



**A  
LITTLE  
MAGIC  
FOR  
YOUR  
TROUBLE**

**ZACH RIGGS**

Hey yo – just wanted to say thanks for downloading! My hope with these stories was to bring a little joy to anyone struggling through the COVID-19 crisis.

I figured with everyone bored at home, a free short book might help someone. And if a lot of us are reading the same thing, maybe it could help us feel a little more connected again.

I hope you enjoy these stories! Keep an eye on your inbox – I'm hoping to send new free stories your way on a regular basis, regardless of how long COVID lasts.

Thanks for reading!

-Zach

*A Little Magic  
for Your Trouble*

*Zach Riggs*

*To Corrie*

*You are always magic for my trouble.*

Flower Bar

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'merica

Old Soles and New Leaves

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# Flower Bar

i.

O'Malley was more complicated than I thought. He tended the bar I visited every weekend—wore a Pippen jersey, wasn't from Chicago, spoke in quick jabs packing a wallop.

Every Friday night he'd greet me the same way. "Henry Boy, what'll it be." Not even a question. Just a statement. Also, my name's not Henry. I never corrected him. I visited the bar to forget my week, procrastinate away any projects left hanging over my head. A new name helped.

I'd order a beer, we'd talk a little, he'd tend to other customers, I'd watch the game, I'd go home. Big deal. Except this one time I walked in, the place didn't smell the usual alcohol-sweat mix. It smelled like flowers because there were flowers everywhere.

Gardenias, roses, jasmine, lilies of the valley—all over the walls. Peonies, wisteria, hyacinth, lilacs—hanging from the bar. Lavender, sweet peas, chocolate cosmos, frangipanis—on the ceiling fans. Bouquet after bouquet adorned every table, every booth, every surface. A brand-new warm glow enveloped the place and invited me in.

“Henry Boy, what’ll it be.”

“O’Malley. What’s all this?”

“What. Oh, those. I got married, see.”

His scratchy voice always made me want to itch somewhere. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“While back. She did the *décor*.”

To hear the tough little man say *décor* was a jolt. “Well I like it. Looks good.”

“Uh.”

“Imperial, please.”

The drink flowed, foamed my mustache between sips. “So what’s her name?”

“Beatrice. Call her B.”

“Ah. So I’m guessing the B likes flowers.”

He stared at me deadpan for ten seconds flat.

“Just a joke,” I said.

“Yeah, she does.”

I took a big swallow. No one else at the bar. “So what d’you love about her?”

“What?”

“Your wife. What do you love about her?”

He busied himself, wiping glasses, cleaning stuff. I thought he’d ignored me until he said, “I guess she got nice hands.”

“Nice *hands*?”

“Yeah. Real nice.”

A husband praising his wife’s hands before all else. I smothered a smile in my glass. “That’s good, man.”

“You got a girl?”

“What, me? No. No I’m, I been dating around and stuff. Here and there. Real casual.”

“You should find a girl.”

I grinned. “Why?”

“You’re kind of wandering.”

“Wandering?”

Another dude sat at the bar. O’Malley tapped his drink. I watched LAFC up 4-2 against Atlanta United. The bald goalie resembled a goose and dove for another save.

I’d been so busy with work I hadn’t stopped to think.



ii.

“Henry Boy. Meet Joe Strack.”

Joe turned to me two seats away. Big guy in his 50s. I had to contort and lean over to shake his hand. “Pleasure, friend. Pleasure,” his voice echoed in the bar.

“So what d’you do, Joe?”

“Road construction.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Well kinda. I do the sign.”

“The sign?”

“You know. I tell traffic when they stop, when they can go.”

O’Malley said, “You’re the guy everybody hates.”

“Or everybody loves.” Joe guffawed, a deep wheeze. “Dependin how you look at it.”

O’Malley licked his top lip. Joe took a big swig, finished. “Nother, please.” He turned to me. “So what do you do?”

“Me? I’m uh, graphic designer at a marketing agency.”

“Ah, I was in marketing once.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. Did that. Wasn’t my thing, really. Too much talking.”

“Well, it’s not really—”

“So you lookin to do that forever?”

“Well—”

“He’s wandering,” O’Malley said.

“Wanderin? How so?”

“Well—”

“You lookin to change jobs?”

“I mean, n—”

“He needs to find a girl,” O’Malley said.

Joe barked a laugh. “Don’t we all.” After another down he swiped his mouth with his hand. “Ain’t that the truth.” He turned to O’Malley. “So what’d you do to this place?”

“What?”

“All the flowers and stuff.”

“Oh, those. I got married, see.”

“You did?”

I tuned out. Swirled my drink. Checked my phone. Watched United score again. Joe filled the bar with another wheeze. “Hands! Good hands. That’s hilarious. Amen, brother.” He couldn’t let it go. “How ‘bout her feet. Nice feet too?” O’Malley shrugged as he fixed two more drinks.

The bar was packing in. After-work crowd. I thought about going home. I traced a snaking line of pink peonies behind the bar, up a pole, across the

ceiling, through a maze of signs and posters and paintings, down and down upon a booth where ...

“Henry Boy.”

O’Malley nodded at the booth. A woman sat there cradling a bottle between her fingers like a web. She tucked a strand of white-blonde hair behind her ear as a group of girlfriends talked around her.

“Time to introduce yourself,” he said.

I think he meant the whole group, but I only saw her. Joe noticed the mischief afoot. “What’s that? Oh ... oh yeah. You got this, son. You can do it!”

“*Shh!*” They had to notice three guys staring at them from across the bar. “I’m not going over there.”

“Sure y’are.”

“This is your time.”

My stomach moved like a thunderstorm. “Y’all are crazy.”

O’Malley gave me a shove hard enough to tip me off the stool. I caught myself awkwardly and Joe laughed for the whole bar. The girls noticed, giggled amongst themselves like all women do no matter how old or young. Even the white-blonde girl broke a smile.

I felt my cheeks flush. “What is this, middle school?”

“C’mon, Henry Boy. What’ll it be?”

Maybe I was dreaming all this. But if so ...

“What the hell.” I scooped a big swig of beer, slammed it down empty and began the walk of shame.

O’Malley clenched his fist and Joe clapped once like a gunshot. “There we go!”

I kept my head down. Want to avoid eye contact until I get closer. My heart pounds, my head is alert and ready. They see me now. One more second. This is living. Must be really living. This is what being alive is—

The ceiling spins. Straight ahead. A weird ritual. My back on the floor, my eyes staring up, my arms spread out like Jesus on the cross. Dazed, I try to look around, can’t lift my head. Somewhere in a distant land I hear pained *ooooos* and a harsh wheeze.

I don’t know how long I lay on the floor. O’Malley emerged and helped me back to the bar. I settled in my seat and waited for the bar to stop whirling. “Here, Henry Boy.” He passed me a tall glass of seltzer water.

“You need that,” Joe chuckled.

O'Malley looked back at the girls. "He's fine," he told them. Joe turned in his seat and proclaimed, "He's a lightweight!"

The whole bar erupted in laughter, or so it sounded to me with my head down on my arms. "I don't know what happened," I said, voice muffled. "I guess I drank too fast."

"Drinks have their own plans," O'Malley said.

Soon the group of girls filed out. I was too embarrassed to look up. "They looked at you as they left," Joe said.

"So this is middle school after all."

"Must be with how much you can drink." The sound of Joe's laughter scraped my skin.

O'Malley shook his head and watched the game end. 4-3. United couldn't pull it out.

"Got too far in a hole," said a guy at the bar's other end. "Couldn't get out in time."

Miserable, I tried to find the bottom of my Facebook feed.

### iii.

My feed stopped loading. My phone showed no service bars. "O'Malley, what's the Wi-Fi here?"

"What's Wi-Fi?"

"Never mind. My phone service went out."

Joe checked his phone. “Hey, mine too.”

With no phone and no beer, I stood up. “I think I’m gonna go home.”

The door opened. In walked a woman—a tall, gaunt, bony woman.

O’Malley rushed from the bar. He took his wife’s hands in his. He leaned up on tiptoes and kissed her cheek. “Henry Boy,” he turned to me. “This is my bride.”

“Hello. I’m Beatrice.” She offered her hand, smooth and soft and flawless. I shook it and felt a warmth like a hot spring pass through my stomach up to my chest.

I felt better instantly. “Nice to meet you, Beatrice.”

She grimaced at me and dropped her elegant hand by her side as if to shield it. “I think it’s about to storm,” she said.

“Oh, maybe that’s why my phone lost service,” I rambled like a helpless waiter. “Cell tower down or something.”

“Maybe.”

O’Malley shifted from one foot to the other as he studied his outside guests through the windows.

“Got a guy singing out.”

“Might want to bring him in,” Beatrice said.

Joe noticed Beatrice and fell from his stool to meet her. “The pleasure’s all mine, Mrs. O’Malley.”

She pressed her lips together. “That’s not my name.”

“Ah, pardon me, modern times and all. *Miss* O’Malley. I have to say, you have particularly stunning—”

A flash and a crack of thunder outside. The door flew open as drenched customers hurried in followed by a man with a guitar. He found O’Malley, tapped his shoulder. “The speakers are still out there,” he said. “I had to save my guitar.”

O’Malley spun to me. “Come with me.” We rushed out with Joe behind us and rescued speakers, a PA system and a microphone from the torrent.

Back in the bar I felt my socks squish in my shoes. The bar overflowed with people now—a definite fire hazard. The dry customers squeezed at their tables and booths while the rain-wet had to stand. But the flowers and warm lights created a cozy atmosphere. An easy patter of conversation drifted up to meet the storm’s drone above.

O’Malley found the guitar player, tapped his shoulder. “I paid you for the night,” he said. He pointed to a tiny stage in the corner. “Go play.”

“Wha? But the PA—”

“Probably fried. Doesn’t matter. Grab a stool and play unplugged.” O’Malley turned to me. “Thanks. The bar’s slammed. Gotta jump back there.”

I’d lost my seat when I helped O’Malley. I reclaimed what I hoped was still my seltzer water and pressed through the onslaught of bodies. Joe, soaking wet, towered above the mob. He beamed at me. “Pretty nuts, ain’t it?” I shook my head.

Then I bumped into someone and my water splashed all over us. “Oh, man, I’m sor—”

It was her. The girl with the white-blond hair.

#### iv.

She was soaked through from the rain like me. “What’s a little more water,” she said, and she smiled long and loud and true.

“You came back?”

“I did. We took a walk. The rain came out of nowhere. How are you feeling after your ...”

“Uh, what are you talking about? I’ve done nothing embarrassing all night. Completely perfect night.”

She smiled again, easy and free. “Right. That’s right. I had you mixed up with someone else. My bad.”

“So where’d your group go?”



She shrugged. "I don't know. They ran ahead when the rain started. I didn't feel like running so I came back here. I know, I'm so lazy. And I can't call them 'cause my phone stopped working."

"Mine too! Maybe it's the storm?"

"No idea. Do they have Wi-Fi here?"

I laughed. "The guy behind the bar, he didn't know what Wi-Fi was."

"What?" She laughed. The guitar guy started playing and singing a soft tune. I looked at my shoes and noticed hers were red Converse. I looked up and studied the flowers. "So what d'you think about the *décor* here?"

"The *décor*, huh? Well. I think it's wonderful."

"Yeah?"

"Never expected this when I walked in. Seemed like just a normal pub."

"Usually it is. But the owner got married."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Made him a softie, I think."

Her eyes squinted when she laughed. "Softies are so underrated."

"Oh, for sure."

"The nice guy shouldn't finish last all the time."

"Absolutely. But they always seem to anyway."

“Well maybe they do in this life. But maybe not in the next?” Her eyes sparkled blue in the center of black rings of makeup—two centrifuges pulling me into orbit.

“I think that’s a rare perspective,” I said.

“Maybe so.”

“Most girls like the tough guys. Dudes who treat them bad. The wounded, flawed type. At least that’s what it feels like.”

“That’s ‘cause they like to think they can fix them.”

“That makes no sense, though. Guys don’t do that to girls.”

The corner of her lips tugged upward. “It’s a pride thing, I guess. Kinda like when guys only care about a girl until they hook up. Then they move on the next day. It’s all about the conquest.”

“Sure. Lotta guys are like that.”

