward Susan with outstretched arms.

"We're too late," Jacks says. "Look behind the tree. Behind the garbage bin. They're here to take her to the Island."

"We can reach her before they do," I say. "Focus your energy Jacks. Do what you spent decades practicing. We'll be right behind you."

Jacks looks up at us with eyes full of tears. "Why me?" he asks. "Why did you give it all up to help me?"

"Jacks," I say, "there was never any notion of giving it all up. In fact, you helped me get back everything I lost early on in my living life. You helped me find the peace I struggled finding even in the afterlife. I am at peace now."

"We are at peace now," Annika confirms.

Jacks closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in. "Okay, then," he says. "I'm going to do this. One..."

"I love you, sister," I whisper to Annika.

"Two..."

"And I love you, brother," she whispers back.

Before Jacks hits three, Annika lets go of my hand and wraps her arms around the boy. I sprint outside. I am underneath the direct sun for only the second time in seventy-six years. Jacks is screaming, "You told me I could do this! You lied to me!"

The once inanimate shadows that stretch behind onlookers and officers are now growing. Fast. From the corner of my eye it looks like oil oozing over the asphalt. And as they grow, they slowly peel away from the ground. There are a dozen of them and they are all rising up toward me. Spinning around each other only meters above us all. I hone in on the energy that makes up my being. The protons and neutrons attract atoms in the air, strengthening my Light. Giving it mass. Pebbles begin to shift under my feet. When I reach the grass, I leave imprints behind me.

I am the footsteps you hear upstairs when no one else is home.

I am the picture frame falling off the wall.

I am the whispering voice in the hallway.

The shadows have eclipsed the sun. I have only seconds. Maybe less time than that. A shadow slaps down missing me by inches. The woman in armour has paid no attention to anything but Susan. Susan's light is reaching toward her. I put my head down and with all the mass I have gained, I run my body into Jerry, startling him. He drops Susan to the ground and falls back. One of the officers fires his gun and then Jerry is no more.

My shoulder is now where Susan's outstretched hand had been. The realization of what has just happened in a matter of seconds doesn't sink into anyone or anything. The woman in armour takes hold of me.

TWENTY-TWO

The mid-summer humidity has transformed me into a sweat-drenched sloth. It's frustrating, because the seminar starts in less than an hour and I know I'll never be able to get to the hotel and back before it begins. Why the hell would they hold this conference in Etobikoke, anyways? Why the hell is it so hot in Etobikoke? I need to sit for a minute in an air-conditioned room and sort myself, you know, before I start swinging my briefcase around, randomly attacking people because my mind has melted. My luck, there's a café called Vernon's, a couple of doors down. Last thing I need is a hot cup of coffee, but I'd pay triple just to take a few minutes out of this godforsaken heat. I pull open the entrance door and a wave of cool air blows past me like spirits escaping. Vernon's is a big space, with dark blue walls covered in various styles of art: landscape, abstract, still life. Other than me and a middle-aged man behind the till, the place is void of people. He smiles at me when our eyes meet, but there's no audible greeting. The emptiness in Vernon's is a little perplexing, because the sidewalks outside are bustling with folks from all demographics. And it's still technically morning. Geez, how bad is the coffee here? I sidetrack from the man at the till because I am drawn to a pencil and Conté portrait of a young girl. Maybe seven or eight years old. The girl looks just like my sweet

