

A misty, green mountain valley with a river and buildings. The scene is dominated by lush green hills and mountains, with a thick layer of mist or fog hanging over the valley. In the foreground, a river flows through the valley, and several buildings are visible, including a prominent one on the right. The overall atmosphere is serene and somewhat ethereal.

The Impossible Life

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series:

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one

Saya moved as if a hand pushed her back. She had no pressing matters to attend to. The carpet beneath her sole pair of black flats sank half an inch with the consistency of foam and quicksand, the kind of mixture that took years of isolation and half-hearted cleaning efforts to develop. Her coworkers neither denied nor acknowledged the crumbs and body bits from employees long gone buried in its synthetic fibers, but too many downward glances in the name of her “lie low” survival strategy had forged it into a matter of existential concern for her.

While the state of the carpet remained uncured, laughter spilled from the break room where the usual morning coffee club hovered by the hall as they migrated back to their desks at the rate of an amoeba crossing the desert. The air about them was different on this Monday. It buzzed with gossip – more so than usual. Saya recalled that they were getting a new program manager and that he was

rumored to be an eccentric.

The rumor began when the hiring manager and human resources specialist, Grace, read his cover letter aloud. Though she had shared it with a couple of people who had shared it with a couple more people until it was Kellion's village news, she reread it now to a small crowd consisting of Karalee, Shawn, Devon, and the other local twenty-and-thirty-somethings who set the bar for office and general life normalcy. Karalee, Shawn, and Devon were only there for the dramatic reading, and Grace's desperate callback to the callously clever well-off already leaving this dead horse to tear into the next oncoming neck still managed to net a satisfying flow of raised eyebrows, half grins, and disbelievably suspended company mugs filled with the fruits of the break room's Keurig.

“ ...It is a hard truth to accept that most of us do not discover our full potential in this life. The world does not nourish a journey into the limitless world inside ourselves. On the contrary it is cold to it, teaching us to live in apathy or even fear of its strangeness by clinging to circumstances that keep us inwardly stale and uncertain why – how can we feel why, buried as we are under the clamor of money,

prestige, stability, and acceptance! Sadly, most believe the outward to be the only reality possible, and the notion of another sounds like insanity. Thus when someone begins to fight against circumstances, especially comfortable ones, they appear maladjusted, unrealistic, and impractical. *What could they possibly be fighting for? There is nothing else!*

This is the great tragedy of the first world: its rationalization. People go on paying the bills and keeping a low level of risk that sounds all the more practical with each passing day! They do not realize what they give up by accepting things as they are too readily! But we cannot upend the world in one move. We must help people grow in their daily lives. Psychology, sensitivity, strategy – to me, this is the calling of a manager today.”

“Can I get that as a motivational plaque?” asked Devon.

“Uh, this is the fridge copy. We all need motivation to reach our full potential,” said Karalee.

“I can't believe you hired this guy,” Shawn said flatly to Grace. “I hope he's a huge tool and not actually insane.”

“Definitely the latter,” Grace confirmed, happy to be included.

"I've ever met anyone so... *intense*," Devon said.

"I, for one, am excited. We need some fresh blood," Karalee said. "Saya knows what I'm talking about. She loves the weirdos."

She had almost made it. She knew she shouldn't have paused to listen, and now all eyes were on her.

"Another overeager managerial type out to change the world one unfulfilled employee at a time. He'll be gone within a year," she said sullenly.

She was spared further small talk by the ringing of Grace's phone, which sent the collective rushing back to their desks.

Grace dawdled behind, now in Karalee's ear.

"Last night," she said in a low tone, glancing around the office while Saya took the opportunity to disappear; the newcomer was processing in, liable to appear at any moment, "he emailed me an itinerary for his first day. At *eleven. PM.*"

"Stop."

"Uhuh," she nodded. "He scheduled a one-on-one with

every single person. Are you ready for the intensity?”

“He sounds like *such* a character. Just out of college?”

“You're off by a decade,” said Grace, parting from Karalee with a significant look and a smile just as the phone call died, having failed to rouse her haste.

Saya headed straight for the darkened cubicle – one of the light bulbs above her had been out for eight months, and she never put in the order to fix it – where she made her niche. She kept out the office gossip for the most part, partaking with a halfhearted comment in her best feigned interest only to avoid rudeness, which she often did not, anyway. A newcomer to Kellion was like a wrapped present: shaken, poked, analyzed under microscope until they could finally open it and commence testing the lab rat for quirks, uncovering by subtle torment its roll of past misdeeds. His bold cries to rally were no trumpet call to the masses but a hunk of juicy exposed meat, bleeding on the table. Saya pictured an anxious, eager youngster already wearing the company lanyard, shiny faced from attending one too many leadership seminars. Excessive zeal often marked a wide gap between feet and ground.

She sat down and checked her phone for the third time that morning. No messages; no missed calls, as there hadn't been all weekend.

Maybe it was her lack of sociability. After all, *he* was the most sociable guy she'd ever dated, traveling in the same wide circle as Karalee and Shawn, a group that bumped into itself every weekend at bars, houses, and Instagram accounts. Could her distance from the fray be her downfall with Chris?

She wasn't Karalee, whose life consisted of one social event after the other, many of which she reveled in planning. Friday night out, Saturday show in the park cut short to make it to a barbecue, followed by Sunday brunch. Miss a day and the idyllic whirlwind spun on without you. Her bank account slunk into the corner from the thought alone of what being sociable enough to seduce Chris would do to it. But if she was *that* sociable she could probably find someone to knock Friday off her credit card statement at least, the sardonic thought hit her.

She could have at least been more engaged in the break room, she reasoned with herself. Cynicism endeared no one, and Saya already shot herself in the foot by ignoring

the majority of Karalee's happy hours. She forced out small talk and joined their outings just often enough to assure them she was alive and functional, and then she holed up at her desk for eight hours until she could go home. Too aware was she of an impracticality in her that kept her from throwing her full weight into the world of which she was a part. It turned her away from strategic happy hours and office intrigues and led her wading through murky, borderless waters that nullified the lessons of daylight on night after night of not happy hour but hours alone at home, on her couch, where she lay, unraveling.

Saya mediated a perpetual tug-of-war between the demands of the world and her natural tendency to pull away from it, proving unsuccessful in stomping out the hindrance after many long years of battle. Nor could she reverse it without a backlash of self-loathing following each attempt. She was left to accept the consequences of her inherent handicap and watch those without it, such as Karalee, fly forward with ease.

Long ago, her internal fighting had, post-cleavage, cooled into a compromise: she let impracticality's waywardly whispers go on undisturbed, but remained herself apart,

ignoring their seductive threats to wreak havoc on order, and turning around to feed the waiting monster its sacrificial chunk of her flesh without flinching, accepting, at last, this hard inevitability facing her as it faced all.

Unfortunately, the halfhearted force behind these efforts had the effect one would expect of halfhearted forces. Five years later Saya was where she'd started. She tried not to be hard on herself. After all, she was metaphorically handicapped in a competitive world and she'd done well! – by a safe, conventional measure of “well”. She had a niche where people left her alone to cog away at her comfortable, secure life – and wasn't that the entire point, to keep it all going? Not only that, but she'd mastered the tricks of survival. There was no bonus for that; the reward was what *didn't* happen, and Saya knew how to avoid it all! Keep her head low, block solidly the moment one attacked, and accept the ruling presence of the chomping toothed mouth that claimed a slice of her arm in return for a spot on the bus.

Still nothing. Her fingers hovered over “Chris,” twirling to compose a phrase that wouldn't come off as cloying, cold, or desperate. Maybe her overthinking was the culprit; by

the end of the morning when her turn came to meet their manager – who for his clamor on paper hadn't made a sound since Grace showed him his office – her “sent” folder remained unchanged.

Mind distracted by the more pressing romantic concerns, her knock inadvertently pushed the door into the office, empty save for a desk covered only by a spread of papers and folders lying ignored. The young man sitting behind it focused so intensely on a spot in the middle of the door his eyes nearly burned a beam into a point where Saya would rather no stranger focus as her body filled the entrance.

His head shot up, blushing, meeting her with a fresh, somewhat freckled face and wide eyes that betrayed childlike naivete on sight. A far cry from the smarmy go-getter Saya had imagined, he was the opposite of a magazine cover in an overlarge checkered shirt and unruly mop of reddish brown hair. He stood up immediately and shook her hand, his middling stature and thin but not peckish frame putting him on the smaller side of men.

