

Self Sabotage

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Abstract

This thesis project has been a perfect combination of my two studies: psychology and creative writing. Upon first enrolling at the University of Colorado Boulder, I had only realized psychology as a field of interest, and writing was a simple passion of mine- a basic means of expressing myself in a time where I needed to find my voice. However, since then, not only have I pursued this passion in the form of an additional major, but I have also used it to refine and better my voice, being able to tell stories that were more than just for my own muse. I discovered that a lot of the things that drew my curiosity were the darker corners of our minds that we tend to flinch away from. Feelings of anger, insecurities, self discrepancy, self destruction. These are aspects of humanity, and we've all faced them in some form or another. Yet, due to the stigma surrounding mental health within a culture that perpetuates happiness, we tend to let these emotions, these factors of life, fester and go ignored. I've fallen victim to this same mentality, and it's where that need for a voice was born. Being able to study psychology, educate myself on our own minds, and apply that through art have allowed me to explore these uncomfortable topics in a healthy and open manner. Combined with the usual tropes, and some underutilized ones, of the horror genre, I've been able to create a wide range of pieces that focus on this self sabotaging and maladaptive nature of our own emotions and insecurities. Through this creative thesis, I hope to create a robust portfolio that many can turn to as a way to think about these uncomfortable feelings. I hope that this project can utilize the power of literature to open up discussion and allow for the exploration of the hardships that dwell within us all.

Reading List

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Red Ink

Sail, sail, the wide ocean blue,

Look into its depths and seek out the truth,

When choices are made and sailors betrayed,

A captain will be found as a fraud and a fake...

The steady rocking of the ship put the crew to sleep, but the chilled salty breeze kept Captain Simon Briar awake. It whistled through the open balcony and nagged at his skin. He paced his quarters, grinding his teeth to the tune of the creaking wood. Soft candlelight flickered off the walls and illuminated the disarrayed room. Papers and notebooks scattered the floor, ink from inkwells splattered against the locked door, and shimmering jewelry and gold found themselves off of their displays and discarded like trash. This wasn't the first night like this, but tonight something much more troubling siphoned his mind.

His eyes caught sight of the scrawny captain looking out of the silver mirror. It was his own face with sunken eyes, an unkempt beard, and stringy hair. He hated him.

The sirens' song from earlier that day still resonated within Simon's ears as if he had stood too close to a firing cannon. It drowned out all other noise and persisted to boil his blood. Was it a taunt? Was it a means to pull him under just like those he lost today? Was there any

shred of truth within it? Did his crew hear the same song? The scene of his first mate, Maurice, rescuing him from the side of the bow looped in his mind.

The warm and fleshy sensation of candle wax being hastily shoved into his ears made Simon shiver. It was an embarrassment even if it saved him from flinging himself overboard. How could he, a revered captain, look so foolish? So obviously thirst for wealth? Needing to have that brute save him... Surely the copious amounts of treasure gained could satisfy his debts—even if he had thrown it aside in his rage. Simon reminisced over his father's words, looking down at a tattered portrait of a proud man.

He stormed behind his desk and righted his chair, slumping into it and dropping his head into his hands. He rubbed his temples, pressing harder and harder with each resounding heartbeat. His breathing came in quick and he struggled to calm himself.

Simon's eyes shot open, and without hesitation he lunged forward to rifle through his desk drawers. In a fury, he tossed loose sheets of paper and quills into the mess that was his quarters. He came across his inkwells still untouched—his hand hesitated before throwing them aside, too.

The last item in the drawer was a leather-bound book, perfectly centered. Simon cleared his desk and opened the ledger, leaning over it so close he could see the bumps of the parchment. It listed the costs of ship repairs, crewmates, supplies, and other expenses. However, Simon's eyes were drawn to the page that read *Briar Tea and Trading Company Debts*. The total amount was so high it ran off the line in damning red ink traced over the original text; it was a number he grew all too familiar with during nights like this.

On the adjacent page was a running list of various treasures his crew found and bounties they had collected. Shipments of lumber, arms, and even sugar and honey struggled to outweigh the costs that came with them, and no amount of silver candlesticks or pearl necklaces would help. Simon scowled at the slow, tedious progress that was being made to pay off the debts. He glared up around the room at the mess he made, returning to the paper and striking through the page in the same red ink. His finger tapped against the desk. Its pace quickened as his mind lingered on the siren's song.

Fraud... fake...

Surely nobody knew, right? After all, with Maurice's knowledge and skill of the sea, it was much easier to delegate tasks to him; Simon had already been doing it this entire time without anyone being the wiser. Just like his father before him, he knew that all he needed to do was to sit back and look the part, commanding those around him to keep things afloat... It was only a matter of time until everything came crashing down. 'Till they viewed him as a failure too, hiding behind the shadow of Maurice.

“Shut up. Nobody will find out.”

You will eventually slip up again.

“Then I'll just hire new crewmates.”

And further your debt?

“I'll find a way out of this. I always do.”

Right... always...

“Just. Shut. Up.”

The portrait stared at him in judgmental silence. He slammed a fist onto the desk. There was red ink on his hand he hadn't noticed before.

Temper temper; his father's condescending voice rang out.

“Who says I have a temper?”

Apparently you.

“Well, I'm wrong then...” He stood from his desk, contemplating whether he really wanted to go back to pacing the floor. What other choice was there? “No... I'm in the right here...”

He combed his hand through his hair, fingers catching on knots.

“It was my father who wronged me...”

He tugged sharply on his hair.

“He gave me this debt. I'm being the bigger person paying it off.”

A hollow laugh escaped him. “I could easily tell him to deal with it himself.”

Then do it.

Simon stood there with no retort. His eyes shot to the deed reading *Briar Tea and Trading Company*. Below it was his name, signing ownership to him.

“No.”

He turned away from the desk, marching out onto the cabin's balcony overlooking the wake of the ship. The night sky was cloudy and dim. No stars, no storms. Just darkness.

Simon studied the water below, hoping for some sort of answer. All the treasures he had come across felt like blessings from God. All he needed was one more blessing... one more blessing.

A large shape moved through the water, jolting him from his stupor. He leaned out further, balancing on the tips of his toes to catch a glance of the mysterious form just under the surface.

The water broke as the figure breached once again. Even without the moonlight, Simon could make out the slimy surface of its skin glistening from the water. An arm, no... tentacle, rolled across the surface as if it went on forever. The shifting waters roared as the appendage disappeared into the fathomless depths.

"No! Come back!" His voice echoed across the water.

He worried about alerting Maurice. The last thing Simon needed right now was for that oaf to rush to his aid again...

In fact, Simon didn't remember seeing Maurice since the sirens. After rescuing him, his first mate... It didn't matter. Simon turned his attention back to the sea, eyes darting back and forth for any return of the shape.

The water rippled once more as the same massive tentacle emerged. It waved in the air as if testing its surroundings before continuing up. Then, another tentacle, followed by the rest. The

movement of the appendages rocked the ship. Simon stepped back, craning his neck upwards to see just how high the creature would rise. He reached for his sword, but after failing to find it by his side he placed a hand on his dagger instead.