dead sister Annika. My right hand shakes. My heart aches. The man at the counter is trying to make himself look busy by wiping down the coffee urns and blowing out the steam wands. The act is awkward and just the distraction I need to get me away from the portrait. 'Just a small coffee,' I say as I walk toward the counter. He nods his head, turns away from me and pushes down on the urn's spigot, unleashing a stream of liquid into a white paper cup that has magically appeared in his hand. When it's nearly full he places the cup on the counter and smiles at me. There are ground espresso thumbprints on the cup. I can't see any steam coming off the surface of the coffee inside the cup. Bad signs in a coffee shop. I toss a two-dollar bill on the counter and say, 'Keep the change.' He nods at me as I take the cup of coffee and make my way to the condiment stand. I look over my shoulder to see that he has returned to looking fake busy. I set the cup of coffee down and inconspicuously dip my pinky finger into it. Lukewarm, at best. But I no longer care. It's just an excuse to be inside. I'm not even going to drink the coffee. To make my act even more convincing, I put a little sugar into it. As the white crystals fall into the cold coffee, I notice movement in the sugar dispenser. Jesus, it's a giant horse fly. How did it squeeze through the hole on the dispenser? I twist the dispenser lid off and the fly, fat on sugar, crawls out and flies off in heavy arcs toward the window. Coffee mugs clank. I turn to see the barista trying to place the mugs on top of the espresso machine while looking at me. I point to the fly and say, 'That giant thing was just swimming in the sugar.' He shrugs and mumbles, 'Happens sometimes.' I scan the café and say, 'Maybe if you checked the sugar more often, you'd have more customers.' The barista smirks. 'Oh I knew it was in there,' he says. I didn't expect that response. 'You knew it was in there? That's awful,' I say, genuinely disturbed by the admission. 'What kind of business is this? Why wouldn't you get the fly out and change the sugar.' The barista purses his lips for a second then mumbles, 'Because he deserved it.' He deserved it? What? The awkwardness of the barista and the position I am put in is far more discomforting than the heat outside. 'Ummm, think I'll be going now,' I say and turn toward the exit leaving my untouched cup of coffee on the condiment stand. As I walk away the barista mumbles, 'I didn't mean that in a bad way, I...' but I am out the door and back into the humidity before I can hear any more.

TWENTY-THREE

“Who are you?” she asks.

Her eyes are green, like polished emerald. Her pupils are narrow, giving me feline feels. She is standing in front of me, staring deep into me. Two elderly men stand on both sides of me, but I can’t make out any of their details because I can’t look away from the woman. We are nowhere. “Who are you?” she asks again. “And how is this even possible?”

“I...I used to be you,” I say.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean...I used to do what you do. I used to be the head of a group like yours charged with bringing children to the Island.”

“How can that be? There’s no ‘used to’ being this. You are this or you’re in the White.”

“Yes, I know that is what is imprinted in us to believe. But who’s to say what can and can’t be done in this afterlife.”

“It just is and always was,” she says. “I didn’t follow through with my job. Now I’ve doomed Susan to an eternity as a Fade.”

“Susan Caslow is meant to live. She is still alive, I am sure of it.

If you return, you will see that.”

“Her death is inevitable,” the woman says. “As are all the deaths we deal with.”

“No!” I shout. “Nothing is inevitable. We are meant to believe the Universe has everything planned out, but I know the Universe is nothing but a demon wrapped in plastic telling lies and making decisions on a whim. The only thing that is inevitable is change. The thing is, we always do what we’re instinctively told to do. Every single one of us. No one has ever questioned it or has ever tried to defy it. Until now.”

“But I’ve heard whispers about the shadows,” she says and shakes from the corporeal chill brought on by the thought.

“They’re real,” I confirm. “They were all around us before you took hold of me.”

“You mean David, Marcus and I could have been wiped from existence? You brought that upon us?”

“They were only there for me and for my sister Annika. Had they been there for you, you definitely would have seen them. We wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I am afraid of where we’ll be led to next,” she says. “What is taking place right now is a defiance of our sole purpose. It is why we are not in the White. What am I supposed to do now?”

I had spent decades thinking about what would happen if I succeeded in my mission to keep Susan alive. But most of my thoughts centered on being stamped out by the shadows. Or continuing to hide in the dark until the world ended. I hadn’t considered being a replacement Charge to a group of three...three that are so like Annika, Lar and me, had Annika been the lead.

“Follow through with your task,” I say. “Take me to the Island.”

She laughs and says, “That’s ludicrous. You, a grown man... you’re just going to get on the road with children and see what happens?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. But what have I got to lose? What is that feeling that pushes you forward telling you right now?”

“Return the charge to the Island and move on to the next one.”

“Exactly. You came away from your task with a light. It won’t be long before that witch realizes it’s not the right light, but right now...right now that seems to be our only option. You leave me on the Island and you just keep doing what you’ve always done.”

A few seconds pass. She closes her eyes. “But what’s to say we don’t all rebel after this?”

“Have you ever considered it up until now?”

“No.”

“I think I am an anomaly. I don’t know how I became that anomaly, but I really think I am the one put here to test the system she who calls herself the Universe created. I really think once you move onto your next charge, you’ll never think of this moment again. Can you remember any charges from your past? Their names? How they died? What they said to you?”

“No.”

“You just recall that there have been a lot of them and they are all named whatever child you are charged to bring back at the moment. What’s my name?”

She opens her eyes. “Susan,” she says.

“Take me to the Island.”