“You must be Saya,” he paused to glance ungracefully at the roster. “I'm Yan.”

“Nice to meet you.”

As she said this she judged him far too young to be a manager. Not only was the air about him guileless but his outfit looked thrown together at the last minute. She noted also that he went through their customary introductions distractedly, jumping from trifling phrases to business as if he couldn't be bothered with propriety at this moment, she intuited.

He studied a file with her name on it. “You've been here – ?”

“Five years,” she replied, not one to question the pace her superiors took.

“Wow,” his eyes met hers again and blinked as if she'd blown a puff of air into his face. “That's a long time for someone so young.”

“Well, this is a great place to spend your youth,” she said just offhandedly enough that if he missed the deadpan, all the better.

“Certainly.” His tone exactly mirrored hers, rather infuriatingly. “At least you have a sense of humor,” evidently unveiling the game as soon as possible, he gave her a smile

as straightforward as sunlight, that of a kid boy and a spirited adolescent rolled together, or at least certainly not that of a thirty-year-old manager meeting his employee for the first time.

“Would you like to get coffee?” he asked, still looking at her.

“What?” Saya said awkwardly to the abruptness.

“I haven't been able to concentrate all morning,” Yan confessed. “Would you like to join me for coffee so we can continue our conversation?”

“You're the boss,” Saya stood up.

“Oh no – please – it needn't be like that,” he stopped her and opined with clear and unpremeditated sincerity. “If you don't want to go that's alright.”

“It's fine,” she shook her head, hoping to gloss over her latest snark.

Inquisitive stares followed them down the hall, the strongest of which came from Grace's strategically placed cubicle beside the lobby doors, as Saya kicked herself for the habit. She wasn't in high school. She was twenty-eight.

Snark was becoming less excusable and certainly less charming by the day.

“First day overwhelming?” she asked politely as they walked down the street and Yan had said not a word as they rounded onto Starbucks.

“Yes and no,” his response, made without hesitation, was measured. “It *is* overwhelming, but not because of the job. I woke up from a very odd dream today and I haven't been able to think about anything since.”

Saya reeled. He'd plunged into the deep end! The walls of decorum standing high between them crumbled prematurely as he plucked at a bond they did not yet share. What was she even debating? Who would care about a stranger's dreams except for future fodder? Saya would. She loved hearing other people's dreams, but she dared never pry. The smart thing to do was to nod and move on.

“What was it about?” she found herself asking. *A reckless jump!*

Yan looked skyward, a maneuver out of sync with all those passing them along the crowded street who looked straight ahead. Between the brief glances people threw

their way at this itch in their periphery, Saya caught snippets of comfortingly mundane conversations and leaned to them out of their sudden strange world with longing.

“Have you ever felt a something pulling you, farther and farther away from the world? Some nameless pull that inexplicably goes against common sense?”

“Yes. I can relate,” she said slowly, then added sardonically, “Especially the bit about going against common sense.”

Yan laughed. “Don't I know it. Yet, could it be any other way? If you *don't* go, you're miserable.”

“You're damned if you do and damned if you don't, right? I've managed to keep it at bay reasonably well.”

“But why?” he was taken aback.

“Because it ruins your life! It's the game of the young: run off a cliff and hit reality at the bottom.”

“Because you didn't go far enough!” Yan exclaimed.

“I take it you have?” her tone coolly kept its distance. They were sitting inside the Starbucks now, having this

conversation. She looked around her and made sure to keep it down.

He nodded vigorously. "Somehow, miraculously, I got to the end of it. I got to the place where it all was going."

"Well you've returned from Shambala. Must not be all it's cracked up to be," she muttered.

"I'm not sure what that is," he cocked his head. "I reached an indescribably beautiful forest. Not just beautiful," he amended. "It was *significant*. What I found there – ! It was everything that pull led me toward. Truths, meaning, spilling everywhere. It was impossible to grasp it all. I only really remember one thing, and it was the most important: true freedom. In that forest I moved in any possible way that fit perfectly to what I am. It's impossible to understand but – " he shook his head " – there's nothing like it. Your life's not the same." He paused. "For so many years, I walked alone... thinking there was nothing but the barrenness I saw all around me."

Saya eyed him scrutinously.

"Nothing is the same after you touch it. That's the true world." His eyes grew focused on the air before him, as

when Saya first encountered him upon pushing open his door. “I feel so indisputably that I should still be there. My waking up was an accident of the universe.”

A pause hung between them.

“That’s just the derealization that happens when you realize Kellion is the rest of your life,” Saya smoothed it over.

“The rest of your life! That’s absurd!” Yan cried.

“Maybe not for you if you keep up the dream talk.”

“This is my first managerial gig. I’m still learning,” he rationalized.

“Well, I can’t give you managerial advice, but I can tell you that the dream life is not a frequently discussed subject at Kellion.”

“You’re the first one I’ve told, actually,” Yan reflected, surprised by it himself.

“My friendly face?” she asked in deadpan.

“I just felt like telling you,” he shrugged.

“You felt like it so you did it,” she mumbled.

“Shouldn't it be so? I thought that's the ideal we strive to.”

It's the ideal we say we strive to; she decided she had spoken enough for one sitting.

Sent to fetch the next victim, Saya walked down a brightly lit row she preferred to avoid. Mostly, she could not help think that Yan's next encounter would be several magnitudes more eventful than theirs. She found Karalee bent over the task of sifting through photos on her desktop with robotic rhythm. One of her acquired duties was updating the company website, which for Karalee meant overseeing photography at company events and periodically posting new photos for their fledgling social media brand. She listlessly scrolled through pictures from last year's annual party to choose one for this year's annual party invitations, determined, thanks to a goal-oriented work ethic, to scratch the daunting task from her to-do list before lunch.

Her scroll was guided and sure, her mind quick to analyze each image in under two seconds. She appeared partial to a photo of the entire office lined up in two rows, women in front, men in the back, Karalee front and center

leading a sorority squat and flashing a winner's smile (Saya spotted her lanky self at one end, barely doing either). Based on Karalee's present expression, the cheerful moment called forth no fond memories. She dragged the image into the open invite and saved in one dispassionate motion.

Saya lightly tapped on her fabric wall.

"Well happy Monday!" Karalee spun around, holding her *Kellion Technologies* mug in a manicured hand almost carelessly, as if it could not possibly fall. Her salmon striped button-down, belted skirt, hair straightened as usual, and just the right amount of makeup for a Monday morning were Karalee's tools for playing the professional with imperceptible perfection. She hinted at just the right amount of weekend fun with the mint green nail polish Saya had first seen on only one other girl on the metro that very morning.

"My turn with the fresh meat?"

"Yep," said Saya. Behind Karalee, a chat box flashed with a new message from Shawn. *Ha*, it said in response to Karalee's, *oh I'm bringing an agenda for him. He better be*

operating at full potential.

“So?” Karalee's eyes widened.

Saya shrugged, knowing what was expected of her. “A nonevent.”

Karalee deflated. “Bummer. Shawn and Devon's were barely a minute.”

Saya watched the blinking chat windows. A message popped up from Grace. The rate of gossip never failed to strike her, even though after five years she should have been cozy in the cloak of whip-fast scrutiny. It would've been stranger if no one had noted their detour.

“Sounds about right. Unless he decides to go for coffee.”

“Oh really?” Karalee gobbled up this news.

“Yeah, apparently it's stressful being a manager at a new place? Who figured?”

“Yeah really. Well maybe when he's wired things will get more interesting,” Karalee said. “Speaking of which, happy hour. Thursday. We're giving the newbie a proper welcome. You can't miss this one,” she smiled.

“Wouldn't think of it,” said Saya.

“Perfect.” Karalee stood up and smoothed her skirt before leaving. Following, Saya returned to her silent cube.

two

Yan was barely aware of walking home. He'd thought of nothing but the dream from the moment he'd come to that morning until he stepped back into his living room that evening. He was in the height of an inexplicable collision! Its impact was fading, leaving him beholding the comet's dwindling tail, unresponsive to the greatest longing his being could muster to regain its brilliant light.