The captain kept his eyes on the water in the center of the ring of tentacles. Deep red tentacles. His heart raced, and the singing melody of the sirens only grew louder in his mind... Wait, not just his mind, but all around him too.

Bubbling to the surface was what appeared to be a large rock that struck a chord of familiarity within Simon. He remembered seeing it when they encountered the sirens. Except, what appeared to be merely stone earlier was now much more recognizably part of the monster. Not only that, but growing out of the rock were the figures of four merfolk, flesh combined with the lumpy pile of rubbery grey skin beneath them that disguised itself as stone. The song he had heard enveloping his mind and body resonated from them. There was no doubt these were the same sirens he heard that day.

“It’s you again... What do you want? Have you not tortured me enough?” He shouted to them.

The sirens floated there, tentacles sweeping through the deep waters below them as if they were patiently waiting for a meal.

We come in search of your pain, one of the sirens said.

It is you who called for us, another sang.

“I did no such thing.”

Did our song not resonate with you?

Were you not thinking upon it endlessly? Their voices sounded fluid as if they were constantly changing.

“You were the ones driving me mad... And now you seek to turn my crew against me?”

We have no such desire.

We only speak truth.

Those who can accept it will continue...

Those who cannot will meet their doom...

“You expect me to believe such blatant lies?” He drew his dagger. “Now tell me how to prevent the mutiny you placed upon my crew. You think I don’t remember that line of betrayal, do you? Well, you’re going to have to try a lot harder than that to fool me!” He laughed to himself as he waved the dagger, oblivious to the red ink that stained his blade.

You still think you’re being betrayed?

“I know it.”

The sirens looked to one another.

“Tell me how to break your spell! I have come too far to be stopped by some sea-witches. I am too close to freeing myself of this damned debt!”

He could feel bile rising to his throat. His blood pumped furiously and beads of sweat began to coat his forehead.

It's already in motion.

“What do you mean?”

You should know.

After all, it's your reality. A single red tentacle rose and pointed behind the captain, into his quarters.

After so many hours of the song dominating his mind, he only heard his own, lonely pulse. He felt like he was free. But freedom felt like being tossed into a void. He turned his back to the monster and peered into the room. His gaze caught on ink splattered across the door. Red ink.

Carefully, picking his way through the wreckage, he made his way to the center of the room. As he approached, he realized the ink on the door was smeared and continued across the walls. In it was the very same number that had been seared into his memory, repeating over and over.

He followed the scattering of digits, watching them grow more frantic as they continued. They didn't even appear like numbers; at least nothing a sane person would recognize. Simon's hands snapped to his mouth, sending his dagger clattering to the ground. He tasted iron as the red ink stained his face. Sitting in the center of the room was the inkwell that sourced this mess: Maurice.

Blood was splattered across the ground from several dozen stab wounds, the most recent being a familiar sword standing upright from the first mate's chest.

The bile erupted from Simon's throat and onto the lifeless body.

Nobody could know about this. Nobody could find out what has happened here tonight.

Who else might've heard the commotion?

What if his crew was already planning to avenge their first mate's death?

Simon had no other choice. He had come too far to have it all blow up like this. He couldn't let anyone know.

Wiping the vomit from his mouth, Simon wrenched the sword from the wound and staggered out of his captain's quarters. The door slammed behind him, and all was silent.

—

As the sun begins to rise behind the ship and the water glistens in gold and orange colors, a ghostly captain returns to his chambers. A sword clatters to the ground next to a torn portrait, both bearing a matching, red stain. The captain glances out the back of the cabin with a smile toward the warm light glimmering off the water's surface. A trail of red ink floats in the wake of the ship with several dark figures bobbing in the waves, slowly disappearing beneath the tides by inky tendrils. The captain pays it no mind.

He closes the balcony doors and stumbles over to the silver mirror to make sure he looks presentable for the day. He frowns, realizing that there has been a crack in his mirror this whole time. He has a hard time even recognizing the man staring back at him.

The man covered in red ink.

The Plunge

You tell me to take the plunge. That it'll heal the body. The mind. That everyone else around me has already leapt, some fully submerged in the icy depths.

The frost siphons my warmth, and the hot springs are long behind me now. I stand there at the bank of the river with the others. Each of them seeking a rush of adrenaline I never asked for. I wonder why you want me to jump with them. Is it some kind of lesson other kids have already learned from their parents? Or is it just for your own amusement?

It's my turn. I shock my body, skin instantly swelling and itching, warning me to leave and return to the warmth. The faceless strangers all cheer, whoop, and laugh for more. I strain my eyes through the thick snowfall and the distant steam of the hot springs where you and dad were seated comfortably before I left. I try to find you, for a sign of achievement, or basic recognition. I think I see you. Behind the camera that is. Laughing with the others, cheering for me to fully submerge like the other kids did.

I grow hot with embarrassment. My breathing quickens, and my heart is a rabbit trying to escape the maws of coyotes. I can't find a perch on the rock, and I panic. I swat for dry land, you both think I'm being dramatic. Someone yells at me to touch the bottom.

You keep recording. You motion for me to do something, but this command I cannot decipher. "Stop" I want to ask you. All I want is for you to come pick me up and carry me back to the hot springs- the sour pungency I recoiled from at first, the one you insisted I was too sensitive to. But if I mention wanting to return, would that become yet another lesson?

My quivering legs fail to push me up from the pool. The water eats at my legs. It burns now. Oh god it burns.

My fingers become raw from clawing the poolside. I'm sinking. I'm going to drown, and later you will tell me I should've swam harder, that I should've been ready for the cold.

I'm a kid.

You said I'd be okay.

The strings of your trusting puppet have snapped. Sulfur and ice fill my lungs.

I took your plunge.

Gallery of Babel

“So... any image possible?”

“Yes, what don’t you understand about infinite possibilities?”

“But it’s not *actually* infi—”

“No, but the number is so high it’s basically infinite.”

We stare ahead while having this conversation, eyes fixed to the computer monitor- the only light spilling into the midnight apartment. With each passing second the screen flashed a different array of pixels, and each time my entire body hummed with anticipation. However, all that appeared was nonsense. Just tiny, randomly generated tiles. Static colors.

Earlier, he explained to me that the images are pixel grids with 416 rows and 640 columns, and with each one being randomly generated to a different color, the possibilities of what you might see are endless. You might see a wedding, a funeral... yourself. The very idea enthralled me.

“It’s based on that story about the infinite library, but instead of words, it’s images.”

I nod. His voice is behind me now as I lean closer. My eyes strain from the proximity of the screen.

“It’s cool in concept, but of course you aren’t going to find anything that interesting.”

The image shifts. I jump.

“Look! Down there, I saw an eye!”

I pull myself forward to watch as it goes away, returning once more to a random patch of colors.

He scootches closer. “Really? Where?”

I don’t respond.

...

Flash. Nothing.