And then we are there. And the sky is so blue it looks like it has been artificially dyed. A boy on a hill behind us kicks a can and two dozen other children scream and laugh in joy at the culmination of another game. There is a group of children beside us doing cartwheels and dancing to a beat only they can hear. There are so many little voices. The buzz in the air is like power lines overhead emitting such powerful energy it is overwhelming.

The woman in armour no longer sees me as a grown man. She only sees me as her latest Charge. The two old men that are with her have their hands on my shoulders comforting me. “You will wait with all of the other children,” the woman says. “And at some point you will be called forward, Susan. It’s not something you hear. It’s something you’ll feel. And that’s when you get on the

road and join the crowd. Then you keep moving forward until you can't move anymore. And when you can't move, that's when you put your hands against the barrier holding you back and you push with all of your might."

"Thank you," I say.

She smiles and the three of them walk away from me. I watch as they walk past a group of children bouncing balls on a parachute, and then disappear.

I was told throughout my adult life that if I believed in something hard enough, the Universe would make it happen. Some people call it the Law of Attraction. Positive thoughts bring positive results. It might not happen right away, the books and the sages and the people looking for more would tell me. Patience is a part of its effectiveness. I believed so very hard that Annika would return. I spent a lifetime believing it. But it never happened. Leading me to believe The Law of Attraction and positive thinking carried the same weight as horseshit. But then I died. The woman wrapped in plastic called herself the Universe. She said She would always be watching me. I cannot deny that She is in control of whatever is happening right now. I also can't disprove She put the Law of Attraction in the minds of humans. Human minds are filled with so much horseshit. There to distract us from the pain of existence. But whatever I was to the Universe (a pawn, a guinea pig, a toy, or just one more human soul being shown "the way"), I now believe I am at the end of the path She laid out in front of me. And I believe for the first time, I am exactly where I am supposed to be.

And, I guess, that is a positive result.

I sit down on the softest, greenest grass, and I wait.

"It has been a while, Risto Salminen."

The voice comes a minute after I sat down. Or a week after. It is filled with heat and scope. It has been more than seven decades since I last heard it, but it's like the conversation we began on the Queen Mary, never ended. She is behind me, but I cannot bear to look back at her.

“Have you always known this is where I would end up?” I ask.

“I know what I know, and that is all.”

“You know all?”

She chuckles at my observation.

“Why have you lead me here?”

“We are not tethered, Risto Salminen. You brought yourself here.”

“But why am I so special?”

“That is your ego talking, Risto Salminen. You are not special. None of you are special. Have you ever actually looked around the Island? Have you noticed that here and there, men and women just like you wait? Sitting on the grass thinking the same things you think? I have been called cruel and I have been called witch and I have been called liar, but I have also been called God and great and glorious. Funny how one entity can have so many sides to it. Funny how my compassion is so often overlooked. How my compassion is so often mislabeled as cruelty.”

I look at my surroundings and for the first time notice the adults. They’re all sitting. Hidden behind children playing games and flying kites and eating ice cream. They all have looks of confusion and contemplation on their faces. There aren’t a lot of them, but they are here. Waiting, just like me.

“Are you God?”

“Oh, Risto Salminen. I would think by now you would know what I am.”

“I guess I do. But I never did anything good in my living life. Why am I one of so very few given this...given this second chance? I mean, I wasted my life being sad and angry. Those aren’t redeeming qualities.”

“Risto Salminen, you gave up your life to those things. You were a child. You were human. Humans are not as powerful as they often think they are. Many lose their lives to the same things you did. You made a difference in your life, Risto Salminen. You may not have always seen it, because of how subtle it was, but Risto Salminen, that difference you made was so very grand. Take Phillip

Ulster, a man you spoke four words to during a random encounter in 1974.”

“That name means nothing to me.”

“But you, Risto Salminen, mean everything to the man who goes by that name. You spotted the tears running down his cheeks as you walked by him. You sensed the conflict raging through him and you told him to...”

“...Hang in there, buddy.”

“Yes. Those four little words made Philip Ulster’s thoughts of suicide dissipate. Those words made Phillip Ulster get back on the path he was destined to be on. Your life was filled with little words and little actions that made big impacts. All lives are. Risto Salminen, I forgave you long ago for what you did because of your loss. Now you must forgive yourself.”

“But if we’ve all made big impacts, as you say, why aren’t we all given another chance at life?”

“At first there was an infinite nothingness, Risto Salminen. An idea that no one had yet thought of. An abstraction of anything real. And after an eternity of pure nothingness, something momentarily appeared in the void and gave substance to the atoms and elements floating around in it. A few of those elements collided and a bang birthed worlds. And birthed me.”