It wasn't right! *Years* of barrenness and, out of nowhere, a downpour of riches had filled his soul! Gallons of the gold he'd sought for years, spilling from a long silent wall, and all he had were a few vibrant moments? It was an entire lifetime – he'd lived a lifetime in seconds – overflowing with the wealth of meaning, lost upon waking. He retained only the ghost of a thread to a place growing more unreachable by the second and fragments of a stained glass vision he feared would never be shown to him again.

The entirety of his mental prowess fixed on restoring the

mosaic, but he'd succeeded in recapturing only the barest outline thus far. Slumped on his couch, with a great sense of loss, Yan felt that he had lost something irreplaceable.

Straining, he recalled a blur of lush greenery, a forest where he had wandered for a seeming eternity in perfect freedom. He was certain that he had conversed with unique beings residing there, vague to him in form now, but their distinct personalities hinted at behind a hazy veil. The flavors of their conversations remained with him, a pantheon of notions who'd left their imprints on his core but hung just beyond his comprehension.

Only the very last moments were etched upon his mind's eye in perfect clarity. The overwhelming sense of home when the wayward king had at last arrived and the realization that behind his directionless steps had always lain perfect sense. That every step taken according to his nature, without regard to paths and outside guidance, and in no other way, had lead him to his castle, his fate, what truly belonged to him and him alone.

It was the only kernel of gold he'd escaped with, and it was the key. Freedom of motion. It was *because* he had moved through the forest in such freedom that he had

found his castle.

One more step and it would have been true! He would be inside his real life! He'd stood an inch away. Every cell was still facing the final moment, aching to take the step to completion. Yet here his body found itself, out of sync with the truth that beat in his being, and each second his body remained stuck in this clamorous world, his treasure grew farther away. It drove him to panic. He had to remember! *That* was the true world! He couldn't let it fade! Yan felt compelled to act. To move. But how? Not a hint of a path was apparent to him from this point.

He had moved so easily *there*, taking the steps that had taken themselves. But what good did it do him here? It was a climb ever uphill. Well...then so he would go. It was the only lead he had.

Yan kept his newfound resolution to himself, hiding it even from his brother. Mark was the ultimate pragmatist, a steady, unpretentious man whose life fell perfectly in line with his personality. He had a regular set of friends that never evolved and he grumbled from time to time that he should do something more with his life. That was how his life went on – he was content to grumble lightly about it.

The grumbling, by its occurrence, was adequate payment to the stirs of unrest that called him to action. To Mark, acknowledgment was the action, and action was impractical and foolish, a risk taken by those with inadequate common sense.

Yan knew that “impractical and foolish” was just how Mark would view his *idée fixe*. The spiritual chasm between the brothers pained Yan to his core. He watched Mark sitting idly beside the possibilities resting within him, knowing that whatever Mark acknowledged out loud, only a miracle would set him in motion. Meanwhile, the quest for “something else” had fueled Yan's motions across this sphere. Yan and Mark had long ago reached a mutual acceptance of their split, and their lives ran peacefully along separate rays.

But even bullish Mark was compelled to address the sudden change in Yan's behavior.

“Are you alright? You haven't been yourself all week.”

“Au contraire. I'm closer to myself than I've ever been,” Yan said cryptically while putting his shoes on in the hallway Wednesday evening that week.

His response only deepened Mark's concern.

"Where are you going? We're about to start," Mark gestured to the living room, where a chair awaited Yan among the many around the table.

"For a walk," Yan said.

Mark stood in front of the door, as if blocking it until he got a straight answer.

"Is it a girl? Did you get new friends?"

"It's nice outside. That's it!" he said to Mark's disbelief. "I might come back for a few hands," he added to mollify him.

Mark shook his head, realizing he would not persuade Yan. "You're the only person I know who would ditch poker night to go walking by himself. But you do what you need. I just worry. I can't remember the last time I saw you out with someone else."

How could Yan explain it? Thread by thread, his little corner had unraveled until he was unhooked, the nights out thinning to a trickle and the voices of friends growing softer until they diminished to mumbles. For the past two years, Mark had been his only real link to the world, a

grounding element that reminded Yan of humanity's details when he drifted too high.

It was not by his desire. His isolation was involuntary. He was neither rude nor unfriendly, and in fact the opposite. He was a ghost, floating among people racing to bars, to yoga classes, to promotions, to the newest restaurant, to their cars. With a bystander's amusement he'd watched the elements of his life pare down to the single digits until from the cleared, lonely field, the dream burst forth like a new universe, occurring and fading as fast as a sonic boom, and leaving a thin white flame blazing like a lightpost out of murky disorder.

Yan arrived at a park where the grass wrapped around an old, seldom frequented church. Remembering his resolution, he slowed to his exact pace and slipped imperceptibly through an archway into a world where visions formed behind the unfurling spring leaves and in the moonlight falling on the park's marble fountains and benches sitting empty at this time of night. Every scene he laid eyes on was a liquid story, rewritten by the slightest motion as Yan savored alone the slow walk of lovers. Hundreds of lessons poured into him simply as he watched

the fountain, but he could not hold onto one. How unnerving it must have looked to any bystanders: a lone man, barely moving, turning his head about the empty park like a tourist on a Wednesday night.

The church's spires poked into the cloudy sky. Street lamps' light waved over the black glass windows, creating an ocean spilling into a tunnel through an ancient school bleeding into a never existing medieval town alive with an unseen population. He drank in the story, conversing wordlessly with the stones. The church spoke. It sang. And people passed by on the sidewalk like short, frayed notions, mumbling words that fell to silence before hitting the ground.

It was here Yan resided. Not in his new job. Not even at home with Mark. In this isolated world. Circumstances were irrelevant to his reality. His life was inside of him, careening along the dramatic terrain of peaks and valleys beneath his skin. He felt closer to the memories of the beings in his dreams than to anyone on Earth. Their presence beat as palpably around him as the church's talk. It was insanity unless one tasted it, and Yan could make no one taste it. Even Mark, the person closest to him in the

world, who saw him daily and knew every one of his habits, perceived not a trace of it. That incommunicable reality which was the storehouse of all of his treasures was his and his alone.

three

“His door is closed *again*,” Karalee whispered over Grace's cubicle. “Every day this week!” she mouthed to a passing Shawn, reveling in yet another morsel to gobble up behind her affront.

“What a weirdo,” he obliged, leaning over Grace's cube with her.

“I'd understand if this was a huge office, but we're a small place. It's *so* unprofessional.”

“Gee, you think he's picking up on that?” asked Shawn with dripping sarcasm. “He's like on another planet.”

“This happy hour better be real good. I'm making Mike take Chi-ha to remedial training. Little fucker keeps peeing all over my bags.”

“Bet he's happy about that,” Shawn grunted.

“No, he understood,” Karalee became very grave. “*This* is

unmissable.”

“I’ll say,” Shawn slapped Grace’s wall and walked off.

“This morning he got my Coach,” Karalee turned back to Grace.

“From the set Mike got you for Christmas?”

“*Yah*. There goes my Saturday. I can’t get it dry cleaned today ‘cause there’s happy hour, then Friday we have dinner plans with our friends we haven’t seen in like three months,” she sighed in aggravation. “You’d think we wouldn’t have to deal with this shit with what we pay Chi-ha’s trainer.”

“Some dogs just have attitudes,” Grace consoled.

“Chi-ha is *such* a prince, but he’s my baby. If he was an actual toddler he’d be the worst.”

“Dogs *are* like kids.”

“Right? Tell that to my parents. You’d think they have enough with Monica’s. Chi-ha and Zora are *basically* fur brother-and-sister. They fight like it at least.”

The office fell quiet in the afternoon. Even the sound of typing failed to emerge from the soft cubicle walls. Unable

to clear details for the annual party with her boss, Karalee sat at her desk reading when the very unexciting manifestation of Saya holding a manila folder appeared at her wall.

“Just set it there,” Karalee waved to the messy pile of magazines crowned by the newest *Express* that sat under closed cabinets adorned for the most part with numerous photographs of a robust looking pit bull and a fluffy ginger pomeranian. A single shot of Karalee and her boyfriend, and another of two small blonde girls in a pink heart shaped frame, flanked the parade.

Karalee shunted the book out of sight beside a half-eaten salad and spun around to face Saya, who glimpsed a bookmark stuffed near the top of a spine reading *The Modern American Spirit*.