“That’s why I think mercy’s a lost virtue for us. Millennials, I mean. It’s so rare these days.”

“Yeah.”

A beat. Guitar dude crooned ‘New York I Love You, But You’re Bringing Me Down.’ I clenched my seltzer water in a vice grip. “Which flower’s your favorite?” I asked.

“Oh, I haven’t seen it up there. I was looking for it earlier but couldn’t find it.”

“What is it?”

Her eyes a blue flame. “Orchids.”

“Nice. Very cool.” The music went on, changed to some Sinatra song. “Hey, I’ll be right back.” I couldn’t tell if she heard me because the crowd pressed in on us and drove us apart like an ocean’s riptide.

Suffocating.

I pushed back to the bar. O’Malley was pouring three drinks at once. “O’Malley.”

“Yeah, kinda busy.”

“Did you put orchids on the wall?”

“What?”

“Any orchids up there!”

“Ask B.”

“Where is she?”

He juttled his head to the back.

I slipped through, turned a corner and almost ran Beatrice over.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“You scared me.”

“I’m sor—”

A purple orchid sprouted from her open palm. She extended it to me. “I heard you through the bar window.”

“Oh. Thank you so much.”

She pressed her lips together and I realized the grimace was her version of a smile. She was pleased. I didn't know what to say so I bounced my head once. "Thanks again."

I fought back through the mob. All the bodies warmed the cold still trapped in my bones from the rain. I reached the center where we'd met but she wasn't there. I stood on tiptoes. Nowhere to be seen.

I searched the floor for red Converse. There were more people than ever, too dangerous to even try moving, they pressed in around me, I felt a sinking feeling in my chest. Chet Baker's 'I Get Along Without You Very Well' drifted above the heads of drinkers and talkers, laughers and partiers, well-wishers, happy people, all. I gripped the orchid and turned my eyes upon it. Its violet petals waved at me, its open lip and throat taunted me. Its scent filled my nostrils.

**v.**

Before I knew it I'd torn the flowerheads from the stem. I dropped both on the bar and pushed past Joe to the exit.

"Where you goin?" he said.

"Home."

Somehow O'Malley overheard. "Don't leave yet, Henry Boy. Not yet. What'll it be?"

I stopped. I didn't really know what he meant—but I did.

I turned and waded through the crowd. At first I was polite, excusing myself. But soon I didn't care. I almost pushed people over in my hurry. I didn't know where I was headed—but I did.

I jumped onstage. I bumrushed the guitar player. I interrupted his song and took over his mic.

"Did anybody see a girl, super blonde, almost white hair?" My voice boomed through the bar. The room shushed. My heart buzzed. "She had red Converse hightops on. Uhm ... really, really pretty. Like, gorgeous. I don't know."

Jeers, heckles, boos.

"Get off'tha stage!"

"Lover boy!"

Cheeks warm. Ears on fire. I wanted to leave. The guitar guy jostled me. "Do you mind? I'm working."

I shrunk back. Under the stage lights I could just make out O'Malley's shape behind the bar standing next to his much taller wife. They watched me like patron saints.

I pushed back in towards the mic. "No, really. Anybody seen this girl? I gotta find her. It's gonna

happen. I don't care how long this takes. I don't care."

Loud boos this time. The guitar player threw up his hands. I planted my feet. They might start throwing drinks but I wasn't going anywhere.

"Yo!" somebody called. "She just went outside."

I spun for the voice. "What?"

"I literally see her outside the window right now."

I couldn't see her from stage. As I exited everybody cheered and clapped as the music started back. I pushed toward the door, passing O'Malley, who only nodded at me with a glint in his eye. Beatrice was nowhere to be found. Joe gave me a hearty thumbs up. I noticed he had tears in his eyes, but I couldn't say why.

I opened the door and stepped out. She was under an awning watching the rain, white-blond hair a shock of electric.

She matched eyes with me. "Hey, I am so sorry. I had to get out of there. Got kinda claustrophobic." She laughed big.

"That's alright. Don't even worry. I'm guessing you heard my speech."

"What speech?"

"On the ... never mind."

We huddled beneath the overhang, barely room enough for two, listening to the rain waterfall off the roof.

Her eyes dropped to my hand. I followed her gaze and saw one of the orchid's flowerheads still clinging to my palm. Its violet vibrated against the gray drull outside.

"Oh yeah. I found this for you."

"For me?"

"Of course. I left to go find it."

I gave it to her, our fingers touching—a firespark. She glowed at the flower and pinned it in her hair as the rain fell around us in synchronic notes. "It's perfect. Thank you."

"You're very welcome. Listen—" My throat went dry. I swallowed hard as she gazed at me. "You think, ah ... could I get your number?"

"Of course. I'd love that. I'd text it to you but, obviously no signal." She pulled out a black Sharpie and grabbed my hand to write her number on my arm. "There. Now you can't lose it."

"You carry a Sharpie around?"

"Sure. You never know. By the way, I'm Katie."

"You can call me Henry Boy."

# Duel of the Hipsters

Coffee shop yesterday. Sat next to two dudes at a table. Both had enormous beards, giant glasses, extemporaneous tattoos, thrift-shop clothes. Mirrors of each other. I couldn't help eavesdropping.

"That's what I thought, too," Hipster 1 said. "Every note they played was like a seismic crash. Against my soul, man. Totally dug 'em."

"*Totally* dug them," Hipster 2 said. "Especially when they played the acoustic version of 'My Last Cigar.' You know, that B-side by Astrid and the Wildcat Humberries."

"Oh yeah, great cut. That was killer. I got that on vinyl, actually. Rare pressing but, anyways."

"That's cool. I got it on cassette, so ..."

"Dude but that aftershow. Best part of the night. You hear about it?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah totally."



“It was invitation-only for the band’s first five fans. From back before they got big. Pretty legit, actually. Didn’t see you there.”

“Yeah I actually got the invite, but I had a previous engagement. Got to attend a private art show by Nikki Falome.”

“Oh yeah. Falome. Love her work.”

“So woke, dude.”

“Her collage of ancient Mesopotamian symbols really gets to me.”

“Oh yeah, watching her paint with her feet was literally life-changing. It was only me, Nikki’s nephew, and Nikki’s nephew’s pet owl Phoenix there. Super intimate setting.”

“Legit. That reminds me. Last month when my kombucha was almost done fermenting, I took a short trip to Montreal to get inspired for my fourth novella.”

“Whoa, fourth? I didn’t see your third get published.”

“It’s in the works. Anyways I got to walk the streets of Montreal alone. And I found this bar in the middle of nowhere, literally. I think I was their first customer ever. It was this coffee-juice-tea bar that doubled as a tattoo and scarf shop.”

“Dude I love scarves!”

“Me too!”

“I own like seventy-nine!”

They geeked out here a bit, because scarves. Their excitement blew over as quickly as it came.

“Yeah. I own ninety-plus, minimum. Personally, I just love scarf weather. I feel like it’s just—*me*.”

“Yeah. But you said Montreal. My last trip there I sat in a deserted garden and just drank in the surroundings with my double shot no-water non-fat slightly extra hot with a scosche of hyacinth chai. Got to wear my v-neck and scarf around like it was normal.”

“Oh, that’s crazy. This scarf I’m wearing was made by this Norwegian farmer’s son. Super talented prodigy. Definitely up and coming in the fashion world. I watched him shave the sheep firsthand and knit it for me right before my eyes. Best smelling scarf of all time.”

“Oh man. You been to Norway? Last time I was there I was in this tiny town, population of two. Both people were writer-slash-photographers who make their living brewing ale. Great couple. The wife was pregnant and she said she was gonna name me the child’s godfather, so ...”

There was a pause. Hipster 1 leaned back in his chair, took a careful sip of coffee. He must have been

panicking inside—I could tell by the snide little smile hidden beneath his French handlebar. Had he been out-hipstered? Would he lose this round?

A lightbulb went off in his brain. He leaned forward—but not too quickly. He didn't want to come off eager.

“That’s awesome. Norway is pretty cool. Personally though I prefer Estonia’s climate and culture. My favorite band is from Estonia, actually. They’re called Sada Kuuskümmend Üheksa Sallid. You should check them out.”

“Yeah, they’re OK. Personally, they got a little too big for my tastes. Kinda sold out. Which is a bummer. NPR kinda ruined them. They’re old stuff was so good.”

I packed my things. When I left they were passive-aggressively comparing beard lengths.

# The Colorist

*First published in the Spring 2019 edition of The  
Blue Mountain Review*

It would've been a nice day if the sky wasn't green. But the sky had been green for all of Kevin Huey Hartaugh's days.

He heard green wasn't normal. People said the sky was blue. But he knew that wasn't true because the trees were blue.

He sighed as he weaved his '97 Camry through Atlanta traffic. Purple taillights ran the length of I-75 as far as he could see. The Camry's hood was a gaudy bright orange. The listing had said it was silver. Kevin had bought it anyways.

He'd barely managed to get his driver's license in the first place. Stop signs were a deep yellow for him but red lights were cyan. Yellow lights a dark coral;

green lights pink. He memorized the correct colors with the Internet's help. But the stereographed vision test had concerned him: he couldn't find an actual image online.

At the DMV counter, a woman with an aqua nose ring told Kevin to look through the goggles on his left. They pointed down into an image of a road lined by fences, leading to a tree on a hill with a barn on the right. A little man stood under the tree. The sky looked green to Kevin, the grass blue, the fence turquoise and the barn a fluorescent indigo.

Ms. Aqua asked Kevin, "What do you see?"

Kevin told her. He left out the colors.

"Which way is the farmer facing?"

Left. Kevin had perfect vision at 20/20.

Then came the killer question.

"What color is the barn?"

Indigo. Fluorescently. Obviously. But that couldn't be right.

Kevin licked his chapped lips, pressed them together. He had to guess.

"Red."

He passed. Now he was driving on the highway to visit another doctor. It was like they'd let anyone on the road.

He'd seen many optometrists as a boy. That all started when Kevin did a science experiment in school about heat absorption in colors and he got every question wrong. His mother took Kevin to all the doctors in town. No optometrist had ever encountered as peculiar a specimen as Kevin. Most didn't believe his disability and asked his mother if Kevin was a middle child or perhaps adopted.

No one found a cure.

But lately his coworker Jenna had been suggesting another doctor. Jenna was one of the few Kevin let know his condition. He was a quiet man who learned to live with the perpetual reminder that everything he saw was wildly incorrect. But at a social after work one night, Kevin had one too many drinks and turned to Jenna.

"Hey ..." he slurred, leaning on the bar. "You know what. I *love* your red hair."

Jenna glared at him. "You must be pretty hammered if you think my hair's red."

Kevin remembered himself for a moment. "Oh ... I forgot. I can't see colors right." He laughed until his face turned teal.

The next day Jenna confronted a hungover Kevin. "What did you mean you can't see colors right?"

Kevin shrugged. “C’mon, Jen. I was drunk. Don’t listen to what I said.”

But Jenna’s mother had been stubborn—a gene Jenna inherited in spades. “No. I could tell. You really think my hair’s red. Do you have a condition or something?” She held up a sheet of paper. “Can you see this?”

It was a white spreadsheet with numbers all over—the reason Kevin had gone into accounting. Plenty of black and white, which he could see fine. Few colors, if any. Only real trouble was when Charlie the receptionist color-coded everyone’s birthdays. Kevin never wished anyone happy birthday until the cake came out.

“Of course I can,” he told Jenna. “It’s just numbers.”

Jenna cast the paper aside. “Look. My hair’s blonde. Not red. OK? Not even close. Tell me what colors I’m wearing.” She put her arms at her sides and waited.

“Um ...”

Jenna’s mouth gaped. “You really can’t tell, can you?”

Kevin hung his head (balding, just as his father and his father’s father). “Your blouse looks gold. Your pants look blue.”

Jenna shook her head, her flaming red bangs waving, her mouth still gaping.

From then on Jenna quietly helped Kevin with colors in the office. Now Kevin had an outlet—someone to share with about how he saw the world. Jenna never ran out of questions, insatiably curious about this folder’s color, or that fern in the corner, or VP Bob Bank’s toupee (violet, beige and baby blue).

Then Jenna discovered a specialized optometrist. Dr. Wylan McNeal.

“I’ve seen dozens of eye doctors, Jenna,” Kevin said. “They can’t help me.”