...

He yawns.

“... Anyway, we’ve been at it for a while now. I’m gonna get ready for bed. You good on the couch?”

...

“Cool... Don’t stay up too long, okay?”

...

“Yea, will do.”

...

His footsteps hesitate but disappear eventually, leaving me alone in front of the flashing screen. The only sound to remain is the droning buzz of the computer...

Flash.

Shapes.

Another flash.

Shapes.

“Hmmm, come on.” I itch.

The screen continues to cycle through nothing. I grip the desk with whitening knuckles.

Flash.

Two eyes.

Flash.

A mouth.

“Holy shit.”

Interest clutches my mind, dragging it even further into the night.

... Shapes.

I'm no longer sure how much time is passing. The only things that I can perceive are the shifting tiles and droning buzz. The tears building from my reddening eyes roll down my cheeks, but at some point I stop feeling them.

My periphery catches a pair of hands resting on the desk. It takes a second to recognize they are my own. I see myself tap a finger, but I don't feel it.

The interesting thing is, now everything feels like those shapes. At least, ones that all come together to form something... but they were still just shapes. After seeing the eyes and the mouth, it's like I can break down the pixels that exist all around me. How does it do that?

My body eventually leans back out of exhaustion, I watch the shapes that make up the computer screen zoom out of focus as my head drifts away from it. I'm watching from behind

my eyes. Every movement my body makes, or I suppose the shapes that make up my body, seem to sift through molasses. They look slow. Distant.

My mind continues to lock my eyes onto the screen, and I just watch. I think I'm still interested, is this what interest feels like? It's like I'm detached from myself now. Derealized. Depersonalized.

Flash.

Shapes.

Flash.

Shapes.

Flash

...

... Me.

The tiles are of something that looks like me, staring back at myself yet void of life. The room around me appears to, like a perfect reflection.

I feel myself turn around to compare the room to the photo. All of the shapes around me match...

But I can't tell what they mean anymore.

I know there's supposed to be a couch there. I know my friend left a pillow and blanket on it. Why can't I recognize it? I look to the potted plant on the table. It too is just a jumble of shapes. Just green triangles with no real identity.

I try to get up. My vision shifts upwards. My body is standing, but I don't sense it. It's numb. Even the act of moving is detached. Distant.

I start to feel the tears swell once more. A void that fills my chest, caving inwards. An irreversible sense of abandonment washes over me and sends the room spiraling.

My perspective falls to the floor. I think I'm hugging myself. Crying. The comfort of what used to be my arms, my knees... they are just objects with no real meaning anymore, wrapping around a person that used to mean something too.

In my mind the image of myself in the gallery, the array of meaningless tiles, stares at me. It was a person. It used to mean something- have an identity. Now? I can't seem to attribute the shapes to anything real. The void grows. My heart tries to ache.

In the distance I hear my friend's voice. A once familiar concern failing to push through the muffled ringing that fills what used to be my head. Light spills into the room, this empty space, illuminating nothing of importance anymore. Following it, is a jumble of shapes moving towards me.

It was my friend.

It should be my friend.

But now it's nothing.

It's just shapes.

Everything is just shapes.

And we're all alone.

I weep.

Fiend

“Well ya heard what happened with Sarah’s kid,” Jannette purses her lips, “Caught tryn’ to sneak lip balm out of the store. God help her. It’s a shame too, she was so smart.”

One of the fathers grumbles, “All these kids are getting into trouble nowadays. Parents just don’t know how to raise ‘em.”

“Oh they’re thirteen, it should be expected that they are going to break the rules,” I say.

The room murmurs with mixed reception, causing me to sink further back into the thin leather of the folding chair.

It’s Tuesday bible study at the local church. The fluorescent lights hum, painting the pale walls with an eggy yellow in one of the side offices outside the nave. In it is the usual ring of chairs; everyone always sits in the same spot, and no one new shows up to disrupt that.

The bible presses down onto my legs. Heavy. I keep my hands folded atop it, watching them shake alongside my bouncing heel. The room continues.

“Don’t even get me started with the Schmidts’ boy, you heard he got into a fight at school?” One of the moms’ voices raises above the rest. Attention snaps to her.

“It was the talk of the school board last night.”

“I heard his dad had to hide his hunting rifle.”

“My dear Abby was nearly struck because of him.”

“It’s that damn game his older brother got at the mall,” Jannette says. She looks proud of herself.

Of course, everyone knows what she was talking about already. It’s the talk across the country. Some violent video game that all the boys are playing, but it’s just a dumb game, right?

Surely the kids who have it and are acting out were already that way to begin with. Then again, it's been getting tons of news coverage, so something must be happening.

Jannette continues, "I also heard that Carol was experiencing migraines from them playing it. Couldn't sleep a wink because her boys would have it on late into the night."

"The Schmidts' boys are better than that."

"Well I'm just saying. They were until that evil game. And it's hurtin all the innocent folk with them."

"You know, I bet Sarah's kid also got her hands on it. They're neighbors to the Schmidts."

The tide of rumors only rose from there, sweeping my mind along with them. I keep quiet though. I need to hear what they thought was best. Lord. I am so lost. I can't believe I didn't realize how vile such things can be.

Pretty soon our session ends, and everyone goes their separate ways. My back is still plastered to the chair. I stare vacantly at my bible, lingering in the room before I realize I am the last to leave. I sheepishly grab my purse and turn off the lights.

The halls of the church watch me as I retreat out of the building.

The discussion echoes in my empty car as I drive home.

What should I do?

After an eternity of driving I reach my point of dread, pulling into the hole littered driveway and into the busted old garage.

I pause, pressing my forehead into the steering wheel. I let myself breathe for just a moment.

They're only rumors. Right?

I look to the door waiting for me to enter it and return home. A home that feels all too large despite being so small.

I let out a shaky breath, checking the mirror before exiting the car. I quietly open the mudroom door.

I hear Parker in the living room. The television is set at a respectful volume even though he was the only one home. Part of it still feels too loud, but that's okay. He's going to bed soon for school the next day.

I pass by the picture sitting atop the hallway desk. It's the only one of its kind that I leave up despite my wishes to have him out of sight and mind. Parker insisted. He misses him. I try not to.

I place my things onto the kitchen counter. I don't announce that I'm home, but I have a feeling Parker already knows the schedule. I grab one of his snacks from the cabinet before returning to the papers that also awaited my arrival home.

I'm not sure how long I sat there before giving up.

Despite the oncoming due dates I shuffle the forms aside for later. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Parker. Five more minutes and then let's start getting you ready for bed, yea?"

"Aw. How about ten?"

"Don't you have a quiz tomorrow? Five minutes."

"... Fine."

Seven minutes go by before I get up from the table and go to turn off the television. On it, I can see the scarlet mess of colors. The jarring movement of the game he got for his birthday just this last week.

“Okay. You’ve played for long enough.”

“I’m sorry. Let me save it really quick.”

I wait and watch him effortlessly move the game to a different menu. I assume he saved it. I never know how kids could so easily figure out that kind of stuff.