“You ready?” Karalee herself looked very ready to be out of the stifling office in her bared athletic arms and ponytail.

“Oh, yeah, I’ll stay for a bit.”

“Saya! You’re killing me!”

“Sorry, I’m meeting up with someone later.”

“Hot date?”

Underneath her joke the smirk on her face was a bit too knowing. Was it real? Karalee's barely concealed complete awareness of the whole situation said “yes”, but she masterfully kept up an ignorant facade.

“Not really,” Saya said as offhandedly as she could.

“It's cool, I need to detox myself after last weekend,” Karalee said.

“Big weekend?” Saya asked, her heart jumping in anticipation.

“Uh, *yeah*. So busy but super fun. Went out Friday, and then Saturday some of my friends had a party, trying to relive their frat house days,” she rolled her eyes. “Needless to say Sunday was...”

Saya chuckled, fighting back hard heart palpitations at the revelation of where she ranked on his priority list. In that tiny half-instant Karalee scanned her for the changes.

And then the moment was gone. Perhaps it had never happened.

“I won't stay long either unless our guest of honor makes

it worthwhile. Is he even here?"

"I'm not sure, I haven't seen him today. Actually I haven't seen him since Monday," Saya said.

"*Nobody* has. How weird is that?"

"A bit," Saya shrugged.

"Don't get me wrong, he's perfectly polite, but there's something about him," Karalee squinted shrewdly into the nothingness of her cubicle wall.

"Off in his own world?" Saya offered.

"Something like that. I mean – only a crazy person writes and *sends* a cover letter like that! Right?"

Saya nodded.

"And yet..."

"What he wrote?" Saya finished for her.

Karalee smiled. "I knew the mind meld would come through."

These quiet exchanges left Saya uncertain. Through them she and Karalee had developed a bond upon the foundation that Karalee viewed Saya as a mental equal, a fellow human

among a herd of animals, a link that disappeared immediately outside of their five-by-fives when they reverted noiselessly to their respective roles in the schema.

Devon scouted for and honed in on the good seats, swiveling through the crowd like a guided missile with his thin, athletic waist. Karalee followed unconcernedly, chatting in the company of the others and still scoring the optimal seat next to Yan, who trailed behind them in favor of drinking in the bar's details: the gleam, here clean, there sticky, of the long black and red granite L counter below stylish metal lamps that hung low and freed them from unflattering office lights, softening the cliques of laughing, well groomed professionals, half of whom would call in sick tomorrow, while dozens more flowed in and amplified the noise level within minutes.

“You look like a tourist,” Shawn said as Yan took the seat next to him, which caused Shawn apparent discomfort.

“It's my first time here.”

“You new to the area?”

“Oh, no, I grew up around here.”

“And you've never been to Hooligan's?” Devon didn't hide his surprise from Shawn's other side.

“Guess I never had the occasion,” Yan shrugged.

“It's a good date spot,” Grace interjected from behind Karalee, clearly intending to steer the conversation.

“Where does your crew hang out?” Karalee asked.

“I don't go out to bars much, to be honest,” said Yan.

A little gap cracked the noisy air that they only knew how to fill with glances.

“Where do you go? Board game night?” Shawn delivered in perfect seriousness.

“I play poker with my brother and his friends sometimes, but otherwise not really. I go on a lot of walks.”

“Like with a walking group?” Devon asked.

“No, by myself,” Yan chuckled.

“It's called hiking, Devon, maybe you've heard of it,” Karalee said.

“I guess it could still be considered hiking if it's around the city. Just a lot more sidewalks and buildings. And you have to stop for cars,” Yan said thoughtfully.

Shawn drank more of his beer to let the urge to comment pass by through the second uncomfortable silence.

“Well, good excuse to get away from your girlfriend, right?” Devon said.

“I suppose, though I wouldn't want to get away from my girlfriend if I had one.”

“Boyfriend?” he fired rapidly. “Kidding. Unless you do. We don't judge.”

“No boyfriend,” Yan shook his head.

The rest of their coworkers were slowly forming an outer ring around the core, dotted with doublets and triplets discussing banalities of office life, celebrity gossip, and noncompetitive rec leagues. Yan glimpsed the dark haired girl whom he had gotten coffee with sitting on the fringes, checking her phone and not talking much to anyone.

“You've just gotta find your tribe,” Devon coached.

“Oh, I have. I've found the place where I belong,” Yan

nodded in perfect understanding of what Devon was getting it. "But it's hard to reach."

"Is it abroad?"

"Is it a circus?" followed Shawn.

Karalee and Grace snorted into their drinks.

"No. Neither. I'm not sure how to describe it. But whatever exchanges we had, and wherever we had them, they've stayed with me like nothing else has," Yan peered into the granite to choose his words.

The gap cracked wider, breaking the porcelain scene. It worked through Karalee's face, down Shawn's taut pecs, to the cold stone ground, splitting the atoms of their reactions. The darkness of opened earth lay in its crevice, leading into the unprecedented and uncertain.

"Do you believe in aliens, Yan?" Grace asked. "It's an honest question. I believe in communicating with the dead," she nodded.

"They aren't aliens," he chuckled. "And they're definitely not dead. If anything they're alive and *we're* the ones who are dead. How can they be dead when they live in the most

beautiful place imaginable? Everything we know pales in comparison! We don't even have senses for what's there! Our colors, our words, our – the way we do *everything* – can't transmit it even a fraction of it! But if people *saw* even a single grove of this land, or a slice of the canopy and the way the light played on it, it would break their hearts. They'd drop everything and run to it in a second."

"If this was a long-winded lead up to a punchline about a *literal* tribe in the Amazon, I am *very* impressed," Karalee said after a minute.

A third of the bar erupted in laughter.

"I say it's aliens," said Shawn.

"Sounds like a secret place," Devon pressed.

"It's no secret," Yan shook his head earnestly, hooking onto any gram of sincere interest. "It's open to everyone. The only problem is we're not able to see it."

"So it's invisible?" Devon was struggling to stay even. Shawn had increased the rate at which he consumed his beer.

"I hate the word 'invisible' but that's probably the best

way to put it,” Yan considered.

“But *you’ve* seen it?”

“Well, as much as one can see something that’s invisible. Again, that’s why I hate that word! I didn’t see it in the *physical* world. I saw it in a dream – or well – it wasn’t really a *dream*. It’s hard to explain. You can’t understand unless you see it for yourself. Otherwise it sounds like total nonsense, as I’m sure this sounds to you.”

“So, how does one reach an invisible forest?” Devon posed, checking his audience’s reactions now that the direction of their talk was agreed upon by all present.

“He walked there, obviously, *Devon*,” Shawn said. “On one of his walks. Or he took a shit ton of drugs.”

“You weren’t far off with the first part!” Eager for the interest voiced in reaching the invisible forest, his own very purpose for living, Yan hooked on and went forth bravely while he had the moment. “You have to take your steps as they take themselves. You can’t follow any outside guidance, even if it means breaking down your life and looking crazy in the eyes of the world.”

“What on earth is this conversation?” Grace exclaimed

with the contorted expression of something emerging from the uncanny valley from her more peripheral seat where she strained to catch the words.

“Relax, Grace. Yan's just telling us about the invisible forest,” Devon called across the row of bodies.

“Yeah, he goes there sometimes,” added Shawn congenially.

“I went there *once*,” Yan exclaimed. “I *experienced* it once,” he quickly corrected his wording, blushing. No one noticed the dark haired girl on the very fringes be the first to settle her tab and slip out of the bar as all attention had turned exclusively to the center, tightening around Yan and the nucleus.

“*What?*” Grace shook her head so hard her bob lost its hold.

“A magical forest. I assume that's where you get fulfilled. You get there by doing whatever the fuck you want,” Shawn said.

“Or taking drugs,” Devon chimed in.

“It's not magic. There *is* no magic,” Yan was running after

a quickly derailing trail. “The forest contains what's truly yours.”

“Do you *believe* this nonsense? For Christ's sake, it's only a *cover letter* – ” Grace was visibly flustered.