“How do you know? Just go and see.”

“What makes this guy different?”

“Who knows if you don’t go!”

Jenna bugged Kevin for two weeks straight about it. She flooded his weekends with annoying texts.

And now here he was. He pulled between cherry-colored parking lines, marched into an emerald elevator, searched for office glass doors that said *McNeal Experiments* in bright bold magenta.

Kevin did a double take. “Experiments?” Jenna left that part out.

He pushed through. A receptionist greeted him. She had eyes the color of tangerines. She was a large woman and seemed proud of it.

“Hello,” Kevin said. “I think I have the wrong place. I’m looking for an optometrist’s office.”



The receptionist smiled and the tangerines exploded into sunbursts. “Oh no, you’re in just the right spot. Sign here ... and here ... initial here ... OK. You’ll see Dr. Wylan shortly.”

An hour trickled by. Kevin suffered the wicked torture device called an office chair and thought many times about going home. But he didn’t, and eventually a man of impeccable stature crashed through the far door.

“Mista Hartaugh!”

The giant standing in the doorway sported wild stringy hair the color of saffron and red-pepper eyebrows standing at an impossible angle.

“I’m Dr. Wylan. Follow me.”

Kevin sprung up and followed the doctor to a white room with a white table. Dr. Wylan wore all white and he jittered like he was nervous or cold or both. “So, uh. What seems to be the problem?”

“Well, Dr. McNeal—”

“It’s Dr. Wylan.”

“Well, Dr. Wylan,” Kevin said. “I can’t see colors right.”

“I see. And who says?”

“Who says what?”

“Who says you can’t see colors right?”

“Well. Everybody.”

“Mmhmm, mmhmm,” Dr. Wylan jotted on a clipboard and mumbled something imperceptible. Then he said, “Got a girlfriend?”

“What? No. What’s that got to do—”

“Oh, I’ve seen some strange cases walk in here. Almost all of them were related to love.”

“Love?”

“Oh yeah. *Love*. You betcha.”

Kevin wondered if maybe Dr. Wylan snorted cocaine right before this. “Nope. No girlfriend.”

Dr. Wylan kept jotting. “Any urinary problems?”

“What?”

“Urinary problems. You know—taking a leak. Any issues?”

“Um ... no?”

Dr. Wylan’s red-pepper eyebrows jumped and he hooted a heavy breath. “Oooh, boy. OK. Let me look at them peepers.”

He turned out the light and stood peering into Kevin’s eyes with a blinding light for a long, long time. The room became a coffin. Kevin held his breath as Dr. Wylan stood incredibly, uncomfortably close. It felt like hours.

Finally the doctor turned, flipped the switch, settled back in his chair. “Well Mista Hartaugh. To be honest, I can’t help you.”

Kevin shrugged. "I figured."

"And that's because," Dr. Wylan stood again, "you don't want to be helped."

"Aw, c'mon. Who are you, Dr. Phil?"

"Dr. Phil, great man," Dr. Wylan laid his hand over his heart. "But no, I'm not. But I believe in the human body's ability to work for itself ... with a skosh of experimentation to help it along. But none of that works if you believe you can't be helped."

"That's just what everybody's told me my whole life," Kevin said. "Tell me something different."

"Oh, I'll tell you something different, alright. You're not just helpable—"

"Helpable?"

"It's in the dictionary." Dr. Wylan licked his lips, clicked his cheek and pointed at Kevin. "Look it up. Anyway, I was saying you're one of the easy ones."

"What?"

"Oh yeah. You wouldn't believe who I've seen come through this office. You'd consider some of my cases ... *miracles*. Yeah, that's right."

"Like what?"

"Well one guy came in here—wait. Can't tell you that. Confidential stuff."

"That makes sense."

The doctor hummed before he spoke again. “Limb regeneration.” His eyes popped wide. “All I’m gonna say.”

“OK ... right. But you really think you can cure my vision?”

“Whoa, whoa!” Dr. Wylan jumped like an explosion hit the building. “Who said *ANYTHING* about the c-word!”

It took Kevin a moment to get what he meant.

“We don’t use that kind of language here,” the doctor said. “I don’t believe anyone—or anything—needs to be ... *cured*.” He cringed when he said it.

“Then ... what? You’re a doctor, aren’t you?”

“Enhanced, my color-confused friend. Enhanced is what we say here. And that’s because the best way for the body to deal with a problem is not to get rid of the problem. It could just come back, right?

Relapse. Happens all the time. So I believe the best solution is to *evolve* with the problem. That way the problem isn’t a problem anymore.” His voice fluctuated and his eyes lit up as he talked. “It makes sense, right?”

“Wow. OK. So how do I do that?”

“I can show you. We have our methods.”

None of Kevin’s previous doctors told him anything like what this crackpot was saying. Kevin

couldn't believe it, but he was willing to give it a shot.

“OK. Tell me what to do.”

Over the next few months Dr. Wylan gave Kevin exercise after exercise for his vision. The doctor had special colored markers created. On the side they had names for the color Kevin saw and the color others would see.

The doctor gave Kevin color-by-number sheets, a whole zoo of animals on the pages. Dogs and cats, monkeys and fish, giraffes and elephants. By the time Kevin finished they were heinous Frankensteined conglomerates of color.

“Dr. Wylan. I feel like I'm back in pre-K.”

“Maybe you are,” the doctor twitched. “Continue!”

One day the doctor brought in a graphic designer. Sporting purple bedhead, she sat with Kevin in front of a huge screen.

“OK, here's a typical stock photo. Pretty American family at the beach,” she said. “What colors do you see?”

Kevin told her about the purple-pink swimsuits, the blue-gray sand, the chocolatey water, the green sky.

“Wow. That’s ... uh ... freaky,” she said. “OK. Now I know you got these special markers and all. But colors onscreen might look different from what you see offscreen. So I’m gonna go through the color wheel and you tell me when you see the color blue. We’ll start with this.”

“That’s green.”

“How ‘bout this?”

“More of a saffron.”

“OK, this?”

“Gamboge.”

“This?”

“Kind of madder.”

“Holy sh—”

Eventually they landed on a blue.

“That’s like ... an avocado to me,” she said. “But hey, whatever, we found it.”

Then she spread the blue which was actually avocado over the sky and the sea. She worked with Kevin to lighten and darken for highlights and shadows. They kept on until Kevin realized he was gazing through a window into the normal world.

The man and woman were barely thirties, their tan bodies gleaming in the hot sun. They laughed as their children splashed and danced in the deep blue water. Bright yellow and absinthe swimsuits

complimented each other. The sand on their feet was the actual color of sand. The ocean behind them met the blue canopy overhead at the horizon.

Kevin drank it in and wept.

He didn't go to work the next day. Instead he drove four hours to the nearest beach. He sank into the blue-gray sand, looked out at the horizon where the chocolatey water and green sky met.

An ugly combination. With all his might Kevin willed his eyes to see different. See right. Maybe if he focused he could change his perception into the photo—blue on blue. Real life. He longed to step into it.

He stayed there until the sun sank and the pale moon rose high overhead. At least the moon looked normal.

His phone buzzed.

“Hey, Jen.”

“Hey. I didn't see you at work today?”

“I had to ... take a trip. Should be back tomorrow.”

“OK. You good?”

“Not great.”

Jenna sighed on the other end. “I'm sorry, Kevin. I can't pretend to know what you're going through. I'm sure it's a lot of work, and probably discouraging.”

“Yeah.”

“Just ... don’t give up. OK? It’s gonna get better.”

“Heard that before.”

“I know, but ... still.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

“OK, well ... you wanna talk or anything?”

“Not really, Jen. I’ll see you later.”

“OK ... bye, Kev.”

He hung up and drove home. The next day he threw himself into work, drowning himself in black and white spreadsheets, numbers, accounts, documents. He didn’t speak to Jenna.

After work he drove home, ate cereal, watched old noir movies. *The Third Man*. *Double Indemnity*. *The 39 Steps*.

He fell asleep and dreamed of a colorless beach.

At his next appointment Kevin asked for a printout of the beach photo. Then he asked for more. So the purple-haired designer gave him more snapshots of normal life.

“They’re all stock photos,” she reminded him. Kevin didn’t care.

A photo of a golden retriever playing fetch. A live rock band. An airplane flying high over the Rockies. A family at Thanksgiving. These were drenched and



draped in pleasing colors—not mucus greens, velvety purples, acid yellows and umber all swirled together.

He took these and hung them throughout his house. Beautiful random snapshots—memories not his—people he didn't know adorning every wall of his home. People smiling, laughing in a world of perfect balanced color. His only glimpse into the new heavens and earth of which he could never be a part.

He ran out of wall space. He brought more photos to work, pinning dozens on his cubicle's olive-green wall.

“Kevin. What are you doing?”

He turned and saw Jenna eyeing him as he finished pinning a photo of a man teaching his grandkids to fish. “I, uh ... these are just ... inspiration.”

“Those pictures. They're all wonky.”

“Not to me. They're perfect.”

An awkward beat.

“Listen, Kev,” she said as she studied photo after photo, “this might be a little ... unhealthy.”

Kevin turned on her. “What are you talking about. How would you know what's unhealthy for me?”

“I just think ... this isn't right! You really need to—”

“Stop!” he stood up. “Stop telling me what I need to do. That’s what got me here in the first place.” He motioned to the photos. “I was fine before all this. I had learned to cope. Coping fine. But now I’m not—”

He cut his words short before he said *because of you*. Jenna just stood there. He thought she might yell back or storm out, but she stayed still—an almost-timid demeanor he’d never seen from her.

He made himself inhale, exhale. “I need to get through this myself.”

She nodded and walked away, her red hair sweeping behind her.

Weeks went by. Kevin saw no progress with his vision.

He waited frustrated in the white room until Dr. Wylan burst in.

“Mista Hartaugh. What’s shakin?”

“Dr Wylan. I’m seeing things just like I always have.”

“Well, of course you are,” Dr. Wylan winked.

“You’re still you.”

“But—” Kevin clenched his fists, opened them again. “Then what am I even paying you for?”

The doctor shrugged. “You tell me. I told you in the beginning I couldn’t cure you. Only help and enhance you.”

“I know,” Kevin’s voice rose despite himself. “I just don’t get it. Why am I like this? How come everyone else in the world—”

Someone knocked on the door. The doctor opened it and an old man with a walker stepped his way into the room.

“Kevin,” Dr. Wylan said, “I’d like you to meet a friend of mine. This is Bob Cone. They call him The Sergeant at the nursing home.”

Bob waggled his way to Kevin and stuck his hand out. “Bob Cone. They call me The Sergeant. That’s ‘cause I bark a lot. Like a dog. *HA!*” A great hurricane of a laugh.

Kevin nodded. “Good to meet you.”

Dr. Wylan beamed. “I brought Bob in because he also has a condition.”

Bob paused and suspended his buttocks mid-air before collapsing into a chair. “Yes, indeedy. I’m a hundred years last month, and for all those hundred years I been colorblind.” He sighed. “I may die in this chair though. Get some comfier chairs, McNeal!”

“So,” Kevin said, “you were born colorblind?”

Bob nodded sharply. “Never seen a lick of color all my days. Just gray, shades of gray. Somebody told me there were fifty of ‘em, but I can tell you there’s many more. *HA!*” He wheezed again, a symphony of air and mucus and joy.

Kevin listened for the next hour as Bob talked about the war (desperate for recruits, the Air Force actually took him in WWII) and movies (the effect was lost on him in *The Wizard of Oz*) and what his life was like as a black and white film.

“Fantastic,” Bob said. “I see the world like no one else can. Except for dogs. And we’re pretty close ‘cause of it. I got five big ones and they gonna outlive me!”

The conversation never ventured to Kevin’s condition and he knew why. He avoided Dr. Wylan’s eyes the whole time.

“Well, Sergeant,” the doctor finally said. “thank you for your time. You’ve lived an incredible life.”

Bob snorted. “You talk like I’m already gone. Help me up, will ya!”

Bob left and Dr. Wylan faced Kevin. He said nothing but his red-pepper eyebrows did all the talking.

“I get it,” Kevin said.