“What does any of that have to do with me?”

“Ego again, Risto Salminen. Your ego is what almost cost you this opportunity. But it is what you possess within you...what you carried with you through your life and through your afterlife, so powerfully, that made you break free from the constraints I placed upon you...it is that same alien energy that entered the nothingness and birthed the one true universe...it is that and only that, which brought you here.”

“Love?”

There is no response. Only laughter. I turn around and see two children playing pick-up sticks.

“Do you want a turn?” one of them asks.

I smile and shake my head.

I am here now, waiting for I don't know what. Full of love, but still so aware of the pain I caused people throughout my life. I wish I could apologize to my ex-wife Lenora. To Elizabeth, who I tried to make better...I wish I could apologize to all the women and children I left alone during the most difficult times in their lives. Their only mistake, thinking I was more than I was. I wish I could go back and explain how none of what I did or said was personal. How I just wanted them to hurt so I didn't have to. God, I loved those women so much. If only I could have given those women the same love I gave Annika, how different my life on Earth could have been. But I am dead now and the only person I can apologize to anymore is me. I am sorry I never let joy in. I am sorry for sabotaging happiness whenever it was within arm's reach. I am sorry I always wanted the opposite of what I had, never content with the present moment. I am sorry I let the past create such an infection in my soul, making me sick the majority of my life.

I am sorry.

And I am here.

How is one love so much greater than another?

Children wave at me and invite me to play hide and seek and sing songs with them. What they see when they look at me is a mystery. But it does not deter them from approaching me. Asking me if I want to play.

I am sorry.

And I continue to wait.

Every minute, children break away from whatever activity they are engaged in and they get onto the road. And every minute another child arrives and takes the place of the child that just left. I no longer see the people who bring the children to the Island. All I see is positive energy and life bubbling, ready to be lived again.

And I continue to wait.

And when it feels like all the time in the world has passed, while at the same time it feels like no time at all has passed, the electric hum of all the childrens' voices mutes and I hear one word.

"Go."

It is an unmistakable voice. It is the woman wrapped in plastic.

It is the Universe.

It is God.

It is me.

It is everything that ever was and ever will be.

And it loves me.

And I love it.

I stand up and walk down the hill to the road where I join in with the thousands of other children walking forward. Children holding hands. Children carrying babies. Children skipping and twirling. I walk for days. And at some point during the walk someone grabs my hand. It is Jacks. He smiles at me and I smile back. We are past words. Together, we eventually reach the barrier.

And together, we push through it.

pg. 72 **Farewell to Nova Scotia** is a popular folk song from Nova Scotia, Canada, adapted from the Scottish lament **The Soldier's Adieu**.

pg. 85, 86 Excerpt from **The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia: Being Babylonian and Assyrian Incantations Against the Demons, Ghouls, Vampires, Hobgoblins, Ghosts, and Kindred Evil Spirits, Which Attack Mankind** (1903), translated by Reginald Campbell Thompson.

Christopher Millin is the author of *The King of Arugula, Fowl, Swine and Things That Send Shivers Down Your Spine* and *The Healing Sand*. When he's not writing, he's publishing **Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine**, an arts and literature magazine for children, and he's talking about the 80s on *Neon City*, a late-night community radio show in Penticton, BC.



THE ISLAND OF WAIT

Risto Salminen spent a lifetime hiding from the traumas of his childhood in Northern Finland. When he dies, he hopes he can leave it all behind and drift peacefully into the White. To his surprise, he awakes in the afterlife as the leader of a group of Bearers, which includes his nine-year old sister Annika and the seven-foot-four behemoth Lar. The Bearers are tasked with bringing the souls of deceased children to The Island of Wait, a mysterious middle ground between death and life again.

Risto has been lead to believe that everything that happens in life and the afterlife is predetermined by some higher power. That the path we walk on is laid out for us the moment we are born. And therefore cannot be changed. But with each new charge Risto and his Bearers bring to the Island, he becomes more and more unsettled by not only his position and his purpose in the afterlife, but also by the realization that he wasn't the man he thought he was while alive on Earth.

When a young boy named Jacks is killed in a hit and run and begs to be returned to his body so he can save his sister from her abusive stepfather, Risto begins to understand the complexities and corruptive abilities of human emotion. He steps off the path to help Jacks save his sister, and in doing so, learns just how enlightening...and how dangerous it is to go against the will of the Universe.

And to make our own path.