“But it's the same idea!” exclaimed Yan. “This is just it! That's the world that awaits when we tear down the false lives we've built up. That's the reason! Even if we have a mansion or a kingdom – who in their right minds would tear that down? The world would think we're crazy! But this place – the forest – is the reason to do it. We have to listen to it. Otherwise we go through life convincing ourselves we wanted all this heaped on us or accept that we had our chance and it's gone now. That's how we come to close the door on the world inside us that longs to get out. As it is, it escapes only in the tiniest whispers, and saddest of all, the moment we close the door for good looks the same as the moment before! But believe me, there is an ocean of difference. A moment ago we had a living chance, and now we have only the shell.”

Yan's beer sat barely touched within reach of his animated arms.

“Were you home schooled?” Shawn asked bluntly.

Yan froze, as if the flavor of the situation was finally seeping into him. “Some, through the elementary school years. We moved around a lot.”

Happy hour was rapidly snuffed out as Karalee “could not” much longer. But an urgent debriefing followed among the few she had sent invites via glance. Karalee and Shawn, at least, decided to remain behind on second thought and consider one more drink. Devon and Grace followed suit.

“In *no* way am I surprised that he's single,” Karalee said.

“I can't imagine him on a date,” Devon shook his head.

“He'd probably try to take her to the invisible forest,” came Shawn's gruff tone.

“*And* wear that shirt,” added Grace.

“I can't believe you asked if he was home schooled,” Karalee laughed.

“It figures.”

“I've known home schooled people. They are *not* like that. *That*,” Grace shook her head.

“Didn't I call it on the first day that he was a high functioning something?” Shawn said proudly..

“He's crazy!” Grace was still shaking her head in disbelief.

“Well you brought this on us,” Devon turned to her.

“We didn't think he'd be *that* crazy,” Grace appealed to Karalee.

“This was *your* doing?” Devon turned to Karalee.

“Are you not entertained?” Karalee coolly finished her beer.

“You outdid yourself, finding us a homeschooler,” Shawn tipped his glass to her.

“A homeschooled virgin,” Karalee said.

The rest laughed.

“Probably,” said Shawn.

four

Not for long could Saya stand to watch the lions tear apart the gazelle. She cried for poor Yan! That ready gleam in their eyes had taught her to keep her safe distance from the stampede. But Yan couldn't know! A friendly invitation to sit beside Karalee was a death knell disguised. To intimate to her was to sign a release for your own ridicule. She didn't bite; she amiably cleared the path to the lions' den and you thought yourself lucky to meet such a good Samaritan who gestured along neat paving stones. Then she let the lions do the work.

To whom could Saya express these trivial horrors? Everyone around her was in the game. She sailed alone. Even Chris required careful treading around: he planted at least one foot firmly in their soil, and maybe just a toe lined up beside Saya.

Saya yearned to pull the whole body in by that little toe, and that was why she waited at their agreed-upon bench

alone. He showed up almost on time, looking as fresh as he did the last time they met there – and the last time she saw him – weeks ago.

“You been here a while?” he asked.

“A few minutes. You've aged well,” she joked in greeting. Chris sat down, his leg eliminating the space between their bodies, knocking her playfully on the arm from the subtle jab.

She loved returning to the beginning, where the sea rocked them back and forth ever by the shore and left the depths a tantalization. Every relationship had its own pattern and she was learning to ride the caprices and whimsy that so colored theirs. Did she want to be on land, where nothing moved? She'd had that and left it. And they *were* moving... slowly. A good counterbalance to her perceived earlier tendency to rush.

The strength of his arm brushing hers fell like a droplet of honey on her tastebuds, making her reach for the mountain of wealth behind it, withheld.

“A drink? A few?” she asked brightly, remembering to exaggerate her smile more than was natural.

“I just came from a happy hour,” said Chris.

“Well me too. Clearly both our happy hours sucked since we're both sober,” Saya said reasonably.

Chris laughed. “It's a gym day so I can't really be drinking. Coffee?”

Saya deflated. “Sure. As long as they serve beer.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Chris pulled her up and led the way with his arm around her.

“So what was this happy hour for?” he asked, his grain of curiosity gently prying her mind like a tentacle. Too gently. He'd already heard the backstory and now he wanted her take on it. He was assessing Yan as much as he was assessing her. Saya felt the lamp's burn on her as he calmly ate across the table.

“It was for our new manager. He's a bit odd and you know how tolerant people here are of nonconformity – of oddness.”

“Anything good?” he bit into his sandwich.

Saya snorted, replaying the fiasco. “Define good.”

“Is he insane?”

“I don't think so. He just has some... interesting beliefs.”

“So he's a weirdo. I know what that means coming from you.”

“What are you saying!”

“It's probably a good thing to be open to it. Means you're nicer than the rest,” he shrugged, rather unaffected one way or the other.

“The whole thing turned into an attack. That's why I left early,” she admitted. “I hated it. They tore him apart. He's not a bad guy! I haven't seen him say or do a mean thing to anyone.”

“People are dicks,” Chris shook his head.

“To say the least. You must be really hungry,” Saya noted, watching him devour his sandwich and gulp down his coffee.

“Gotta carboload.”

“Isn't that for runners before a race?”

“Could be good for anything,” he shrugged.

“Oh. Well you're the fitness expert.”

“At least someone thinks so,” he chuckled. “So this guy – what's his name? – how's he weird?”

“It's Yan – ” he did not flinch at the uncommon name and Saya knew she was walking into a trap. What could she do? She was already riding the escalator through the room.

“He's perfectly polite, and intelligent. He just has unconventional beliefs... that he explains to the wrong people.” Chris paid more attention to her than he ever had. “Like when I met him,” Saya held herself back, “he said – he talked like we were close friends.”

Chris laughed. “So he's awkward.”

“More naïve I'd say.”

“How old is he?”

“I don't know. Thirty?”

Chris shook his head at his sandwich, grinning knowingly.

“He understands everything perfectly well. He's just not cut out to be a manager. And he looks disheveled.”

The ride ended. Saya stepped off, feeling dirty.

“I'm gonna go with insane.”

Chris looked at her. His was a poker face that rendered her illiterate, an inscrutable mask the way Karalee's would be were she sitting across from Saya instead.

“He's definitely not insane,” Saya mustered her most assured tone and gave him a look that put them on even ground.

“Sounds like a character,” said Chris, crumpling up his waste and slowly standing up. She did not say a word about it while she followed suit.

“Somebody just needs to shake him into place.”

“Maybe you should do it,” said Chris, leaving his tone intentionally empty to measure her response to yet another ambiguous situation.

“I think Karalee's already taken him under her wing,” she evaded.

Chris laughed. “I bet.”

He checked his phone.

“You have to go?”

“Yeah, I gotta run. I was gonna meet with a friend of mine tomorrow but looks like he can only do today,” Chris said to

his phone. "Haven't seen this guy in years."

"Oh! Well that's understandable. Have fun."

"We always do. I'll text you tomorrow?"

"Whatever," she gave a sarcastic shrug.

He hugged her outside the cafe and threw back a wave a few steps down, leaving Saya's Thursday night wide open. She checked her phone again. Less than an hour had passed.

five

A rare knock sounded on his door one Monday morning.

“Come in,” he said amiably despite its unfamiliar pattern.

A thin girl with straggly black hair and a face that was long and wan despite its olive hue entered. It took him a minute to recognize her as the girl who'd left the welcome happy hour early and the girl he divulged his dream to on the first day, but he was helped by her thrice worn outfit of gray bottom black top.

“I'm subbing for Karalee today,” she placed a manila folder on his desk and waited with an apathetic expression that dragged her already long face lower. It bore no trace of makeup and was partially blocked by the long hair she left unstyled, hanging down her back in irregular waves with a carelessness that, while bluntly rejecting the prevailing standards of office chic, proffered defeat over effortlessness.

“Saya, right?” he said inoffensively.

She nodded.

“I haven't seen you all month.”

She gave an ameliorating shrug, resisting the urge to comment; Yan was infamously reclusive, a pattern Karalee and the crew speculated originated with the disastrous happy hour. But, contrary to their expectations, Yan returned bearing no sign of being affected. In all interactions he met them openly: he was fair and punctual, friendly but friendless, keeper of an open door policy but a perpetually closed door. Thus it was not long before he emerged as the koan of Kellion.

“You've been on this account since the start?” he asked, running through the folder.

“Yes.”

He furrowed his brows in displeasure. Saya steeled herself. Displeasure from Yan was most disconcerting; one could read neither its cause nor its future trajectory.