Dr. Wylan grinned like an old friend does when he tells an inside joke. He busied himself at the counter. “Did you know the praying mantis can see at least four times the colors we can? Four times the colors. Stuff we can’t even dream of. Worlds we can’t comprehend. Except it’s all the same world. It’s our world. The praying mantis just sees it different than the rest of us.”

The doctor turned to Kevin. “I once found a praying mantis hanging by one limb off the edge of my balcony. Totally ninja. Cool. I poked him and his body was completely stiff. Dead. He couldn’t pull himself up, so he just hung on and died like that.

“And I wonder, maybe, if he didn’t want to let go because he didn’t want to give up living. Because with all those extra colors, the world was that beautiful to him.”

Dr. Wylan handed Kevin a bag. “This is our last meeting. I’ll always be happy to help you with other ailments, issues, urinary problems—what have you. But I can’t help you anymore with your technivision. Hopefully what’s in the bag will take you further.”

Kevin offered his hand. “Thank you.”

The doctor shook it warmly. “Pleasure, Kevin.” He sprang from the room and down the hall.

Kevin opened the bag and stared into it. A full minute ticked. Then he left the office and called Jenna immediately.

“It’s Jenna.” Her voice cold. Message clear.

“Hey. It’s me. What’re you doing right now?”

It was a beautiful Saturday morning. “I have plans,” she said.

“Well. You think maybe I could come over?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Just real quick. I got something to show you. I wanna ... I wanna make it up to you.”

Silence covered the space between them. She said sure. “C’mon.”

He climbed the stairs to her apartment, a loft downtown with old brick walls. He knocked and she opened, her fire-red hair in a bun.

“Hey,” he said. “Hi.”

She crossed her arms.

“Could I come in a minute?”

She shrugged and stepped back.

He’d never been to her place before. It was spacious and smelled like lavender. The brick was all dark blue, the kitchen a comfortable cream. He felt at ease.

“I wanted to show you this.” He set the bag on the counter and drew out the contents. Several

canvases, a stand, paintbrushes, a palette and acrylic tubes of paint.

Each tube had the paint's name meticulously scraped off so they were all blank. Jenna picked one up. "Where'd you get these?"

"Dr. Wylan. He said he can't help me anymore, but he gave me this. He said it'll take me further." Kevin turned to her. "I was hoping I could paint you."

"Me?" Jenna's face went blank.

"Yes. I'll probably be terrible. But I'd love to try. If you'd let me."

Jenna demurred like she was tossing it around in her head. "OK ... alright. Let me change first."

She ran upstairs and changed into a simple blouse. It was emerald to his eye, complementing her charcoal pants and ruby hair, which hung to her shoulders now.

"Want some music?"

"Sure."

She put on Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. "Where do you want me?" she asked.

Kevin had no idea. "I guess over there. On the couch by the window."

She sat for him.

"Look straight at me," he said. "Hold it there."

Then he began, spurting colors across the palette, spreading color across the canvas, mixing paints to make new colors, washing his brushes, starting again. He couldn't believe he'd never tried this before.

He painted her as he saw her: red hair, green blouse and—blue eyes. He'd never noticed her vibrant blue eyes.

They stayed quiet, but Kevin enjoyed their silence. Only the music floated between them, somehow accommodating his colors. It felt good, felt right. And for his first painting, he was proud of it.

He finished. "Go easy on me," he said and turned it to her. "What do you think?"

Her blue eyes widened. She put a hand to her mouth.

"That's how you see me?"

Kevin nodded. Jenna's eyes glistened.

"I've never ... I don't ..."

She left the couch and threw her arms around him, knocking over his palette, spilling reds and blues and greens all over the white living room floor.



# California City

All we wanted was  
the 60s.  
Wild and wicked  
in suits and dresses.  
Villains and heroes  
—the Marlboros  
mingle with  
Virginia Slims playing  
parliament.

I remember nursing a Manhattan  
bruise, a lessened lesion,  
some yellow-blue wallpaper  
I gazed into—you  
hooked your arm through mine:  
a lesson I tried to hide.

Pan American took us  
wherever we landed  
(we never did).  
Vintage glow in Milan,  
Paris, all  
those art shows,  
your white glove on  
my pinstriped thigh.  
Then all at once  
the smoking  
stopped.

Now you've come along,  
way past where we should've  
finished  
planning, dreaming of  
that snowy cabin  
in the Rockies—  
instead standing  
in the Mojave

Desert hollies crowd out  
our names spelled  
on the ground  
in dirt c r a c k e d;  
crumbling foundation—

another dead-end  
road to Hollywood.

# The Sandwich

The bell rings at Reggie's Deli. City street sounds filter in with the lunch crowd. Hungry workers hog wooden tables. Black and white pictures of old-time New Yorkers watch from the walls. The line at the counter leads to the door. The air sizzles with sandwich meat and melted cheese steaming on hot grills.

In the back office sits the owner himself reading the latest offer. Everybody knows the owner. This latest offer even uses his first name.

*... offers Mr. Reggie purchase of Reggie's Deli, LLC and all ensuing property with a sum totaling ...*

Reggie's eyes widen at the number, his already too-giant pupils swirling like dark plates rimmed in hazel. He leans back and rubs his salt-and-pepper

stubble. A rickety office fan swings overhead, creaking like a sailboat's hull. Everything in his shop feels old to him. Antiquated. Even last year's Zagat awards—the most recent lining the walls—carry dust in spots he can't reach. He would appreciate if Zagat consolidated all his BEST SANDWICH SHOP awards into one giant plaque.

He checks the clock. 11:45. He drops the offer letter on a stack of others and heads for the kitchen.

The kitchen crew scrambles to fulfill orders as the line grows longer. Reggie washes his hands and mans the counter. He's the captain of these lunch crowds with his trusty and quick crew behind him.

The customers come in one big wave. Just like every lunch rush, Reggie plays a game to get through it: he tries guessing what the next customer will order before they say a word. His own form of stereotyping—except he's almost always right.

A young businessman steps to the counter and Reggie calls a reuben on white.

"Yeah, can I get a reuben on white?" the suit says, his whiny voice betraying his youth. Reggie writes it down, rips it off, hands it to Marty, his right-hand grillman.

Another young man steps up—clothes all black, a flatbill cocked at an impossible angle on his dark curly head. His forehead beads sweat, but he smiles.

“Whatcha want?” Reggie says, pencil poised. He calls a philly.

“I want a philly cheesesteak with ...”

Weird pause. The customer’s eyes fall to Reggie’s notepad.

“Could I write it?” the customer says.

“Write what?”

“My order.”

Reggie presses his lips together, snorts. “You serious?”

“Yes.”

This was a first. Reggie’s giant pupils bore holes in the skinny young man—a beanpole during a famine. Back in the day he would’ve told the kid off. But lunch just started and he’s already tired.

Reggie shrugs and passes him the pad and pencil. “Why not. Go for it, kid.”

The young man scribbles his order, taking up too much time. “Write legible,” Reggie commands him.

The line grows longer. The young man finishes and slides the pad back.

Reggie reads the order once, twice, three times. The customer watches him. Reggie meets his gaze

and decides the kid's beady eyes are set too close together like a dim-witted bird, and the smile wrapped around his hairless face is just a little too thin. "You can't be serious."

"I was told you guys were the only deli in the city that could do it."

"I mean ... we can do it. But ... why would you?"

"I gotta have it. It's important."

Reggie scans the order once more. "OK, well ... onions?"

"Yeah."

"Pepper-jack?"

"Yep."

Reggie snorts, rips off the order, hands Marty the ticket. "Good luck, friend."

"Thanks," the young man says. "Oh, wait. It's to-go."

He finds a corner to wait and watch from, shifting foot to foot the whole time. Reggie forgets him and turns to the next customer.

The lunch rush crowd stuffs their faces, checks their phones, asks irrelevant questions, pretends to listen. Reggie handles it all, feeding the masses in a frenzy. Assembly line—herding them in like cows, pushing them out full and satisfied.

He retains perfect control of his business, knows every tick and tock of the machine. Thirty years, over a hundred awards, several nods in *The New Yorker* later ... it gets old. Just like him. He could take any of the offers on his desk and walk away, make a killing, retire in leisure. Maybe he should.

The businessman who ordered the reuben barks into his AirPods so loud Reggie can hear from the kitchen. “No, let me stop you right there, Finn. You’re wrong. You’re wrong, you’re wrong on that. I already told you *verbatim* the transfer wouldn’t go through until the 24th. So you’re wasting your time, completely.”

The young man with the weird order stands next to him grinning like a buffoon. Reggie doesn’t have time to think about it as he cycles through more customers and jots down more orders.

Then a smell. Strong, sensual. It wafts from the grill and across Reggie’s nostrils. He almost falls over, leans against the counter to stop himself. His knees feel weak. He snorts deep, loud, with eyes wide. It reminds him of something old and familiar. A hunger deeper than his stomach pangs inside him.

At the same time Marty straightens and looks around like someone pegged him with a spitball. The smell overpowers the other food and makes its way



through the nostrils of everyone in the deli. It's sweet, heavenly—wonderfully decoded by the neurons in their brains. Conversations slow and stall as customers lift noses from their devices and sniff—*snifffffffff* the blissful aroma.

The mystery customer in the corner stands perfectly still now. He smiles from ear to ear and breathes in deep like it'd been a lifetime since he smelled that.

The businessman next to him blinks once, twice. "Uh. Listen, guys. I'm gonna have to call you back." He hangs up and steps to the counter. "Hi, yeah. What is that? That ... whatever that smell is."

Reggie wobbles like he just had his lights punched out. "What ... what smell?"

"Whatever that ... wonderful, beautiful smell is. Please, please tell me."

Marty faces him. "I think it's this thing." He points to the Philly on the grill.

"Is it that? *Is it?* No way. That looks hideous."

"It does, doesn't it? But it's the smell, look." Marty bends down over the sizzling sandwich. When he comes back up his eyes glow like stars. "Yap. That's the one."

"What is it? On the menu?"

"It's special order," Reggie says.

“I ...” the businessman digs for his wallet, “I would like to buy that sandwich. Please. Whatever it costs, I’ll take it.” His mouth hangs open like a dehydrated fish.

A woman in line raises her hand. “No, I’ll take it!”

An old man at a table says, “I’ll pay double!”

“Triple!” rings a voice from the back.

The deli erupts in a fuss. Reggie knows he has to do something fast or he’ll lose control of the crowd. He jumps on the counter with surprising dexterity and spreads his hands.

“Quiet!” he says. “Everyone quiet. Listen. I’ve never come across a sandwich like this in my life. It was special order by that gentleman over there.” He points to the customer, who shrinks back but still smiles like an idiot. “Now I’m sure we can make all of you the same sandwich, if that’s what you all want. But we need—”

“What’s it cost?” a British man yells.

“Doesn’t matter!” a gray-haired lady screams.

“Stop!” Reggie spreads his hands again. He can’t remember encountering a more vicious lunch rush. “None of that. It matters what it costs, if not for you guys, then at least for us. Now it’s a regular philly with some additions, of course, and—”

“I’ll sell my frickin house!” a massive bald man says. “Just get on with it!”

More customers shout. Some pull out cash and wave angry shapes in the air.

Reggie shakes his head and calms the crowd. He notices the customer watching his every move. “No, no. That won’t work. Let me see ... let me see that ticket. I forget what he told me.”

“Uh. Sir?” Marty says, the ticket in his hand. “Sir.”

“Give it here,” Reggie bends down to swipe it. “OK, it’s a philly with ...”

He falls quiet.

The crowd notices.

“What?”

“What’s on it?”

“Tell us already!”

“It smells delicious!”

“Ink’s all smudged,” Reggie says. “Or something. Can’t read it anymore.” He faces Marty. “How’d this happen?”

“Never seen nothin like that,” Marty says.

“Let me see it,” the businessman says. “It can’t be totally unreadable.”

Reggie gives it to him. “It is. Not a chance. Maybe it was the steam or something. God, why can’t I remember what he told me?”

The crowd swells. Now Reggie fears they could actually grow violent. His body pulses, sonar waves rippling beneath his skin. He hops down from the counter and faces Marty. “Do you remember how to make it?”

The sandwich has been on the grill the whole time. As Marty finally takes it off, he rolls his eyes up at the range hood. “Uh. I mean ... no.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry but ... I can’t remember what kinda ingredients I put on, how much, how long it said to cook ... I get bad short-term memory loss sometimes.”