“I’ll turn off the tv. Go ahead and start brushing your teeth, okay?”

“Okay, mom!” He pops up, rushing past me. I hear his feet patter across the house towards the bathroom.

The aura of the room feels more sinister than before. The menu screen continues to blare out rock music that I didn’t pay much mind to when I first got him the game. Now? It feels all too... savage. Pair that with the images that sit before me of some kind of man holding a gun to a devil, it makes my stomach churn.

I muster up my courage to walk over and turn off the television and his game console. The last thing to leave the screen is a single word, the title of the video game: *Fiend*. Its after image fades with dying static. I stand alone in the room thinking about what the church group would say. *How could I let this happen to him? To the rest of our community?*

I find an excuse to walk past the picture again before tucking Parker in for the night. After that, I sit in my own bed for what feels like hours. God. I don’t want to deal with this alone.

I’ll call up Jannette at some point. She knows my situation better than the rest.

—

“Throw it out immediately.”

“It was a birthday gift. The last one he’d ever get from his father.”

“Linda, it's all over the news. These video games are bad. Were you not listening at all during bible study last week? You know its evil is running rampant as we speak. Infecting the whole town for all we know.”

I purse my lips.

“All I'm saying is that if it happened to Sarah's girl, then it could happen to anyone. I've heard other neighbors saying that they're starting to get headaches too just from even hearing about it through the news.”

“That's ridicu—”

“— I've been getting them myself, and I know for certain my Johnny isn't playing that game. You've even said you're having trouble sleeping. That's one of the symptoms.”

“Trouble sleeping and a headache are normal.”

“... How's Parker doing then?”

I pause. My eyes glance at the picture on the hallway desk.

“He's fine... Schools been a little tough lately...”

“Has he had trouble focusing? Tired all the time? Getting in trouble at school?”

My breath catches. I find an excuse.

“He's just bummed about a quiz. Math's always been challenging for him.”

“... Linda, I want to help you, but you gotta be willing to do the hard things here. Think of what you're doing to Parker by letting him continue this... evil. What you're doing to yourself and others... What would Bobby have said?”

“...”

“Call me up if you need help with the decision. I can get the church group together for an emergency meeting.”

“...Mhmm, thanks Jannette.”

I hang up the phone with that message seared into my brain alongside the lingering headache. I can't let anyone from the church know about this...

I'm not going to reach out for help anyways, what am I saying?

In the corner of the living room, the game's box looks back at me. On the cover, the devil's eyes seem to follow when I back away. My mouth dries, and the headache feels all the more present.

This is ridiculous, I repeat to myself. I stride over to the hallway desk and put the picture face down. Under my breath I hear an apology.

—

“Mrs. Zimmermann—”

“— Sorry, it's just Ms.”

“Right.” There's an air of annoyance as Dr. Jackson makes a display of clicking his pen and scribbling something on his clipboard. I shift in my seat to try and get a look. He moves the board away ever so slightly.

The sterile room of the doctor's office makes me feel small, and I can't help but notice how Dr. Jackson's stool sits higher up than the worn chair I'm confined to. The air tastes sour.

“From everything you came in about today, there's nothing actually wrong occurring. Headaches, trouble sleeping... they're normal. Maybe you've been spending too much time on electronic devices before bed. Most patients who do that experience the same symptoms you claim to have.”

My heart twists a bit.

“If you just take some headache medicine and melatonin, I’m sure you’ll start feeling better in no time.”

I go to open my mouth. I want to retort. Tell him it’s more than just that. That there’s something seriously wrong going on, that I don’t know why it’s happening or what’s causing it. I don’t though, and listlessly thank him for the advice. What would I tell him anyways, that it’s a video game’s fault?

On the drive home I want to yell at myself for staying quiet. Though, I couldn’t have gotten out of that hospital faster. Before leaving, I glanced up to the all too familiar window. It still smells like death.

—

“Parker. Please turn off the game. You need to study for this test.”

“But I want to play some more.”

“Parker, math is important. Don’t you want to get a good grade?”

“... It doesn’t matter anyways. I’m just going to fail again.”

The game continues. My body tenses.

“Parker. Please. My head hurts from hearing the game all of the time.”

“I can turn down the volume then.”

“Parker!”

A silence hangs over the household. I scold myself for shouting at him. However, eventually, I hear the television turn off, and he walks over, slumping down at the table.

We don't get far before he starts to fall asleep. I spend the rest of my night downing melatonin.

—

I feel all eyes on me as I sit in the church. The conversation isn't about me, but it's how everyone is sitting: guarded and judging. Jannette probably told them about Parker, either that, or it's the way I'm slouched over, pressing my fingers into my head to try and fight off the throbbing pain. The back of my eyes feel hot.

“It's not just migraines anymore. Full body aches, nausea, anger.”

“I heard Margaret had a seizure because of it.”

“It's the politicians. They're the ones letting technology poison our country. Think of the kids!”

“Half the school board is out sick right now, and several teachers are trying to find substitutes.”

The panic continues to snowball, burying me in its avalanche once again. I think of how confused and distraught Parker must be. Based on what everyone's saying, he probably doesn't even know what he's going through. How could his young mind comprehend it? I want to cry. Not here though.

“What do we do then?” I finally manage to ask. Everyone turns as if they were waiting for me to show I was alive.

“Throw out the game,” One person jumped to answer.

One of the mom’s rolled her eyes, “It’s already too late for that though! The poison’s already spreading.”

“We should take our kids out of school until it settles down.”

“And ruin their education?”

“Well at least I’m coming up with solutions.”

I fidget. My heart is pounding against my chest, aching. My joints are stiff. The headache has been present for what has to have been nearly a week now. I can’t function like this. I need an actual solution. I should go to the doctor again. I’m not smart enough to figure this out...

Unresolved, the meeting draws to a close. This time, I rush out first. I couldn’t be there any longer. Jannette tries to confront me as I leave, but I’m already clambering into my car. As I exit the parking lot, I hear her yell at me to get rid of the game.

Looking through my rear view mirror I can see the rest of the study group exit the church. I didn’t realize how sickly they all looked too... I gotta try something... Anything...

Eventually, I manage to arrive home.

The television is too loud once again. I send Parker to bed early. I sit in my own room and cry.

At some point between night and morning I find myself pacing back and forth downstairs. The game sits in the trash can. It stares back at me, and I want to throw up. I can feel a presence pressing onto the back of my head. I don't know if they're from the game, him, Parker, Jannette, God... it hurts.

“No.”

I take the game out and hide it somewhere. I only misplaced it while cleaning. That's all. If Parker finds it, he finds it. However, until then, it's out of sight, out of mind... I can't just throw away a gift that means so much to him... I'm not ready to just throw away the last thing Bobby's hands touched.

I down some more medicine before managing to pass out on the couch. My entire body aches. I'm running a fever. Why is this so hard?

—

“Dr. Jackson, please I can't continue to live like this.” I hug myself sitting in the doctor's office.