“You're clearly intelligent. You don't want to move up?” he looked at her.

“I don't go to enough happy hours to move up,” she said wryly, instantly regretting doing so.

“That shouldn't have anything to do with it,” he laughed.

“*Shouldn't,*” she said. *Why,* she kicked herself again.

“That's ridiculous! You deserve to be promoted. Henceforth, you're the new assistant manager.”

“You can't do that,” she gave a short laugh herself.

“Yes I can. I'm the manager. I can do whatever I want.”

“You created a job out of thin air,” she sputtered. One didn't just *do* something. There was protocol. Paperwork. Even in her mind, the word “protocol” tasted bitter. Yet it was there, undeniable.

“Isn't that how most jobs are created? In fact, I think that's how most anything is created,” he mused.

“Sure, speaking is easy enough. Getting people to take it seriously is a whole other business.”

“Why wouldn't people take it seriously?” he asked.

She was silent, swallowing her cringe at the reaction she could anticipate from the others at being spontaneously

promoted by Yan.

“...now I can only see her when we have a buffer of, like, *two* people, or it’ll be super awkward,” she heard as she approached the break room after her second and no less strange encounter with Yan.

“I think she’s kind of a bitch. And she’s not even that cute. I don’t know why he’s with her,” Shawn’s voice replied.

“Well, he’s serious. Andie said he wanted to bring her to Outer Banks.”

“Fuck my life,” Shawn groaned, finding comfort in a sip of coffee as he and Devon watched Karalee tend to several full bags from Party City.

She gasped. “*By the way*, did you see *Melody’s* post?” she set the crinkling shopping bags full of party favors onto the table and pulled out the phone she had just put into her pocket minutes before. He looked, then let out a laugh.

“Bold move,” he said.

“New favorite couple, right? They’re *so* cute together. She’s Chris’ type,” Karalee said, scrolling through her phone.

“Saya! I feel like I haven't seen you in forever,” Karalee smiled too widely as she suddenly became aware of Saya making tea in the corner. “How'd the meeting go?”

“Fine,” she said.

“Thank you *so* much. I had literally *no* other time this week to take care of this shit,” she said, unpacking American flag themed streamers.

“Did he figure out how to get to the invisible forest yet?” Shawn asked in signature deadpan.

“I have had zero luck,” Devon shook his head.

“You should try closing your eyes,” said Shawn to communal chuckle from the rest in the break room. Only Karalee heard, “...*doesn't even make sense*,” from Saya's corner.

The invisible forest had become a running joke, an easy jab they took whenever they craved its succulent juice. Saya alone did not participate, watching in pain as Yan gave sincere consideration to their mocking interrogations about its metaphysical features and the logistics of getting there, let alone knowing one was there.

“So, is it possible to *be* there and not know?” Devon posed one day.

“That's a serious question,” Yan said thoughtfully.

“Guys! *I've* been to the invisible forest! We're forest twins!” he put his arm around Yan.

Their uncontrolled pulling of the lever had depleted most of its juice within a week; it lay on the ground like a lame animal now, nearing death, kicked again from time to time out of boredom.

“Oh my God!” Karalee cried. “Did they forget the plates?”

“We have a million from the last party,” said Devon.

“You mean the Christmas party?” Karalee gave him the look that asked if he was serious. “Fuck this day,” she looked at the ceiling. “It's *one simple job*.”

“First world problems,” Devon shook his head at Shawn.

“Okay, Mr. Third-world-problems-only, I guess you don't mind running back to the store to get them.”

“I'll just eat off a Christmas plate,” he shrugged.

“That might be fine for you, but it's not fine for *America*,”

Karalee said. “Seriously, when am I getting a secretary for this shit? Saya, wanna be my secretary?”

Saya's heartbeat quickened as she almost quipped back her promotion. She had just enough self-control to lasso the words and reign them back in.

“Coordinating all your work? Are you sure one is enough?” she said, then took a sip of tea.

A round of “oh!”s and a “*damn*” from Devon filled the space.

“That's how much faith I have in you,” Karalee offered a passable save.

In a house of five stories, Karalee was born on the third or fourth floor. She had only heard of the basement, but mentioned it in casual conversation as if she had spent months on its stone floor in a restless sleep punctured by frantic, illogical, desperate plans to move to a higher floor as quickly as possible, fragmented plans whose constant companion was the fear that in the event of failure she would fall back not to the cushioned carpet containing her piles of clothes but to the basement and have to begin the claw out all over from rock bottom. But Karalee had been

raised to believe she *could* not fall farther than her bedroom floor. Her bedrock was plush and room temperature, littered with receipts from Banana Republic and Express.

Ironically, it was her dandyish standards of what constituted “necessity”, “a bad day”, and “a lot of work” that made Karalee such an adept survivor, if only because more people answered to them than did not. Her cache of “survival skills” was subsequently altered toward life three floors up; indeed, Karalee possessed myriad trivial skills that served her ideally in Kellion and the surrounding urban-to-suburban sprawl where she traipsed all her days and nights, the most admirable of which was, to Saya, her flawless email etiquette. Personable yet just curt enough to convey authority, never apologetic, and devoid of the stream-of-consciousness relayed by less professional communicators, she used exclamation marks, double question marks, and ellipses as sparingly as if they were grenades. And, most importantly, she never mentioned an email in person, even if they had brushed on that very subject in the break room. Karalee let the recipient discover it in their inbox and have their private reaction with it

safely away from her, just as Saya did when she returned to her desk with her tea:

Dear Friends,

Our annual Fourth of July company party is just a month away! To make this the amazing event we all know it can be, I need the help of my awesome planning committee, i.e. all of you.

Mark your calendars for the first planning committee meeting next Monday at 10. If for whatever reason you can't join (and I don't know why you wouldn't want to), let me know ASAP so I can replace you. Just kidding! But seriously.

You're welcome to use any free time you may find yourself with this week to come up with ideas of what you want to see. And remember, no repeats from last year; we are better than that.

Excited for your brilliance!

Karalee A. Thaler
Operations Analyst
Kellion Technologies

“Could we reschedule for the next few weeks?” she asked hesitantly at her first meeting with Yan as assistant manager. “I’m on that party planning committee and it meets at the same time.” As always when she was around Yan, she failed to suppress a usually hidden sentiment, in this case an eye roll.

“You don’t seem like you want to do it,” Yan thus observed.

“It’s not that bad, and I’m already roped in. Plus, it should satisfy my quota for a month’s worth of happy hours at least.”

“Quota?” he looked blank.

“For sociability, office involvement, what have you,” she shrugged. “What? I get the least painful job, designing the flier. I’ve been meaning to learn the software as it is,” she mumbled off.

Yan looked confused. “If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. It says in the email you can opt out.”

“Yeah but that’s not *actually* an option,” she noted.

“It’s says so right there, in writing! Just tell her you have

other obligations.”

Saya squirmed. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It *is* so simple.”

“No, it's not. You can't just ignore the necessary sacrifice.”

“Of what?” he remained as stupefied.

“Of yourself. It's like an unwritten rule. You give up a part of yourself to the monster and get a place on the team. Resist, and you get kicked off. That's obvious,” she finished with folded arms.

“Give up a *part* of yourself? What kind of life is that?” Yan cried, leaning back in his chair.

“I believe that's *life*.”

“The only kind of life worth living is one where you have *all* of yourself.”

“Show me one person who has all of themselves. *No* one does. You're always a slave to something.”

“That's not true,” he insisted quietly. “It's possible in some moments.”

“Ah yes,” she said curtly. “In some places you mean.”

“At least my wacky construct makes me happy. Yours only makes you miserable,” he countered.

“Your wacky construct will get me fired. On second thought...” she muttered.

“Well, do as you will. But, as your boss, I'm mandating a new template.” He turned around to type something quickly, then turned the monitor to her perplexed face and revealed the creation.

Join us
for the Kellion
Technologies annual company
party on Friday,
July 3

Saya burst out laughing. “I wish! Oh, the look on Karalee's face. *Victorian minimalist*, I'd call it.”

“Do it!” he urged, his face lit with mischief.

“I can't *actually* send this.”

“Sure you can. Just hit send. The world will not end!”