“Remind me why you’re still working here.”

Marty shrugs. “All the same, all gone, man. I just follow the recipe.”

Reggie turns and squares eyes with the young customer, who steps up to the counter beside the businessman.

“I’ll take it to-go,” the customer says lighter than a feather.

The crowd surges. They scream and curse in front of their children, who cry for the delectable smell. Sweat beads on Reggie’s forehead. “Are ... are you sure, man?”

The businessman grabs the customer by the shirt. "Please. Please, dude, for the love of God. Let me buy your sandwich. Please!"

"Can't do that," the customer says. "I really need it."

"Then ..." the businessman lets him go, lost in a daze, "please, tell me how you made it. Tell me what's on it. Or tell them. Tell them to make one for me."

The customer smiles. "It's a family secret."

Reggie carries the philly and the reuben on trays and sets them on the front counter by the register. "C'mon, man," he says to the customer. "You gotta share it. That's the most delicious thing I ever smelled. Looks like you've got ..." he examines the sandwich from multiple angles. It's messy, but manageable. A true work of art, but somehow he can't make out everything on it. "Maybe anchovies on there. Peach jam, maybe. I don't know. Is that ... peanut butter?"

"I can't share. I'm sorry."

Someone in line shouts, "What'd you order, freak?"

"What do I owe you?" the customer says to Reggie.

Reggie crosses his arms. "I have no idea. Why don't you tell me what you got and I'll tell you."

“I told you once,” the customer peers back at Reggie with the oddest look. “Don’t you remember?”

Reggie gulps. The noise in the deli rises to a deafening pitch.

“Did you forget already?”

The businessman sobs—actually sobs.

Reggie’s pupils revolve in an ecosphere. “I don’t ...”

“I’ve had enough!” a giant man says at the front of the restaurant. “Let’s get him!”

Breaking point. The crowd charges for the customer and his sandwich, throwing chairs and flipping tables in their way. Reggie and Marty take cover as the businessman cowers into the back. From behind the counter Reggie can still see a glint in the customer’s dark eyes as he holds something in his hand.

With a tiny grin the young man winds his arm back and throws it forward, letting the sandwich fly like a grenade.

It sails through the room over many heads, losing pieces of meat and drops of grease as it soars. Eyes follow it, mouths open, victims and vermin of insatiable lust and hunger.

The sandwich lands in the mob’s midst. They fall on it like a rugby scrum and tear into it. Rabid cannibals.

The customer turns to the three men. “I have to get out of here. Is there a way out the back?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“Show me. And grab that pen and pad.”

They dash out the back and into a back alley. Marty slams the door shut behind them. “What just happened?”

“I wanted that sandwich,” the businessman says, eyes thundering.

“Relax,” the customer says. He looks drained now—his face pale. “I’m going to tell you the whole recipe. I’ll let you write it this time. My handwriting’s terrible.”

Stunned, Reggie readies his pen. “Shouldn’t we get out of here first? They’re tearing my shop apart.”

“Only one thing will calm them down. Here it is ...”

The recipe flows out his mouth like the Euphrates. Reggie takes it down ingredient by ingredient. Marty listens with eyes wide and moistened. He nods slowly.

When it’s over, the businessman says, “That’s it? That’s the smell? No way. That’s a fake recipe.”

Reggie looks down at the recipe. “Nah, it’s real. I wrote it once, and it felt the same. I felt it again.”

The customer reaches out and holds Reggie’s shoulder. “I came here because I was told your deli

was the only one in the city that could do it. Now I know it's true. Start making the sandwich here. Name it whatever you like, charge whatever you like. It's yours. Just carry it on. And don't corrupt it. Don't corrupt it."

Reggie nods. He understands. Somehow this customer knew.

The back door bangs open. A group crams through the doorway. "Give us the sandwich. Give it!"

"You already ate it!" the businessman says. "I saw you all eat it like monsters!"

"It was a reuben," they say. "Nasty! Where's the real one?"

Reggie turns to the customer. But he's gone.

*"WHERE! IS! OUR! SANDWICH!"*

Reggie fights his way to a dumpster and climbs up to look down at the mob for the second time. He waves the sandwich recipe. "I've got it right here. It's legible, I wrote it myself, I can read it, we can make it. But here—here's what I've got to say. You all look mad, raving mad. Total crazy, like lunatics. Like the world's gone nuts. I think you'd all kill each other for just a slice of a sandwich like that."

"We would!" someone says. "I'd murder all y'all!"

"Right," Reggie says. "OK. But what I'm trying to tell you is ... we're going to make you all sandwiches.



This same sandwich. We're going to debut it, and you're all going to get one. It's going to change your life, and best of all—at least for today, it's going to be free!”

The crowd roars in approval. Marty claps. The businessman sobs. Reggie steps down, works his way through the crowd, shakes hands amidst the cheers. He goes inside back behind the counter and gets to work.

From lunchtime to eleven that night—well past closing—Reggie and Marty slave away. The businessman offers to help and rolls up his sleeves as he serves each customer at their table.

The shop fills with the most delectable, delightful smells—a scent so pleasant that customers walk inside crying. The homeless and jobless wander in and leave flashing grins and holding full bellies.

When the last customer's served, the three men sink into chairs. Marty groans. “I have never, boss.”

The businessman grins—an odd look for him. “I haven't either.”

Reggie offers his hand to the businessman. “All that time I didn't catch your name.”

The businessman shakes it. “John. Pleased to meet you. That was fun.”

“Listen, fellas,” Reggie stands up, hands on hips, still panting. “That was the most exhausting day of my life. But ... I loved it.”

“Me too,” Marty says.

“I did as well,” John says. “Hardest and best workday of my life.”

“I can’t sell that thing for money,” Reggie says. “I just can’t. It’s too special. But we also got to keep the business afloat. I’ve got a stack of offers on my desk waiting to buy me out. But this—” he waves the recipe paper, “this is not on our menu. It’s not in the offers.”

“So ...”

“I say we sell the business, take the money, buy a food truck, and go around making this sandwich and giving it out for free.”

Marty’s face brightens. John actually laughs.

“What do you say?”

“I’m in!”

“Let’s do it.”

“Alright, then.”

The customer climbs the stairs of the hospital wing with a small package under his arm. Cold chill. He reaches the top and knocks on the door. Heads turn at the smell as he passes.

“Come in,” says a weak voice inside.

He enters and sits with a woman on the bed.

“What is that?” says the woman.

“Just your best,” the customer says. He opens the package and breaks the sandwich in half.

# 'merica

We woke in the night to gunshots and balls of fire.

I jumped awake in the warzone. My mind worked to disentangle its cobwebs. Soon I realized it was those people across the river shooting fireworks. I tapped my phone screen and saw the time—2:31am.

I rolled to my right and nearly died by bunk bed fall. No rails—bad call. Jack lay awake on the bed below me. I could tell, one because he wasn't snoring, two because his phone lit his hairy face in the dark.

My phone started blowing up in our group text named *Two Stuff and the Rib*—our unfortunate band name.

*2:32am Tom: Don't these idiots know Jimmy needs his 10 hours beauty rest?*

*2:32am Rick: Just... why?*

*2:33am Stacy: Anybody bring explosives*

*2:33am Jonny: I can run over there naked. They'll stop.*

*2:33am Jack: Swim on over, Jonny Boy. Freeze your balls off.*

The fireworks kept going strong, louder and brighter than ever.

*2:34am Rick: Where do they even get fireworks like this?*

*2:35am Sam: Better than anything I ever shot in my yard.*

A grand finale ... maybe this was it. Boom after boom, flash after flash ...

Then quiet. I laid my head back down on my pillow. Finally ...

***BOOM!***

Back with a vengeance. The room lit up again, so did my phone.

*2:40am Rick: STOP*

Our band of eight had rented a cabin on the river in the North Georgia mountains. The plan: get away,

write songs for our next album, maybe raft down a rapid or two. The rafting terrified me—although my boat stayed upright with our drummer Jack, our rhythm guitarist Tom and our saxophonist Sam keeping it weighted. But the other boat—the one with all our singers and lead guitarists—flipped and dumped the flashier half of our band into the rushing waters. Jonny lost his pants. Probably a bad call to split the boats like that.

So we were already exhausted. Now we got scared out of our sleep by what could have been the British Invasion. It was October 12th. What were they celebrating—early Halloween?

I thought about going over there. Telling them to calm down. They probably wouldn't listen.

Then an idea hit me.

I dropped from my bunk bed and rummaged through my bag.

Jack looked at me and I could barely hear him between the blasts and bangs outside. "What you doin'?"

"Going over there."

"Huh?"

"You got any feathers or anything?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

“I’m comin too.”

“Better hurry.”

Jack rolled out of bed. “Why you need feathers.”

“Not feathers. Just something like it.”

“I got brushes.”

He meant metallic brushes for his drums. Closest we had to feathers, I guess. “Give me one or two.”

While he did that I sneaked upstairs, though I knew waking people up wasn’t a concern anymore. I knocked on Stacy’s door. “Yeah?”

I opened the door a smidge. “Can I borrow some makeup?” She always had plenty for our shows.

She stared at me for at least ten seconds. Then she buried her face back in a pillow and pointed to the dresser. I took the white bag and brought it downstairs.

Jack had the lights on while he rummaged. I jumped for the switch. “Turn the lights off!”

“Why?”

“We don’t want them to see us.”

“Oh. Here’s a brush.”

“You got a headband or something?”

“Um. I’ll check.”

I took my shirt off, stripped to my undies and opened Stacy’s makeup bag. Amidst the flashes of

color from the window I found the darkest shadows of lipstick and mascara.

I opened one and hesitated.

Then I spread the lipstick under my eyes and down my nose.

Jack came back with a headband but stopped in the glow of the fireworks. "What you doin?"

I was onto the next shade. Another color under the eyes, around my forehead.

Then I got wild. I attempted little collections of dots on my temple. Next I explored colors and designs across my chest, shoulders, my abdomen. Jack stood transfixed.

"Give me that headband."

I slipped the drum brush inside the band and fitted it over my head, cringing from the crustiness of Jack's sweat. There I stood with my body painted all over in ugly abstract lines of makeup, the brush sticking up behind my head like a turkey.

"You an Indian?" Jack asked.

I nodded. "Your turn."

By the end, Jack stood with a feather in his own cap and makeup painted in intricate designs all over his face and torso.

"I'm cold," he said.

"You're like twice my size. Follow me."



We stepped onto the porch into the fall night air. The fireworks just overhead threw luminous color on the already-beautiful fall trees by the river. Down the hill our kayaks were tied up and waiting for us like horses in the Old West. I started down but Jack pulled my arm.

“We goin over there?” his eyes wide.

“Yeah.”

“Better wait.”

He had a point. Wait for this barrage to end. We crouched in the shadows and watched the spectacular display. It would have been fun if it wasn't almost three in the morning.

The barrage ended. Now only the moon illuminated the auburn leaves and the water below. We heard the whoops and hollers of the renegades at the cabin just upstream, shielded from us by just a few trees. I hoped they wouldn't see us coming.

My heart pounded. Jack was nervous, too. I could tell because he was humming the bassline to 'Dear Prudence.'

“OK. Let's go,” I said.

We hurried to the boats. I got in one and Jack climbed in after me.

“What are you doing!” I said. “Get your own boat.”

“No, man. I’m freezing out here and if I fall in, I’m a goner.”

I rolled my eyes and undocked the boat. Carefully, quietly, I rowed us across the river. Neither of us dared touch the freezing water. The air nipped at our bare nipples.

We docked on the bank directly across. I motioned for Jack to tie the boat as I peeked over the ridge to see if they’d spotted us.

It was a mountain party for sure. Kegs everywhere. Lots of cigarette smoke in the pale moonlight. Someone played twangy country-pop from an iPad Mini. The party was going strong. No signs of stopping before sunrise.

Jack crept up next to me. “I might have diarrhea.”

“*Shh!*” I watched and waited for the perfect moment to strike. I was lean and quick like a gazelle. I could do a good amount of damage and get away before they even knew what happened. But with Jack ... it might get interesting.

Three men were tying fuses in a humongous tangle. At least a hundred rockets waited for launch. Beside them, pounds and pounds of more fireworks.