“Mrs. Zimmermann the best I can do is to advise you to continue taking the pain medication. I can get you some that will be more effective than the generic brand, but that's all.”

“Please. Anything.” I push the words through the haze that's clouded my mind. I'm broken. My body, every part of my body is throbbing. I'm a walking corpse.

“I’m sure a slightly stronger dosage could help you out, but in the meantime, I would also advise you to avoid stressful or distressing situations. They can make these sorts of things worse... Are you sure you’re staying away from electronics like I suggested?”

I manage to nod.

He scribbles what I assume to be nonsense.

“... Before you leave, you also mentioned Parker having trouble paying attention in school. I know it’s not why you’re in here, but if you’d like, we could screen him for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. An untreated child with ADHD can be a significant stressor in a mother’s life.”

“... Would that help him?” The words are barely above a hoarse whisper.

He nods. “If we can diagnose him with it, I can request the medication for him. Here, I’ll write down the name of a psychiatrist who can help out.”

I pause, piecing together what he said. “Are you saying there’s something wrong with him... like in the head?”

“Well it’s quite possible. It’s becoming more and more of a common case among the youth nowadays.”

Those words sit with me through the rest of the meeting and on my drive home. When I walk in, Parker appears to have found the game yet again since I’ve started hiding it. He’s quieter these days.

I look over at the hallway desk where his unzipped backpack sits. I see a crumpled up paper in it. A 67% in red marker is all that shows. Behind it is the picture of three smiling figures. The doctor's note in my purse grows heavy. The game, it's poison to the mind... I shuffle over to the phone.

—

“Parker, it'll help you do better in school. Don't you want that?”

“I don't like the pills though.”

“Not even if we sprinkle it over some yogurt?”

“It tastes bad, and it makes me feel all itchy and weird.” He squirmed uncomfortably. He looks thinner.

“Please? Just keep trying it for a little bit, and we can see how you feel? The doctor said it would take a week or two to start working. After that, you should start feeling better!”

“... Fine.”

After struggling through his breakfast, he zips up his backpack. For a brief moment I catch a glimpse of the video game in his bag. I almost stop him to tell him to take it out, but I remain quiet. He looks uncomfortable when I go to give him a hug goodbye.

—

“I don't get it, Jannette. He should be doing better in school, but his teacher says he can't sit still in class now... His grades are even getting worse, and he's getting in trouble now too.” I

push back the swelling tears. Lately, I've resorted to making these calls on the floor, cradling a bowl filled with bile in my lap. The nausea is getting worse.

"I've been having a similar issue here with Johnny." Her exhausted voice replies. Even through the phone, it feels detached. "And nothing is helping. I've even tried giving him some of that strong medication I take when I'm feeling anxious. He's been all sorts of loud and misbehaving. It's making the headaches worse."

I try to think through what Jannette was saying, but my brain draws a blank. "I just don't understand what's happening. Everyone around town is getting sick and the kids are all getting in trouble and struggling in school... Where did we go wrong?"

"*We* didn't do anything wrong, Linda. You know what the real problem is, but you still haven't taken care of it. You know it's the game. Why is this so hard for you?" Her disdain pushes through the sickness.

My eyes roll over to the television. Its blank screen reflects a sad image. A mother, alone, slumped on the floor as she loses control of her life. *How could Parker be okay when I'm like this?*

I make eye contact with the photo. "I'm sorry. I don't know why it's so difficult, but I—"

"— There's no buts about it. Get. Rid. Of. It. You're poisoning him, exposing him and yourself to this satanic propaganda. It harms the mind and body. You're living through that right now."

"I... it's just that."

“Innocent people are getting sick because of it too. People that know better than to expose themselves to that hate are being poisoned. If you let Parker keep that game you’re only letting more good folk suffer- like me. Linda, you’re a good person too, but as long as you continue to let Parker ruin himself with that evil you’re betraying God’s will. You’re abusing Parker.”

I choke back the tears. They’re streaming down my face. The picture on the desk continues to watch the scene before it. I’ve failed Parker. I’ve failed him. I’ve got to be the worst mother to have ever lived.

“I don’t want this to continue. Jannette, please I need your help.” I sob.

“... That’s why I’m here. But you need to get rid of the game... If you can’t, I’ll have no choice but to get the church group involved.”

“I will. I promise... All I want is for Parker to be okay.”

I don’t care how sick I feel. I can manage with Parker being temporarily mad at me. As long as he’s okay in the long run. I can’t lose him. I can’t lose anyone else. I can’t.

“I’ll bring you some of my anxiety meds. They’ll help calm you down.”

—

A scream echoes in the empty home.

“Mom please! I’m sorry I’m doing bad in school! I’ll do better! I swear!”

I try not to look at the garbage can. Guilt crawls up my throat.

Parker continues to beg. He's trembling. His face is red and wet with tears. I hate how used I am to crying by this point.

"Parker. Listen to me, please. This is for your own good. You can't focus in school, you're getting in trouble now, and I just want you to be okay can't you see that?" I'm not sure how Parker sees me right now. I'm mortified with myself though.

"Please! I'll do better I swear! I don't know why I feel bad, but don't throw out my game! It was my gift! It was from dad!"

I close the cabinet where the trash is. Out of sight, out of mind. Out of sight, out of mind.

I try to walk away, but Parker dives for the cabinet. I grab him.

He's screaming at this point. Flailing and hitting the air. A few strikes hit me.

"Parker, please," I yell, "Please."

He accidentally punches me across the face. I yelp and release him.

Why is this happening? Why is any of this happening? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I want to yell at him more, beg him to understand where I'm coming from, how I can't keep putting on a brave front and pretend like any of this is alright. His father, the video game, this sickness, this poison.

I'm so scared. I'm so lost.

I hear a shatter.

The house goes quiet. Lying facedown on the floor now, was the picture. The picture of the three of us, glass shattered all around it, and I see my son standing at the end of the hall. A look of pained realization paints his face. It was obvious he had accidentally bumped the hallway desk while running out of the room, yet even still, he stands there. Scared.

I move to pick it up, and he backs away, turning and running upstairs.

“Parker!” I go to chase after him. Before I know it, I grab the two bottles from the medicine cabinet.

These will help. These will help him until the evil leaves this household.

Until the poison leaves his mind.

—

Stillness.

I continue to kneel there. Void of life. That single moment engulfs my mind. It plays again and again.

I finally hear the front door break open.

The ambulance sirens outside are no longer muffled. They spill in through the front door alongside the officers. I still haven't hung up since calling them.

The flashes of red and blue paint my son's bedroom through the window. His toys, bedding, books all lay strewn about. Violently thrown from their usual places during the struggle. Across the floor, scattered, are the different pills, exploded from their respective bottles. On

those bottles, the labels with their warnings can be seen. They stare up at a mother who will weep endlessly.

I tried to make sense of them long after I should have.

The officers and paramedics finally reach the bedroom. I clutch the body of my son harder as they begin to move to take him away. His heart had given out minutes before they arrived. Its last pulse lingers on my hand. My tears splash against his still face. His eyes, wide, still meet mine. Stillness.