They locked eyes again. Her finger moved slowly to hover over the enter key as if she were about to deploy a missile. Here they circled humanity's existential crises like scholars or mystics, yet she was unable to send one tiny email. Here she sat toying with one of the smallest fates in the universe while, out there, comets flew by, stars exploded, and people took lives with a fraction of the thought plaguing her about the social ramifications of a little mischief around a Fourth of July party.

“I can't,” she withdrew, making an internal sigh of relief that, for once, she had chosen wisely.

Yan looked crushed. “I don't understand. You wished you could. Well here's your chance!”

A tenderness such as she had not felt for another being in a long time welled in her towards him. With a seldom-deployed softness she said, “That's how it is. Everyone wants to do it but nobody really does it. To do it is – ”

“Against common sense?” a trace of bitterness appeared in his voice.

“At least joking about it is fun,” she offered.

“Joking isn't enough.” Then, with frighteningly calm resolution he pushed the send key.

A few seconds passed before Saya felt the shock, delight, anger – she didn't know what. She was upended, uncertain. Where was the ground and what meant what?

“I just said no one does it!” she squealed.

“Well there. I did it.”

She imagined Karalee finding the file in her email before Saya even made it back to her desk. Beside her cube littered with party favors strung across her folders, magazines, and the bookmark still poking out between the same pages, the minimalist rtf document looked particularly rude. The trajectory of future consequences crashed over Saya in waves.

“It's these sorts of juvenile things that are setting me back!” she cried.

“Don't think about that! Act freely, no matter how foolish it seems in the moment.”

“That's the worst career advice I've ever heard.”

“That's because it's not career advice. It's soul advice. And it's *good* advice, if you give every last drop to it. If you can't do *that*, then by all means, follow convention! Then you can get all the way up to ninety-nine percent and be perfectly happy except for one tiny grain. But you'll never get one hundred. You'll never get what's truly yours.”

Saya glared at him. “Well *you* just set me on the course without my permission! Now I have to deal with *this*.”

Yan returned a face inscrutable. She read in it a mixture of smugness and resolution, swirled with the glimmer of mischief and caprice.

“And your theory is bogus,” she went on, just aware of cordiality's complete abandonment. “In most practical applications, ninety-nine is basically a hundred.”

“Well here they couldn't be farther apart. In that tiny grain between ninety-nine and one hundred the whole world says is irrelevant lies an entire ocean. That's why at zero you're a thousand times closer to one hundred than at ninety-nine, because who will break down all ninety-nine to start from zero in the hopes of one day maybe reaching one hundred?”

Saya shook her head at the wall clock. “You should talk to my father,” she muttered.

“He'd set me straight?” Yan teased.

Saya snorted. “Hardly. He's a magnet for crazy ideas. I suppose that's why I'm even entertaining this,” she rolled her eyes, standing up to leave.

“What's that?” Yan asked curiously, pointing to the book tucked under her folder. She showed a crinkle wrapped library copy of *The Modern American Spirit*.

“It sounded promising,” she said as he read the back cover.

“Looks intriguing.”

“It's self-congratulatory and circular. And it loves its cleverness a little too much. I read it in a night,” she said.

The usual crew met her with stares when she walked into the break room.

“New record for longest meeting. What are you guys *doing* in there?” Karalee asked.

“Having adventures in the invisible forest, duh,” said Shawn.

“I bet he wants to frolic in someone's forest,” Devon muttered.

Her heart beat frantically over their stifled laughter.

“No. Saya has too much common sense,” Karalee said. “She knows he's a lunatic.”

“I showed him the party flier, actually,” Saya spoke up.

“Oh?”

“Yep. Sent it to you.”

“Ahead of the game, Saya. But I'd expect nothing less from such a hard worker,” she patted her on the back.

From that day on, their weekly talks whorled like bending branches away from office concerns – what gripped neither – venturing unapologetically into the air at the tree's frontier without sign of returning.

As Mark at home to the world beyond their apartment, so Saya had become Yan's bridge to the office. Every Monday morning she closed the door behind her and entered a garden for unwinding. In Saya, Yan found an open mind, revealed gradually beneath a sullen exterior in the unsure pauses that waited for his reply to her surefooted

commentary on the battlefield outside the door.

Saya remained careful to tiptoe around the invisible forest. She hovered around the name straddling the line dividing commonsense dismissal and curiosity. But its presence was always felt, with Yan at its edge like a gatekeeper, neither forcing nor hiding it.

“...Everything else is a substitute. Maybe a substitute with merit, but only a substitute. If I seek gold I would rather have just a grain of gold than a mansion of silver. It will never be the popular option. The vast majority of people will prefer their mansion of silver,” Yan said the Monday before the party, which had been brewing in the background to neither one's notice.

“You don't even need silver. I think just mini American flag stickers are enough.”

Yan grinned. “The path to mediocrity gets ever easier. Finding gold necessarily requires going off road. All that uncertainty, and in the end you may not even find it. It may all have been for nothing.”

“Why risk the whole mansion of silver for it, then?”

“I take it you've never found a grain of gold? There is

nothing like the moment when you do. Even if it's just a glimmer, nothing can compare. You'd trade ten mansions of silver to have it again. I know this from experience."

"Is that what happened in the forest?" Saya stepped with trepidation over the ledge.

Yan nodded.

"I found my true home. My real life is there. Not here. *This* is a dream, Saya. What I'm living here is only a shadow of the true world."

"Your beliefs are safe with me," she said.

"You can tell others. I have nothing to hide," he threw open his arms.

The shards of tenderness that had grown habitual rent her heart again.

"You *should* hide it! Don't you know what people are saying?" she burst out. Yan sat silent for a minute.

"I'm not an idiot. I know what I sound like," he said quietly.

"Then why do you say these things? Why are you so open?"

“Because what kind of life is it to close yourself off?”

“These aren't the *people* to be open with! They're cruel. They'll eat you alive.”

He laughed comfortably, his eyes relaxed. “They can't.”

Pain shot through her beholding the perfectly trusting face, and a dozen comments that she wanted to make while wringing his neck back upright. But she let it pass and him have his win.

She did not see him again until that Friday. All week, Karalee's old words echoed in her head. *She knows he's a lunatic.*

“It's seriously been forever,” Karalee said after the kids had gone home and the alcohol was wheeled out. “We missed you in the planning committee.”

“I think it still turned out a success,” Saya toasted her.

“Why thanks,” Karalee popped her beer. “Where's Yan?”

Saya shrugged.

“I just ask 'cause you're the only one who actually talks to him.”

“Oh, well, you know, lots of important managerial things to discuss.” Saya drank.

“I’m sure.”

The man in question had arrived and stood across the room, in conversation. They both watched the interaction.

“I don’t know how you do it. He’s such a mystery,” Karalee said. “Like just talking to him is weird. I almost never know what to say.”

“Maybe you two haven’t found your common hobbies,” Saya said innocuously.

Karalee snorted. “And I don’t think we will. But maybe that’s it, like he’s obviously smart. I just don’t get him.”

“Can’t he be both?” Saya asked.

“Don’t ask me. You two are probably the only ones smart enough for each other in this office.”

“I don’t know where you’re getting that.”

“Oh please. You’re foreign. That automatically makes you smarter than everyone here,” Karalee said while they absently glanced across the room, where the somewhat diminutive Yan hovered like an edgeling around a small

group in his ballooned loose shirt.

“You know there's a rumor you're fucking.”

Karalee was a master of timing, adept at leaving a gap her conversation partner felt obligated to fill. Saya had learned to counter this trick by twisting the fired material into a joke or absurd conclusion, or simply rephrasing and spitting back what she'd said.

“I'd heard that might be going on,” she said stonily, taking another overtly smooth but nerve-driven sip of her own beer.

“I don't believe it. I know you have standards,” Karalee tapped her arm like they were old friends. “Anyway, he should be so lucky.”

Saya snorted. “I don't know.”

“Oh shut up, with your gorgeous black hair and skin that looks like you've never had a pimple in your life. You don't wear any makeup, do you? I bet you don't even wear foundation.”

Saya shrugged. She didn't know how else to respond.

Karalee's eyes fluttered up into her head in annoyance.

“Karalee! Is your family here?” a coworker named Patricia floated by them, trailed by her content-looking husband who patted the same pot belly he had when he'd made his New Year's resolution.