“Get ready,” I said to Jack as the men lit their fuses and ran for cover.

The fuses drew their lines, simmered ...

The first rocket zoomed and exploded in the air.  
The second followed.

“Let’s go!” I sprinted straight for the group, most of their backs turned to me as they gazed upward. I let out a war whoop—the cry of an eagle in flight—and made a beeline for their stockpile.

The partiers shrieked, panicked, jumped back as one guy threw his beer bottle and shouted,  
“Lu’kowl! In’jun!”

I yelped high-pitched as I picked up a box of fireworks and flung it as far as I could. It flew open midair and rockets tumbled out and into the river.

I was onto the third box before they knew what was happening. “E’s dumpin are far-works!”

They advanced on me. Terrified, I let out more chants and screams to no avail. I was only halfway through the fireworks—more than enough explosives left to last through the night. But I had to run.

The roar of a bear—or maybe a whale—ripped through the tree line. The partiers spun and stared into the blackness. A great shadow charged for us.

They wailed like children and ran for their lives. Except one, who trembled but held his ground. He opened his beer can, took a quick swig, then chucked

it at the beast. The can bumped against Jack's forehead.

He stopped, soaked with beer, pulled from his manic rage, a blank look in his eyes. For a second I didn't know if he was OK, if he might fall over.

But his thick eyebrows drooped over his brow. He snorted and glared at the beer-thrower.

It started as a low growl. And it grew and grew until Jack the Drummer could no longer be contained.

*"rrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!"*

The beer-thrower wet himself and leapt away as Jack careened for him. Then, in a behemoth move, Jack lifted all the remaining fireworks and launched them into the river.

He shouted at the moon. *"merica!"*

Something like gunshots boomed behind us. Something very much like a bullet whizzed over my head.

I pulled Jack's arm. "Back to the boat!"

We hightailed through the trees. Their gunshots kept tune with the bombshells overhead. I felt scared out of my mind, fully expecting a bullet in the back any time. And yet, strangely exhilarated, totally out of body, I let out a few more yells and war whoops. Jack did the same.

Until I reached the river, where I screamed for real.

“Jack! Where’s the boat?”

Jack’s eyes followed the stream down to the kayak floating with it. He turned to me, his mouth gaping.

A bullet tore between us and hopped into the water. Jack didn’t waste another second. He dived headfirst into the freezing river with me after him.

The cold stole the breath from my lungs. But I heard more shots above the surface and swam down against the riverbed itself. The water pulled the drum brush feather from my headband as makeup ran into my eyes and burned.

The river carried us down and out of range. The shots stopped. We reached the other bank and heard an onslaught of honest-to-God curses hurled at us followed by sincere mourning for their explosives.

Shivering in the night, Jack and I made our way out of sight, then looped back around, ducking from cabin to cabin so they wouldn’t know we slept just across the river.

We sneaked inside. It was quiet as death with everyone still in bed. Jack and I scrounged for towels and dried off, smearing makeup all over. We peeked out the window.

Just one lone partier still by the water, examining the ruined rockets at the river's edge. He picked up a firework, threw it back in and trudged up the hill.

Jack and I turned to each other.

"Thank God drunk people can't aim," he said.

I climbed the ladder to bed and laughed a good ten minutes, Jack for longer. I checked my phone.

*3:07am Rick: They stopped?*

*3:07am Jonny: Thank heaven.*

*3:07am Tom: I couldn't take another round.*

I texted back.

*3:18am: Don't worry guys. Bass and drums got yall covered.*

I sent one more.

*3:18am: Btw I want a new band name.*

I put my head down and went to sleep.

# Old Soles and New Leaves

Jennifer stole from a BuyMore Shoe Store. Not just like, a shoebox or two. Not like she tried on some shoes and walked out with them like a normal person. What I mean is—Jennifer stole an entire BuyMore.

I knew what she'd done when I pulled into work and saw the whole store empty behind the front glass windows. Not a single shoe on a shelf. Every box vanished like the Rapture for footwear.

I stood in the store, hands on hips, looking at the empty shelves. They ran back like six huge white tombstones. Hanging signs shouted at me from above: *STORE CLOSING. ENTIRE STORE 40-50% OFF.*

The faint musty smell of leather I endured for six hours Monday/Wednesday/Friday and eight hours on weekends had evaporated with the merchandise. I couldn't believe she pulled it off.

I called Joe, my manager. He answered more annoyed than usual because he was on vacation.

“What?”

“We’ve kinda got a problem.”

“What problem?”

“I... well. Let me just send you a picture.”

“Fine.” He hung up.

I snapped a photo and sent it to him.

He texted back.

*WTF!*

I knew it was Jen because she told me her plan. I just didn’t think she meant it. She said a lot of things she didn’t mean on our smoke breaks. Most of them were followed by, “I really mean it. I’m doing this, Marley. I’m gonna do it, girl.” Business idea about hat rentals. French fries with built-in ketchup. Video games aimed at dogs. Prank on Joe by stretching plastic wrap over his toilet. Another kid with Felix. “I really mean it, Mar,” she puffed.

And she had. At least for this. Walking through the empty shoe store was like moving through a crazy dream still stuck inside Jen’s head. Except this was all real. 100% original Jen reality, baby.

Joe called the cops. I sat behind the counter and waited. I had thirty minutes before my workers



arrived, so I texted them all not to come in. No reason to with nothing to sell.

If Jen had stuck with the plan she told me months ago, that meant she'd made a copy of the store's backdoor key. Then last night, she pulled up in a U-Haul with a crew of at least ten. Next, she turned off the alarm with a code she'd swiped from Joe, switched off the cameras and set to work. Burning that midnight oil, however long it took to clean out the whole store. I knew the shoes now sat in a shady storage container on the other side of town. By noon today, some shoes would already be for sale online.

My fingers went to text Jen, but I froze. I knew all this—knew her whole plan, which meant I could get pegged as an accessory. Which I kinda was.

Two cops walked through the front door. One officer stuck his belly out and whistled low. "Well I'll be." The other—a very tall, very fit woman—examined the scene, checking up and down the rows before she questioned me.

"Are you alright?" Her eyes were dark—intensity sucked me in like black holes.

"Yes. I just got here."

"I'm Officer Cranley. Did you see anyone when you arrived?"

"No."

“Do you have any idea who might have done this?”

There it was. The eternal question. I could cover for my friend or turn her in, right now, and clear myself of everything.

The first time I went to Jennifer’s apartment for dinner, a four-foot Spider-Man answered the door.

“Hello, Spidey,” I said. He webbed me up, spraying spittle inside his mask, then swung down the hall. I laughed, walked inside and smelled gumbo, homemade, home-perfected. Jennifer gave me a wide smile, big hug.

“Smells incredible,” I said.

“Time to fatten you up, girl.”

“We college students take what we can get.”

“I’m one a them too!”

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean *young* college students.”

“What? No. I meant college students who can’t cook or don’t have money.”

“Well I fall into one a-those categories,” Jen said with a smirk.

I draped my jacket over a chair. “What can I do?”

A light tap on my hand. A pair of giant blue marbles for eyes stared up at me. Pure curiosity.

“Charity, you gonna say hi to Miss Marley?” Jennifer said while she diced carrots. The knife tapped out rapid rhythmic knocks on the counter. *Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock.*

“Hi, Mith Marwee,” said a sweet high-pitched voice.

“Jennifer, let me help.”

“Oh, you can help. Go sit on the couch.”

“Jennifer.”

“You better listen to me in my house. I’m running the show tonight.”

I sat down. Charity and Spider-Man crowded around me. Spidey said nothing, only peered from the eyeholes in his mask. “Guesth what I did today?” Charity said.

“What?”

“Losth another toof.” She beamed to show her lack of two front teeth.

“Oh, that’s exciting. But guess what? I lost all my teeth today.”

Charity gasped; her hand flew to her mouth. Spider-Man finally spoke. “No way.”

“Yes way.” I folded my lips over my teeth and gawked at them. “See?” They collapsed into giggles.

A few minutes later we all sat around a dimly-lit kitchen table stuffed into a corner. “Kieran,” Jennifer said, “take your mask off and say grace.”

Spidey obeyed, closing his eyes. “Thank you God for food, and for Mama, for Charity, and for—” he peeked one eye open at me and whispered, “—was your name again?”

Jennifer chided him, but I chuckled. “Marley.”

He squeezed his eye shut again. “And for Miss Marley. In Jesus name, amen.”

“Amen,” we all said.

“Children,” Jennifer said to me, shaking her head with a light in her eye.

I started eating the best gumbo of my life. “Jen,” I said between gulps, “this is amazing.”

She nodded. “Straight from Orleans. Just like us.” Her gaze passed over her offspring proudly.

“What brought y’all to Georgia?”

“Well I didn’t come here to go to school, that’s for sure.”

Born in Wisconsin of all places, but quickly relocated to Shreveport, Louisiana. Her mother a pious church busybody, her father an Air Force man. Except he was dishonorably discharged when Jen was two for stealing equipment from Barksdale Air Force Base. “I was the baby of six,” Jennifer told me. “This was when Carter was president. Taxes were higher. So my father tried stealing stuff and pawning it off so we could get by.” He fell to drinking after the

discharge, grew violent. “Crashed all our lives into the ground. My mother moved all six of us to Lafayette. Daddy followed later, so she took us to Baton Rouge.”

At fifteen, Jennifer got so tired of her family’s drama that she hitchhiked to New Orleans and never went back. She got a job waitressing. That’s when she met Felix.

The story paused while Jennifer put Kieran and Charity to bed. They invited me to their nighttime routine. Everyone said something that made them glad, sad and mad from that day. Kieran, still in his Spidey suit, said, “I’m glad I made a new friend George at school. I’m sad we didn’t get to eat ice cream tonight. And I’m mad George thinks Black Panther could beat Spider-Man. But that’s OK. We can still be friends.”

“That’s right,” Jennifer said. I chewed on my tongue to keep from smiling. “What about you, Charity?”

“I am altho sad we didn’t get ict h cweam. And altho mad, too. And I’m glad ...” she cast about, thinking. Then her eyes landed on me. “For my new fwend Mith Marwee.”

Everybody bowed their heads and said their prayers. After kisses, lights out and the door closed, Jennifer led me to the balcony patio. It was a cool

night with a light drizzle every smoker secretly prefers. I liked Camels, Jennifer dug Pall Malls. Sometimes we swapped. We shared a lighter.

“So Felix,” Jennifer picked the story right up, cigarette poking out her round lips, “he was only sixteen when I met him. But he was a dream. Always was. I gotta tell ya, Mar. From the first time I laid eyes on him... *mmm!*” She laughed happily, something she hadn’t done much around the children. Out here she seemed free, seemed like the Jennifer I knew. “Dark eyes, dark hair ... and he grew into one beautiful man, I’m telling you.”

They fell in love, started dating. He would come to her diner after her shift and they would hit the town. New Orleans in the early ‘90s was alive, packed tight with more people than ever before. “We went dancing all the time,” she told me, whimsy lacing her voice. “You had the jazz playing, people swinging, the lights, the smells. You ever been?”

“To New Orleans? Nope.”

“Go sometime, honey. Stay off Bourbon, sure. But there’s no city like it.” A place where exotic flavors blended together to form the sweetest, spiciest concoctions. And she didn’t just mean food. In New Orleans you were bound to meet some of the most

interesting people you could meet anywhere. To Jennifer, Felix was one of them.

“He was always dressed up like he was going to the President’s Ball or something. But he also didn’t seem to care about looks or glamour. I had just one fancy blue dress to wear for dancing, and even that was nothing special. And we’d dance, and there’d be all kinds of women dolled up, twirling around in beautiful red dresses, expensive as all get-out. They’d spin and their dresses would shimmer like a shower of stars. Their hair was all elegant, done-up perfect, braided and pinned and everything. When they passed by they smelled like lavender and honey, with five pounds of jewelry janglin’ as they went.

“But Felix? He paid them no mind. He didn’t care. They might as well not even been there. ‘Cause Felix only saw me.”

She stopped, took a long drag. I caught a pang of a smile in her pale blue eyes.

“We kept dating. He got a job. Real good job. And soon he was buying me those same dresses. Jewelry, too. We ate and drank like a king and queen. It was amazing. Better than anything I coulda dreamed of.”