Those eyes leave me as we're separated. I wish I had enough energy to yell, fight back, beg... I just go numb.

The scene plays in my mind again.

And again.

And again.

We're being dragged out of the house now.

I see the paramedics rush him to the back of the ambulance. From the inside of the police car I hear them. They say the cause of death was a heart attack caused by a drug overdose of both the anxiety and ADHD medications. In their arms, the soft face of my son remains limp. One of the officers walks out with his backpack. Its zipper is broken, hastily ripped closed after the bag had been stuffed with items only a child would think to grab if they ran away.

Only one of them stares back, however.

A single word:

Fiend.

The devil's eyes meet mine one last time.

The doors to the ambulance slam shut.

Arithmophobia

A bathroom scale lays face down, a crack running down its center, thrown aside and left to lie dead. A person is found just across the bathroom, body limp, their face puffy and wet with tears, growing cold as its heat is siphoned away into the dusty tiles. A toilet towers above them, stained with red and bile, their dirty hand still clutching onto its bowl. A puddle of crimson grows, trickling from the person's mouth, mixing with the stomach acid and lining of the esophagus. A small notebook watches, sitting upon the sink, reaffirming messages scribbled out in pen. A phone remains on, screen bright and showing a gallery of photos from the beach, it buzzes absently as a call goes unanswered. A mirror gives a window onto this tragedy, yet remains the guiltiest of all, reflecting a skewed perception of reality, of a body, of the scale.

Frozen Gall

Snow.

Heavy flakes pick up tempo, pelting my face as I sprint ahead. The water soaked through my clothes is already freezing. It clings to my shivering skin.

I am numb.

Breaking through the underbrush, I stumble into a clearing in the woods. Branches and rocks scatter the powdered ground.

“Fire.” The word fumbles off of my lips without feel.

I drop to my knees and scramble like a mad person for dry fuel and kindling. The icy adrenaline races through my brain with one dominating thought:

I’m not dying out here.

With branches and twigs in hand, I throw myself to a shallow part of the clearing. The snow is still light. I swipe it away in a frenzy, pushing flat stones over to create a base.

I set up the sticks in a teepee.

My shaking arms knock over the structure.

“Fuck!”

I punch one of the rocks. It hurts my fist.

I try again, moving my hands away once it seems balanced.

The forest didn’t screw me over this time.

I let out a shaky breath.

Tinder.

I sling my bag off my shoulders. Thank god it didn’t fall through the ice with me.

I pull out my lighter and some alcohol wipes I grabbed from the truck, striking a flame and holding it to the square packaging.

Fire catches.

A sensation of success and power flows through me. I hold a middle finger up to the surrounding area, hoping it's seen.

Not allowing the forest to retort, I set the flame onto the kindling. My eyes constrict as the light and heat dance upon my face.

I watch as the rest of the fire begins to catch.

“Yes. Yes. Yes! Fuck you! Haha!” I find the energy to jump up to my feet.

The spite echoes off into the distant woods underneath the evening sky, and the heavy clouds overhead seem to muffle the cheers as snow continues to drop down onto the sea of rigid mountains.

Dancing around the fire, I sling the wet clothes onto a tree branch above the heat and thank myself for remembering to grab extras before leaving my truck. A dry change of clothes has never felt so good, and pretty soon the adrenaline, that desperation, subsides and allows me to focus on getting warmer.

I make a dry spot to sit down in, holding my shivering hands by the fire as I concentrate on its intent. It's almost dizzying. The world that is. Between the cascading snowfall, the erratic movement of the fire... my head spins.

It spins with the events leading me here.

It spins with that rage.

It spins with the realization that something wants me to fail.

...

I'll show them.

You can't take me down that easily.

Snowbanking my truck, taunting me, making me fall through ice...

"You think you can kill me?" I scream, triumphantly pointing to myself.

I fall back into the snow, and the fire feels warmer than ever, almost as if it is encircling me. My head pulses. It aches. My hand presses onto it and I squint away from the light. It feels as if I'm staring into somebody's headlights. It makes me nauseous.

"You're probably already on your way here." My words feel foreign as I mutter through labored breaths. "But you underestimate me. You can't hurt me. You can't do *shit*. I'm everything you said I couldn't be!"

I spit vitriol and stare up through the heavy snowfall with a cackle.

—

The road winds around the mountainside- gray pavement cutting through the blistering snow. To my left, a steep drop-off to the forest below. To my right, a wall of stone that blurs past me as I press on the gas. My eyes aren't studying the path ahead. By this point, it's muscle memory. Instead, I find myself replaying the last conversation I had with my boss, then the last one I had with my ex... I shake the thoughts out of my head.

The radio had reached the point of static- every channel. When I had first taken this route, I flipped through each station trying to find anything. Every turn of the dial just produced more and more waves of gray to spill out of my speakers. The occasional dissonant chords would push through, and I would smack the dashboard to get it to continue.

Ever since, I remembered to bring some CD's. Helps keep me awake on this long drive. I also brought some coffee, so I should be more than good. You never wanna get dozy when the roads are this iced over.

I glance in the rear view mirror at the bags resting in the back of the pick-up, held in with bungee cords and a tarp. It was equally as shocking as it was insulting to see how little space all of your belongings actually take up. It stung, and even though I already had furniture up in the cabin, I wish she would've just let me take *something* more. I shake the thoughts away once more.

By this time I was well past the point of any other driver. Last person I passed was over an hour ago. I laugh at the thought. Now without a job, apartment, or someone to take up my space, I might just lock myself up in my cabin for good... After all, I got all the beer I need.

I kick back the thermos, downing what's left of my coffee for the fourth time; a trickle meets my lips. The current CD I have in, *Aftermath*, has reached its end, or rather, it's reached the end of my interest.

I grumble to myself, popping open the glove compartment to dig around for a different CD before the next song can start. I can feel the heat blasting against my face as I bend down and reach over, and I linger for just a moment to enjoy it.

The road bends again.

I'm aware of it.

"Come on, where is it? Stupid thing's buried in here good."

I curse. There's another bend coming up.

I righten my body, returning focus to the road. I steal some glances back to the glove compartment.

“Crap...”

My hand reaches back for it. The next song starts.

I hit the pause button. “Shut up.”

My truck makes it around the turn. Out the passenger window, I can see the stone leveling-out to woods. Definitely under an hour left. I could get through a good chunk of another CD if I could just find the damn thing.

I furrow my eyebrows. The road’s just a straight-away for the next few minutes.

I’m gonna have my music.

Holding the steering wheel firm with my knees I lean across the car into the open mouth of the glove compartment.

I rifle through the trash, ripping out discs and tossing them aside onto the seat.

The heat continues to blast. It’s making me sweat and it’s drying out my eyes. I dig faster.

“Son of a-”

A horn blares at me.

I shoot up. My truck had veered into the other lane. A car is speeding towards me.

I wrench the steering wheel to the right, eyes watering from the dryness of the heater.

The other car- a blue sedan- blazes past me. The driver, a younger woman, gives me the finger.

I return the message.

The music begins again without permission.

By this point I can feel my blood racing faster than that reckless fool. A seething heat boils the inside of the truck.

I hit the eject button this time, and I throw the disc aside as my frustration plateaus.

...

A silent storm now fills the truck.

The buzz of the engine is all that persists.

...

After a beat, I fumble for my cigarettes.

Last one.

...

I remembered buying more before leaving. Did I forget 'em?

Who cares.

I grab my lighter, clenching it with white knuckles. I strike it.

...

...

...

The tension in my fist softens ever so slightly.

I shiver, and the cigarette leaves my lips for just a moment. My mind and body buzz, and I let the wave of pins and needles resonate for a moment longer as I lean back in my seat, eyes naturally resting.

Screw that car. Screw the CD. Screw it all. I'm going to have all the time to myself in the mountains alone- no one can take that from me.

I sigh, reclining my head back and exhaling the smoke.

That's when I'm thrown into the steering wheel.

—

I clutch my aching head.

The front of the truck was fully submerged in a bank of snow, and there was no way I was going to just wait for someone to pass by. Not out in this weather. Especially since that woman was the only person I'd seen for miles. No, I can easily be at my cabin drinking and enjoying myself while I call a tow truck... Only someone useless would wait out here, and I know that's not me. After all, I was the one in the right. I am the one in the right. They're all just fools.

The walk shouldn't be a long one. I was fortunate to have crashed right by a trail just uphill from the road- the same trail that loops around the lake my cabin's on. All I need to do is find it and follow it west. Easy. And after grabbing a bag and stuffing it with a change of clothes, some snacks, my thermos, and a pack of beers, I was on my way.

The snowfall is picking up. I can feel it melting on the crevices of my face, chilling it with just a touch only to cause my skin to feel hot. Irritated by the sensation, I try to wipe it away, but it lingers. It throbs across my head.

I need to shake it away...

Nothing works.

Lumbering up onto the trail I kick the powder off of my boots. The deep snow slowed my movements. Hindered me even further than that lady did.

“Crazy woman probably wanted me to crash,” I say to no one, turning to look at my truck down below. I am built for this, and I didn’t need anybody’s help. Especially after they snowbank me.

There’s a slight ringing in my ears that I notice. Just like the irritation in my head, it won’t leave.

“Stupid attitude,” I mutter as I try to pop my ear.

That’s all this was.

Turning westward, I continue to trudge through the snow. Thankfully on the trail it’s much more manageable, and, while I don’t see any tracks, I know people have used it for snowshoeing before. Fuck, if only I had mine with me.

Did I have them with me? Were they something I packed in my car, or are they at the cabin..?

I smack my head for not being able to remember... It’s just this blizzard. It’s just the fact that I was snowbanked and have to walk through the snow now... Once I get to the cabin I’ll be able to relax. I won’t be as tense and irritated...

I press onwards.

The forest around me blends together over time, and at a certain point I’m sure it’s been nearly an hour... Maybe two? My hands and feet grow increasingly numb, but I know I have plenty of layers. It’s the wind. It has to be.

Regardless, I can feel the veins on my forehead bulging more and more. The clothes on my back itch. I swear there's a pebble in my boot, and it's only now that I notice a tear in my coat that some snow is piling into... If only I hadn't crashed, if only that lady didn't make me swerve off the road...

Through the obscurity of the snowfall, the scene around me melts into a white and brown nothingness. I look up and only see gray and green. Even the sounds around me are just a muffled drone. Static, falling from the sky and being kicked up by the wind. Static, trying to fill my boots every ten steps. Static, ringing in my ears.

The channel changes. A snap of a twig breaks me from my lull.

I whip around.

"Who's there?" I call out. The intensity of the question echoes off the trees in the distance.

No response. My knuckles whiten.

"I know you're there."

No response.

I'm storming off the trail. I know there's something there. It thinks it can fool me?

... It's probably that bitch who wrecked me.

I begin to keep my head on a swivel as I disappear towards the noise. I know I heard something. It came from over here... I know it.

My voice continues to reverberate off the trees, and my throat strains. By this point I can only feel the heat enveloping my face. My heart quickens. My pulse throbs throughout my body-my head. Everything I see is doubled. The snow around me burns in my eyes. The ringing in my ear presses into me, driving me forwards. It envelops me.

Then it all stops at once.

My pupils dilate.

I can feel my breath freezing up in my chest. The rage stutters, and I find myself scrambling backwards, on the ground.

My body commands me to flee.

I don't know why. But it makes sense.

It overtakes me.

Next thing I see is that I'm running. I'm glancing over my shoulder back at the trees. Something's in pursuit. It wants to take what little I still cling to!

I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm—

It snags my boot.

I'm in free fall.

The world around me spins. The melted grays and greens turn into the white and brown and then back and forth again and again. I feel the ground. Its impact doesn't register as I

continue to tumble down. For whatever reason the only thing I can think about is running. Escaping. Fleeing. And I'm *aware* of it, but unable to do anything about it.

The nauseating momentum comes to a sliding halt.

The area around me continues to turn. My body still wants me to run, but I find myself locked in place.

The ground has become hard. A single, frozen plane that stretches out around me.

...

Ice.

—

The crackling of the fire ticks sporadically. I can hear it as I continue to lay and stare up at the darkening sky...

"I need to get to the cabin."

The words are slurred.

I'm warm. I'm dry... So I should get going.

"... If I don't, that would prove her right. I would be a good for nothing, can't hold a job dickhead."

My brain has drifted back to the scene in the forest. Whatever I was running from... It *was* there. These woods are fucking with me. This is clearly on purpose.

I fail to gather the will to sit up. That feels like too much right now.

I reach for the bag, producing the thermos. Holding it up to my lips, I sip for the coffee.

Then I remember it's not there.

...

"It's stupid to continue hiking if it's late."

"I have a fire. The forest can't do shit to me anymore."

"... I'm warm enough... I can just leave later..."

The blue sedan flashes through my mind. She was wrong, I'm completely fine even after she did this. Even after she made me fall through that ice...

What I think is a smile stretches across my face. I'm pretty sure I laughed too.

... Why is it still getting warmer?

At least the shivering has stopped.

—

My feet fail to hold steady on the slick ice. However, I can feel myself returning to an equilibrium- a homeostasis. My head still spins, the ring continues to persist, the throbbing still lingering, but I'm fine.

I hold a hand up to my heart. I try to get it to slow.

I'm fine.

...

I'm fine.

I crouch down and hold my head between my legs. My fist tightens. I'm able to keep it together though.

"Just a scare... just all this shit getting to my head... Stop being scared!"

I take a deep breath. It hurts.

"Still uninjured too... see? No fucking problem," I lie.

I stand back up.

My back feels lighter. Did the bag fall somewhere else?