“Must have been a rich guy,” I said.

“He was. Banking, he told me. But I never found out for real. He would always deflect my questions back on me if I asked about his job.

“And then one day, everything between us just ... fizzled out. So.”

She tried to pass it off like no big deal. Like it was just another guy. But the corners of her mouth tugged down. She looked out over three gangly teens playing Pokémon Go in the parking lot and took another drag. I didn't pry.

“Anyways. I don't wanna bore you, Mar. I been talking about me all night.”

“Oh, no. Really. It's totally fine.”

We ended up talking about work—how bad a manager and person Joe was. We talked about *This Is Us* and *The Bachelorette*, Instagram influencers, college classes and shoes, naturally.

It was the first of many dinners together. I learned later she and Felix moved to Atlanta after Kieran was born. The money vanished, their relationship soured and Jennifer had hoped another baby would glue them back together. Felix left her soon after she got pregnant with Charity. He popped in and out the next year, but by then Jennifer had gathered her life and moved from the wrong side of the tracks to north Atlanta. She enrolled in school to become a



middle grades teacher and worked at BuyMore to make ends meet. All the while we talked about anything and everything, including our dreams and ideas for the future.

The last idea she told me was about robbing BuyMore. Totally out of the blue, like someone breaking an awkward pause with a random joke. I laughed it off and said she was nuts.

“No,” I said, “I don’t know who could have done this.”

Officer Cranley looked at me, mouth pulled tight like the slacklines people walk on the campus green. The other officer lumbered over and stuck out a pudgy hand. “Name’s Rollins. Never seen nothin like this.”

Finally Cranley’s unblinking eyes released me from their grip and surveyed the back wall. Four cameras perched in a menacing line like crows watching us. “Did you check the camera footage yet?”

“Uh, no. I haven’t.” Because I knew it wouldn’t be there. “Only my manager has access to that.”

“Where is he?”

“On vacation.”

She shot me a glance that told me she already suspected me of compliance. Not good. Some

eagerness might help. I pushed off the desk. “But I do have a key for the back room. I’ll show you.”

Rollins chuckled good-naturedly as he followed us to the back of the grimy store. “There ain’t one shoe left in this place! Wait a minute.”

He stopped suddenly and my heart with him. Cranley and I looked back at him.

“Maybe,” he said, “all the shoes ... got up and *WALKED OUT!*” He belly-laughed so hard I thought he might fall on the floor.

“Rollins,” Cranley snapped as I unlocked the door, “this is a crime scene.”

The comment only shut down his laughs for a moment. He giggled to himself as the woman examined the back door. “No signs of tampering,” she said. “Who has a key?”

“Only my manager.”

“What about the front?”

“I do, my manager, and another shift leader, Colin.”

I could feel Cranley’s eyes burning holes right through me like lasers. It’s like she could sense something up. Was I too calm, too nonchalant about someone stealing an entire BuyMore? “I can’t believe somebody did this,” I said. My blood pressure rose by the second.

Cranley tossed Rollins a look. “Bob. Go call forensics. We’re going to need some prints.”

Officer Rollins waddled out, his shirt tag peeking at me from behind his neck.

Cranley squared herself with me, her eyes wide and serious, her eyebrows arching like paintbrush strokes. She must have been late-30s, early-40s. “I need a list of everyone who works here. Now.”

She went full-on bad cop mode and launched into question after question with me. Where was I last night, who all was scheduled to come in today, who was scheduled yesterday. I answered everything as blankly as I could. I was honest about everything except questions about prior knowledge, fumbling my way through those best I could, locking eyes with her when I thought appropriate, looking away when necessary. I was running a race in the dark with no idea how I was doing.

The detectives arrived. “Stay here,” Cranley said and followed them to the back. She had moved me to the front for my questions and now I sat at the cashier’s desk. Rollins was sitting in his car. I looked around the empty store and sighed.

My phone buzzed my butt. I looked at it and saw a text from Jennifer.

*I told ya:)*

That's all it said. The text before had been two days ago when Jennifer sent me a gif of Craig from *Parks and Rec* shouting "*I WILL BURN THIS PLACE TO THE GROUND!*"

With a quick glance both outside and to the back, I replied.

*Are you nuts?? Where are you?*

The bubble of three dots floated up, stayed there way too long. I felt my ears grow hot.

*I'll come to ur place tonight*

I fired back, thumbs hopping like mad rabbits.

*No you won't. Starbucks off Blue Bay at 9.*

The dots again. I gripped my phone, stared at it, willing her to text back, anxiously tapping my foot.

*OK u got it*

Rollins stepped beside me. "Detectives are here." My heart jumped into my throat. I hadn't heard the front door. I hit the back button and rushed to delete the text convo. I kept my eyes focused on the phone. Nice and easy. Nothing going on here.

"Detectives are here," he said again like they were the Coast Guard saving us from a shipwreck. He looked around the empty store, an old owl swiveling its head. "Musta been a big job."

I shrugged. “Probably not as big as it looks. Only half these shelves were full. But how should I know?”

“Well,” Rollins said, “back in the day—I been with the department thirty-two years, you believe that? I know I look like a much younger man, of course. It’s a Rollins family secret.” He winked. “Anyways, back in the day, the first thing I woulda thought when I walked in here was, ‘My Lord, the paperwork!’” He laughed hard, almost coughing at his own joke.

I smiled big, tried to look relaxed and interested. “Has the paperwork gotten easier since then?”

“Well, not really. It’s all computer now. So that’s easier, I guess. Better for the environment, I guess.” He stuffed a mischievous look my way. “But now I don’t worry ‘bout it mainly ‘cause I just don’t do it. Life’s too short to spend it doin paperwork, that’s what I say!” He cackled like a crow.

Officer Cranley zipped out of the back room, her jaw set like concrete.

“Camera footage is blank,” she said. I realized she was talking more to me than to Rollins. “Totally wiped. That means we are likely dealing with a highly-skilled crew of experts, or ... an inside job.” She fixed her eyes on me now like a camera adjusting its aperture.

And yet they had no proof on me. Cranley assured me I would be taken into custody if the prints came back as mine. I expected her stony face would show up again soon in my life, but by then I just wanted to go home. I filled out a police report and then it was over.

I stepped through the front door into the hot light, the sun high overhead now. It felt like I'd been locked in a chilly jail cell for years and now I'd been declared innocent. Except I wasn't. At least it didn't feel that way.

As I drove off, I could still see the detectives dusting for prints along the empty bone-white shelves.

I had to talk some sense into Jennifer. Find out what happened.

I met her at Starbucks as planned. True to form, she showed up twenty minutes late.

"Marley!" she said as she came in, her eyes alive and glowing. She didn't look like a single mother who had just robbed a failing second-hand shoe store. "You gettin somethin?"

"No." I kept my head low to our table, my voice down.

She sat. “Might get a chai. Or they have that new macchiato.”

Then she bounced up again, casually chatting with the barista as she ordered her drink. My hands were shaking. I went to the bathroom, washed my hands and face, stared at myself in the mirror. My eyes looked darker than usual, my pupils smaller. *It’s gonna be fine. It’s gonna be fine.*

I came out and ordered a chai tea for myself. I needed something to hold.

When I sat down again, she was scrolling through her phone. The corner of her left eye twitched as she did it. She let the silence continue until I broke it.

“Jennifer.”

She looked up at me. “What?”

“Jennifer—how could you do this?”

Apparently something clicked in her mind.

“BuyMore? Oh, don’t worry about that, Mar.”

“*Shh!*” I shushed her, then couldn’t believe I shushed a criminal about keeping her own crime under wraps. “Jennifer. You’ll go to jail a long time if they catch you.”

She made a face, rapped her fingers on the table. Behind the counter a barista dropped something metal and loud. “OK. You done?” Jennifer said.

“No, I’m not done! What were you thinking? Where are your kids?”

“I’ll worry about my own kids, Marley, thanks.”

This wasn’t the Jennifer I knew. The woman before me was a robot who looked like her. A clone, maybe. A super sleuth who stole her identity. But not my Jennifer.

“What happened? What made you want to ... do this?”

“Just time for a change,” she said quietly. Her eye twitched again, and for a moment she deflated. I saw a sad shadow of the Jennifer I knew still inside. Then she roused herself, puffed up like a blowfish. “It was fun. Been planning to do it awhile now.”

“Just you?”

“Yep. Or at least I’ll take all the credit.” She threw back her head and laughed. Only then did I notice the dazzling jewelry around her neck. “What’s that?”

“This?” Her hand flew to the necklace. “Oh. Just something I treated myself with.”

“Did you steal it, too?”

Jennifer’s face darkened underneath a warm uncovered lightbulb’s glow. “You know what, Mar? I didn’t come here to be *judged*. I thought you’d be happy with me. I thought you’d be excited, girl.”

“For robbing a whole store?”



“I told you I was gonna do it. You laughed like it was cool.”

“I thought you were kidding!”

“I wasn’t. Needed the money. School loans are no joke. And c’mon, you know Joe’s an ass who had it comin.”

“It doesn’t matter!” I was yelling now, attracting attention, too upset to care. “You put your whole life and your kids in danger. For what? A few shoes to sell on the dark web? *Why*, Jennifer? How could you do this?”

“Shut up, Marley. Don’t worry about it, OK? I got everything covered.” She took out her Pall Malls and lit up.

“Hey,” said the barista. “You can’t smoke in here.”

Jennifer grinned at him, a twist of her lips. Her eye twitched the whole time. She didn’t put the cigarette out.

I sat back, short on words and belief. “I do not understand. I don’t. You’ve never stolen anything, have you? You’re not a thief.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know this isn’t you, Jen! I know my friend and this isn’t her.”

“I told you. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“Clearly not.” I felt the venom in my own voice. “Thought I did. Damn. Kieran and Charity. You want their mom to be a wanted criminal? *Jennifer*. You should turn yourself in, admit what you did. Get a shorter sentence.”

“Hey!” said the barista again. “I told you to put that thing out!”

Jennifer jumped up, her chair’s legs dragging across the floor like nails on chalk. “Shouldn’t have come here,” she said to me. “Figured you’d do this.”

I stood up and faced her. “You’re my friend, Jennifer. I love you too much to be co—”

“If you tell the cops about me, I’ll know. I’ll find you. Besides that, I never want to see your face again.”

She didn’t say more. She didn’t need to. Her face—mouth clamped against the cigarette, eye twitching wildly. She turned and barreled out the door. I got a few leftover glances from a woman reading a book, an older couple whispering together. I didn’t care. The barista shrugged at me. “Don’t do drugs, kids.”

My friend was a different person now—someone I didn’t know. Or maybe it was a side there all along.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Jennifer. Especially those two kids. Any day now the cops would show

up at Jennifer's door, and what would happen to Kieran and Charity?

A few days later I was out driving. Somehow I ended up at Jennifer's apartment complex. I sat in my car, motor running at least twenty minutes. I turned the keys in the ignition, left my hand there, heard the engine ticking down. Finally I stepped out and took the stairs to her door.

Another five minutes of internal debating and feet shuffling led me to knock. Nobody answered.

I waited until my feet hurt. I sat down and waited some more. No answer.

I drove to the front office. The little woman at the front desk beamed up at me. "Hello, how can I help you?"

I asked if Jennifer had moved out. She frowned slightly, the nice smile dissipating a shade. "And you are?"

"I'm, uh ... my name's Marley. We worked together. I was just wondering—"

A strange look flicked across her face. She stood up. "Come with me." I followed. "You know, normally we're *NOT ALLOWED* to release any information about our residents. It's the law, you know. But you know, I may have remembered something about Jennifer. She had the two kids?"

“Yep.”

She huddled at another desk in a back room. I watched her flip through a giant book with a green cover. She sighed like it was the most laborious task in the world. She stopped and traced down the page with a bright red nail on a chubby index finger.

“You’re one of her emergency contacts?” she said without looking up.

“What?” I stepped forward and looked at where she pointed. My name with my number right below it. Underneath that was another name with another number. It said Felix Johnson.

“Oh. Yeah.” I did what I could to memorize his number while I pretended to stare at the book in disbelief.

“Have you been in touch with Jennifer?”

“No. I just haven’t seen her. She left for another job. And I lost her number because ... I got a new phone.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Yeah, so.”