I turn to look at my surroundings. Sure enough, this is the lake right by the cabin... I should be able to figure out which direction to go easily from here and still have plenty of time to make it before it gets too late...

Just behind me I spot the bag resting by the shore. Thank god it fell someplace dry.

I take another deep breath. This whole day is messing with me... But I'm still going to make it to my cabin. I'm going to storm in, drink myself to sleep, and call the tow truck in the morning. Then...

Bile rises in my throat. The world still hasn't stopped spinning. That lingering throbbing feels stronger, in fact.

“I am fine. It’s just a headache from the fall.”

I glance down at the ice beneath my feet. I can see the darkness below it, and judging off of the cracks that formed when I fell this ice isn’t thick enough to be standing on.

Below it, it swear my eyes catch something blue. The exact same shade of that car.

I find myself leaning down to get a closer look. Getting on my hands and knees as I feel my brain slipping into another fog. I want to reach for it. I want to know why.

“What do you want?” I yell into the ice. My heart begins to quicken again, pupils shrinking into my irises once more.

Before I know it I’m punching the ice. Pound after pound, my fist creates more and more cracks, and part of me knows it’s stupid. But I’m acting on impulse. I don’t care, even if I want to. All I want is to get back at her, my boss, everyone. I’m not useless! I’m not a fuck-up!

My head feels like it’s filled with cotton. Everything is so separated from me. Why am I doing this? The thought surfaces briefly before being dragged under by something stronger.

My hand plunges through the ice with a resounding break.

The cracks around the hole crawl further out. They are creating a web around me, and like a fly, I find myself trapped in the middle of it.

The hole grows. My leg slips in.

I still do nothing to stop it

Crack.

The cold creeps up my leg. Looking back, I can see the bag on the shore.

No, it's obviously a trick.

Snap.

The rest of me is pulled under.

...

...

...

For the first time in a while things seem to be quiet again, and that silence brings with it an instant calm.

Shock.

My body must not know how to react, but the experience is liberating. I drift further and further down. Deeper and deeper.

I see the car. The woman. Myself.

I see the pain that had been inflicting my head since the crash. I see the ringing escape my ears. I see my rage, loss, sink to nothing.

The cold consumes it all.

It doesn't care about who you are or what you do. All it knows is that you generate heat, and it wants that. It will siphon it from you one way or another... It exposes your weaknesses...

...

Water fills my lungs.

My need to survive seizes me.

I struggle my body upwards, fighting against my heavy clothes.

I can see light. The gentle specks of snowflakes hitting the water- unaware of the death below.

A hand reaches up and grasps onto the ice. A sharp edge stabs through. I barely realize it.

Another hand, then the strain of muscles as I fight for my life.

I resurface, gasping for air, spewing frigid death.

The only thing I can feel is shivering.

—

... Headlights...

A pair of lights, in the same direction of the setting sun and my fire.

The two lights of my truck... are they my truck?

I should be arriving soon.

That's nice. I can finally be alone.

That's what I wanted, right?

The noises from the engine sound like a crackling fire.

They slow, lull.

Looking upwards I see a trail of smoke and ash rise up. Going against the push of the thinning snowfall.

Thinning snowfall.

Yes, look, the blizzard has calmed down.

... That's good news..

It would explain how warm I feel.

God.

I feel like I'm going to have a heatstroke.

It's like the fire's engulfed me. Like it's dragging me into it.

I need to shed these clothes.

If I allow myself to sweat, then that would just make me cold again.

... See? I know how to survive out here.

I muster up the strength to strip down.

I lay my naked body onto the clothes.

Why am I out here again?

I was angry...

It doesn't seem worth it.

I glance out in the direction of the fire and the sun. Those lights are in the distance now. The headlights of my truck. Dying, extinguishing as it disappears. From it, I can see a woman's arm sticking outside the driver side window. She's giving me the middle finger.

I return the gesture, and in my head I can hear the CD playing- stuck on loop.

... I'll switch it out when I wake up

... For now, I'm too warm...

... She took the rest anyway...

... I won't need it though...

...I'll be fine alone...

I'm warm.

Cross Country Meet

Nausea floods my senses as we pack into our team's starting box. The painted white lines on the grass force us to stack together like sardines. The anxious energy, the anticipation from everyone around me makes my head start to spin. I want to puke. There's nothing there.

Coach watches from the sidelines. He's expecting PRs today. My hands and feet are numb. I can't deliver.

Oh god. Shit. I'm crying. Why am I crying?

My breath is shallow. I need to sit down.

No. I need to race.

I'm going to fail.

Everyone is watching.

I'm going to puke.

I can't.

I crouch down. My pulse fills my head. I can't hear the runners around me anymore.

I can't do this. I need a way out. I need to leave.

... My racing spikes are untied...

A thought enters my mind.

Can I get pulled from the race? If I'm too injured to run, they would have to pull me.

I slip off the spikes.

Spiking happens all the time, especially in the initial wave of runners rushing out of the gates.

If it looks bad enough. They will pull me.

I breathe. I'm pushing the spikes into my ankle.

Sharp pain rakes down my achilles. It cleans my senses.

I press harder.

Tears fill my vision. I glance up. No one else has noticed.

Ten seconds.

People are getting ready. I stand up to join them.

Five seconds.

The hot blood soaks my sock.

Three.

Now I just need to fall.

One.

Just need to fall.

The sound of the gun reverberates through my head. I sprint forward with everyone else.

The discomfort fills my leg. A newfound levity follows.

I can be free of this.

I can escape this dread.

A tear erupts from my achilles. I scream out.

I hit the grass, uncontrolled.

The footsteps of the others pound around me. I can't stop them.

I feel their spikes pierce my skin. I'm being trampled. I cry. I want to puke. I can't.

I just bleed.

Through the packed runners, tearing me apart beneath their feet, I can see my coach.

I can't deliver.

Estradiol in Transition

She smiles with the euphoria of a sublingual pill. Small, oblong, robin's egg blue.

The dissonance in her reflection has aligned, and she can finally recognize the woman staring back. Old photos still exist, but the new ones are for once comfortable. She wouldn't trade it for the world. She wouldn't trade it at all.

Yet, old scars are traded for new ones. The dissociation that once plagued her eyes is now replaced by the exhaustion of being talked down to. The once alien voice that rumbled from her chest is instead one with strain and unfamiliarity, often to slip away as she speaks. The pain of clothes that never fit right are now replaced with hand marks left by strangers. And ignorant privilege is drained by the knowledge of why she has to wield her car keys while she walks across a dark parking lot.

Often she'll stay up crying, now awoken to emotions that laid dormant before. She'll now clutch her chest in pain even where there was no feeling prior. She'll collapse onto the floor after completing one miniscule task, filled with the weight and realizations of her shifting reality.

She smiles, defying the creation of gods and random biology, and a tear rolls down her cheek. She can recognize the person in the mirror, and it hurts more than anything she could imagine. She traded sunshine for disease.

She smiles and weeps.

The entropy of her mind has finally ceased. Now it's time to relearn life, freer than ever before.