“Well, it looks like ... hold on ... it looks like she didn’t provide us with a forwarding address. But since you’re her emergency contact, I can give you her number again if that would help?”

“Sure. Absolutely.” I grabbed a Post-It Note from her desk and hid my writing. I wrote down what I

remembered from Felix's number as she gave me Jennifer's.

"Oh, one more thing," she said and bent beneath her desk for a shoebox. "That's right ... I forgot this was for Jennifer. She left these shoes behind in her closet. Would you mind getting them to her?"

I only opened the BuyMore box in my car. A pair of black high heels in what looked like Jen's shoe size. Cute. I put them aside and blasted the A/C while staring another twenty minutes at my phone with what *might* be Felix's number entered in. I remembered the necklace and Jennifer's behavior at Starbucks. Did Felix have anything to do with all this? Including the robbery?

I cranked the A/C down and hit the green call button.

Someone answered on the second ring. "Hello?" A gruff, bored sounding voice. An accent that left off the last syllable. The word came out more like *hella*.

"Uh, hi. Is Jennifer there?"

A long empty pause. And then his voice rose.

"Who's this?"

"A friend of hers."

"Son of a bitch! Don't call here again."

He hung up. I tried calling back but it wouldn't go through. Felix, if that was him, had blocked me.

I called over and over again. Nothing.

I never found out what happened to Jennifer or her kids. Maybe Felix had a part to play in it, maybe not. I really couldn't say.

Eventually I gave Jennifer's name to the cops. From guilt or the need for closure, I'm not sure. I ended up with an attorney who established immunity for me if I offered to tell all I could to the detectives. I only saw Officers Cranley and Rollins once more, right before I offered my testimony at the police station.

Cranley glared down at me, eyes like a falcon watching her prey. "I knew you knew something," she muttered and pushed past me.

Rollins shook my hand warmly.

"Officer Rollins, good to see you," I said.

"You too! It's a good day, isn't it?"

"Guess so."

"Got news for ya. I'm retiring first of the year!"

I met the detectives in a dim room lined with two-way mirrors. I didn't like being watched. I felt like a rat in a cage. The detectives sat across the table. They looked like blurry twin images of each other. My attorney sat next to me. He smelled like ginger and raw cabbage.

“OK, miss. You can start your testimony whenever you like.”

I looked down. I'd dressed up for the occasion. Black blazer over a red frilly top. Black slacks. Black high heels gripping my feet too tight.

# Time in Blue and White

I found bones in the cave. They were small—not like an animal's, but a baby's.

Justin looked down at the bones with eyes as wide as his flashlight. "Holy Mother," he said. "What is this place?"

We'd found the cave by following Rushden Creek up the side of Lonestar Mountain. School let us out early as heavy December clouds hung low and somber. Justin and I didn't go home—instead we set out wandering, waiting for snowfall.

"Hey," he said. "Y'hear 'bout the Legend of Lonestar Mountain?"

"No, I have not."

"My pa told me last night," he said. "First time. Thought I was big enough now. And I agree. He said up on Lonestar if you foller Rushden Creek upside of it, you'll find a cave. And in this cave, people have



gone in but never came out. It's said whosoever goes in will see the future, but they won't never come back out."

"Well," I said slow and thinking, "how do they know they see the future if no one ever comes out?"

"Can't say," he said, "can't say."

"But how then did the legend get star—"

"Hush your mouth and come with me," he said. I thought it odd he already had a flashlight with him. He must have planned last night he would go to the cave today.

We followed the creek up—a hard climb. At one point I bent over the stream and put my lips in the water. It was a freezing slap in the face—the best thing I ever tasted.

Bare tree trunks grew fewer as we climbed higher. Finally the ground leveled out and we saw water spilling out a cave's mouth. I was tired, but Justin said, "C'mon!" and he had the flashlight.

The stream split the cave right down the middle. We splashed through it at first. The noise of the water over the rocks echoed off the cave walls. It was comforting, in a way.

The sunlight faded and all we had was Justin's flashlight to guide us. And then the stream led up to a little pool, and in that pool and along the bank

were hundreds and hundreds of little bones. Baby bones. We even found baby skulls.

Justin's light trembled in his hand.

*"Wegotta get outta here!"*

He dashed out the way we'd come. I had trouble keeping up—being one of the shortest in my class.

The dark cave felt it might swallow us whole. The air turned wet and thick like moss on a tree. Then it got colder as I hurried after him. I thought maybe it'd started snowing outside. But the opening to the cave wouldn't come. We followed the creek for what seemed like hours. Nothing came. Justin's flashlight started to dim. I could hear he was panting on the verge of panic.

Then a shadow passed by the flashlight just as it went out for good. Justin screamed. I felt hair on my neck stand out and we stood frozen in darkness

"Who goes there!" Justin said, trying to be tough.

No one answered. But I could hear one noise, and it was the patter of little feet in the water ahead.

"Hullo!" Justin said.

The tiny splashes came closer. Dread hit me in my chest. I scrambled away from the creek as the patters came nearer and passed the way to the pool.

I couldn't see but I could smell. The smell of old. The stench of death. Yet I could tell by the feet it was a little creature, whatever it was.

It paid us no mind and soon the echoes of its splashes went away. I floated in a pitch-black vacuum.

"Over here," Justin finally whispered. I'd almost forgotten him. I felt in the dark and found his elbow, then his face. He was huddled in a corner.

"W-what was those?" he said. "Should we—"

By degrees I could see Justin's face come into being. A blue light illuminated the cave back toward the way of the pool.

Justin stood up. "What is that?"

Something moved me to creep after it. "Where you goin?" Justin said. But I kept on. The light was beautiful and fell over the cavern walls like cool water. It got brighter and bluer as I went.

We came to the last bend before the pool. I hid against the rocks. Justin came after me. "What do you see?"

I peeked out from the rock and I saw it:

I saw ...

*a tiger.*

I see a tiger white as snow.  
She watches me. She radiates blue light.  
My hands shake. My bones turn frigid.  
Her beautiful eyes flicker like flame. She seems  
amused. The light she emits bathes the cave walls in  
deep blue and indigo. I watch entranced as she  
bends to lap water.

“Did ... did it eat the children?” Justin says, his  
voice squeaking at the end.

Slowly she turns from the water and pads through  
the stream. Justin and I back away in opposite  
directions, giving her plenty of room. I watch her  
glide through the water like she’s walking on top of  
it. She turns a bend and the light goes with her.  
Shadows hide our faces again.

“We’re trapped in here!” Justin says.

I ignore him and follow the tiger. Her light is  
before me, always just beyond me. I can never quite  
reach her. The ethereal blue fades and fades and  
then turns to white.

I spill out the cave. Cold fresh air bites my face. It’s  
night now and it’s snowing. The creek is frozen over.  
The tiger is nowhere to be seen.

I follow the creek through the snow, down the hill,  
searching for her through the trees dressed in white.  
The air feels dead like New Year’s Day.

At the bottom, the creek levels out and I find a small crowd armed with candles. My boots crunch on white fluff as I move toward them. A snowflake floats into my eye.

I get near enough to see a woman's flickering face, pale and plump, watching me with eyes shot through with shock, her mouth open. The man beside her looks the same. Everyone does. Perhaps they saw the tiger. It's why they all look so terrified. But that doesn't explain why they're still here.

Everyone is watching me. Every eye. I notice some of them have watery tears scattering down cheeks like ghosts at dawn.

"You're back!" says an old man with a long grey beard and eyes full of vigor and youth.

"What was it like?" a child beside me asks in a slow and somber tone.

"We've never seen someone go up and come back down," a young man says.

I realize Justin isn't with me. I look back up the mountain but there's no sign of him. I turn to go back for him, but someone grabs my hand.

"Aaron," a woman says. I gaze into her face and see my own mother. She's younger than I know her, less blemished. Yet her green eyes are older than I remember. "Aaron. Are you alright?"

Everything looks the same to me. But still something's strange. The air touches my skin and courses through my lungs in an alien way. I start crying. I can't help it.

"Where am I? What is this? Who are you all?"

The crowd mumbles, chatters to itself. My mother's eyes never leave mine. She searches them like she lost something there. "It's OK, Aaron. It's OK." She pulls me into an embrace, her warmth enveloping me.

A voice rises from behind the crowd. "They've stopped ... I think they've stopped rising!"

The crowd hurries as one. My mother leads me behind them. The moon lights on the flecks of icy white hidden in her dark hair. We cross the frozen stream and come into a meadow I never noticed before.

My mother leads me through as the crowd parts. And in the snowy meadow before me are rows and rows of unmarked graves. Some of them look dug up and empty.

"See," says the one who raised the alarm, "he's stopped mid-dig. He's back asleep. I know he came to, though. I saw his eyes."

I move over to the grave he's indicating. Inside the hole, an old man—a corpse ancient, decrepit, dead—

sprawls in the grave only halfway covered in dirt. His long fingernails are filthy, frozen, partly bloody.

“Could be a no-rise,” a teenager says. “Seen plenty of them.”

The alarmist shakes his head. “Not this one. He just stopped digging. Like he gave up. And it was when that one came back out the cave,” he points over to me.

My mother’s eyes don’t leave the dead man. “I must say ... he looks ... different this time.”

“How so?”

“I think ... he seems like the children when they enter the cave.”

“You mean ... dying?”

“I mean dead.”

My brain can’t grasp what they’re saying. Then my mother pulls me through the graveyard to two unmarked and empty graves.

“Look. Look here. This grave was mine,” she shows me. “And this one. This one was yours.”

I’m at a loss. I’m having a nightmare. Somewhere I fell asleep and this is all—

“This is where you were born, Aaron. Then you lived a long and satisfied life. Don’t you remember? And at the end, when it came time—when you

shrunk and grew small, when you became a child ...  
it was time to enter the cave. As we all do.”

A chill shudders my spine, not from the cold.

“And you did. But you came back. You’re back.”

A million questions chase my mind. Only one  
matters.

“Did you see the tiger?”

“What?”

“The tiger. A white tiger. Blue light came from it. It  
was—”

Of course she hadn’t seen her.

I take my mother’s hand and look around. The  
world hushes, unsteady in a quiet interlude. The  
crowd stands uneasy.

“Mother. You say no one’s ever come back out the  
cave?”

“No one until you,” she says with some pride.

I scan the graveyards, some of them empty, some  
still covered and full.

“I think I know what happens next.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m ... not sure. But I’m going to try.”

I kiss her cheek. She lets me go without argument.  
I turn and pass through the parted crowd. They  
watch me head back up the frozen stream.



One by one, they all begin to sing the most glorious medley I've ever heard.

*O cave of past,  
forgotten scene,  
the realm of all eternity.  
The darkness calls us  
to its breast,  
and time will lay  
our bones to rest.*

I bask in the melody and harmonies as they hold their candles and sing as I climb.

The tiger waits for me at the mouth. I follow her back into the cave.

In the dark corners I find Justin huddled up and crying.

"Where were you?" he says. "I was worried sick."

"It's alright. Don't be afraid."

I leave him where he is and follow the tiger to the pond. There in the shadowy blue light, drifting between the bones of many old children, I see a form on the other side of the pond. He comes nearer.

I see my own face. Someone my age with my face, my hair, my eyes. It is me standing before me, the

tiger between us beaming with blue and white confidence.

I place my hands on the tiger.

Outside the world freezes over and exploded into a single snowflake.

# Afterword

Listen, I'm serious. I *cannot* thank you enough for reading. It means the world to me that you'd take the time to read these stories. I hope you enjoyed them just as much as I enjoyed making them.

If you did enjoy this book, let me know by sending a DM on the For Your Trouble [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) pages. I would love to hear from you and hear any feedback you have!

You can also point someone you love to [foryourtrouble.com](http://foryourtrouble.com) so they can enjoy these stories, too.

Thanks again! Stay safe and stay hopeful.

We'll be alright in the end.

# About the Author

I'm Zach Riggs. I live just outside Atlanta, Georgia. I have a beautiful wife, a hilarious two-year-old girl, and baby boy coming soon.

I've always been writing something, so I always wanted to share my work one day. I never knew a global pandemic would be when I first did that.

I believe we'll be alright in the end. Life will win out. Good will come through. It might take some time, but we'll get there. Until then, keep searching for a little magic to get you by.



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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Yana Hudson

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America