“No,” Karalee portended lament and a sense of misfortune.

“Darn. I was so looking forward to seeing Monica. And the new baby! How's she doing?”

“Great! Monica's loving motherhood, baby's loving life,” Karalee smiled brightly. “Mon's back at work already.”

Patricia shook her head in admiration, saying, “She's superwoman. You must be so proud of her.”

“She's my statue of liberty.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“Uh, I was just about to pull them out,” Karalee pulled out her phone and flicked through a roll of pit bull and sunset photos taken on her runs until she got to her nieces.

“Oh my *God!* How can this face *not* make you and Mike think about it?”

“Oh we're thinking alright.”

“Yeah!?”

“Sure.”

“Is he here?” Patricia searched for Karalee's boyfriend's signature biceps.

“No, he had to work late.”

“He's just around the corner! Couldn't even take an hour off,” Patricia disapproved with her hands on her hips.

“Yeah,” Karalee sighed exaggeratedly. “What are you gonna do.”

“Do people get on your case like this, Saya?” Karalee took a deep gulp when Patricia walked off.

“My parents do sometimes, but I hang up if I feel like it's going that way.”

“Yeah. I swear, if another person asks me when I'm having kids I'm getting my tubes tied. You'd think them being in Ohio would slow it down but no. *Monica* already had *two* kids and *you're nearly thirty, Karalee! You're not forever twenty-one.* It's like they haven't looked out their window in seventy years,” she shook her head. “Just because *Monica* is basically our mother and they're best

shopping buddies.”

Saya had seen a number of photos of Karalee, her sister, and their mother arranged around various monuments and restaurant tables smiling and looking both related and matching, with identical white teeth, neat hair, and clean style. Karalee was amazonian to her mother's petite version of the same shape, strong, tall, and athletic, with her fair share of curves. Her sister, by contrast, was an earthy, top-heavy woman with sandy brown hair who in a glance let an outsider know to be nothing but servile or at the least polite to her. Neither woman was as delicate as the woman who made both, but their mirroring bold facial features left none to question the lineage.

Karalee was blinking back the beginnings of tears when Yan arrived and sat beside Saya. “But Monica's got her own problems. Our dad always loved me more. I'm witty like him,” she said. “He was cold to her and now she's got huge issues., no surprise” She snorted, “Her husband 's basically a slave to her inferiority complex. He fucking buys her *every shiny piece of shit* she lays her eyes on. Fucking tool.” She laughed, “And the more he does it the more she doubts him. They're both fucking idiots.”

She finished her beer while Saya kept an eye on her balance and Yan looked on uncertainly. He was caught in midair, uncertain of what one should do or say, but convinced it should be something.

“Karalee, if you want to change something, *you* have to change it. Nobody else is going to change it for you,” he tried for an encouraging tone, whose mere tail end the arriving Sean and Devon caught.

“What are you changing?” nosed Devon.

“Are you telling her to man up?” Shawn clapped Yan on the back.

Yan laughed. “Basically.”

Saya's stomach contorted.

Oh, Yan,” Karalee snorted and laughed, over her bout of tearfulness in a flash, grasping her glass in a gesture of confidence that commanded Saya and Yan to wipe the prior few moments from their memories entirely. The trio exchanged looks that rounded onto Saya and Yan side by side at the bar. Saya remained silent.

“What?” Yan said innocuously, looking from one to

another to the third.

“Nothing,” Karalee chuckled, or what for Karalee counted as a chuckle.

“Forget her, we got you a gift,” Devon pulled out a flat wrapped square figure from the bag he held. “For being the best manager we’ve ever had.”

The empty plastic black frame left Yan speechless.

“Thanks,” came out slowly from his mouth. “I don’t really hang pictures in my house,” he started.

“It’s not just a frame, silly, it’s a picture of the invisible forest,” Devon enlightened.

The crowd but for Saya and Yan laughed. Yan stared at the blank space.

“Devon, really? You couldn’t get a better picture of the invisible forest?”

Devon nearly choked.

“Look, it was hard to find. I couldn’t stay there for long. What do you think, Yan?”

“I think you got mixed up with your shirtless selfie,

Devon,” Saya chimed, creating a rift of satisfaction among them. Karalee smiled and caught Shawn's eye.

“Adorable,” Karalee gushed.

“Yeah, dude,” Devon nudged him. “Get that. Even if she does have something against taking selfies in the invisible forest,” he retorted to the loudest eruption of laughter yet.

“You're all so infatuated with your cleverness, you treat everything as a joke. Sincerity has no chance with you!” Yan said quietly, but the tone carried around the room. “Under your cleverness you're just cowards!”

“*We're* cowards. What a hypocrite! You won't even ask her out,” Karalee nodded to Saya.

“Or did you already? Are you two secretly dating?” asked Devon.

“No,” said Saya.

“Why not? It'd be cute,” said Karalee.

“Do you not like each other?” Devon nosed.

Saya glanced quickly at Yan; he was strapped into the rollercoaster, helplessly at its whim.

“You like her Yan, don't you?” Shawn asked.

Yan took a gulp of beer. “Of course I like her,” he said without looking at Saya.

“He more than likes her,” Devon grinned the length of his face. “I can tell. He wants to *love* her.”

“Leave him alone,” said Saya in a tone that sunk under their high squeals.

“Stop it, you're ruining a pure little love,” Karalee chided Devon.

“Oh is that what's going on here? It's not 'fucking', it's 'making love'?”

“Nothing's going on here!” Saya interjected, her voice growing louder like a heat wave crawling over the room.

“A man can't have tender feelings, too, Shawn?” Devon asked.

“Yeah,” Yan agreed. “It's loving, *then* fucking.”

A wave of “whoa!”s broke out. Laughter sprayed out from the cluster.

“You're a lucky girl,” Karalee put her arm around Saya,

whose face was steaming red.

“Relax, Saya, there's no shame. Even Yan can own up to it. Guess we're all cowards here except Yan,” spouted Shawn.

“Hey, you leave her alone,” Yan squared up against the much larger man. “She's no coward by a long shot. She's braver than all of you combined.”

Her eyes fixated on the ground. Heat radiated from Yan's arm beside her and she felt its urge to wrap around her in the moment of defense, but thankfully, it did not. She edged on disappearing. The subsequent moments blurred, she dimly heard their jeers, and sat in place until an appropriate amount of time had passed to take leave with her face half on.

SIX

Come Monday a simple truth remained from her weekend's brawl: there was no going back, at least not without a dent to her dignity. It was a dent that, by Sunday night, she had accepted living with for the rest of her days at Kellion, which her sullen habituation said were the rest of her foreseeable days.

Regardless, she stood at a definite fork. She could sneak to her desk like a mouse and stay there, head bowed, taking in their laughter. Or she could counter it with a bold rebuttal and shine all light on the sore.

First thing that morning she drew the battle lines clearly once and for all as her loyalties became plain and clear with each step. She was a traitor on her own ship, allying with the outcast amidst her tried crew. Silent stares she did not meet followed her bold march down the carpet toward Yan's door.

Yan's back faced her in the doorway, shielding a small box half filled with office supplies that sat on the table.

"Redecorating?" she asked in surprise, halted.

"Quitting," he said lightly.

"Wait – what? Don't let this be because of Friday, they're teasing. It'll blow over," she began but he stopped her, his eyebrows raised slightly in amusement.

"That's not why I'm quitting. I'm glad it came to light," he didn't look away. "But it shocked me."

"Which bit," she muttered.

He shook his head. "It shocked me into motion. I can't be a hypocrite any longer, Saya. Every day I've been talking to *you* about following my truest steps, yet here I am *doing* the opposite. Meanwhile the dream that's meant more than anything to me in my life is slipping away. I have to live it if I'm to keep it alive."

"You're quitting your job to go to the invisible forest," all disbelief was swallowed by the flatness.

His undaunted face was a pioneer's on the brink of his next adventure. He had one foot already out.

“You said find me someone who has all of themselves.
Well here I am.”

“What about two weeks' notice?”

Yan laughed. “What are they going to do?”

“What am *I* going to do, without *you*?”

It was abandonment at sea, the disappearance of her shielding guide who'd held the violent storms at bay. She saw the days ahead: the sea's wrath crashing onto her with full force the moment he left, charcoal clouds waiting around their oasis to close in and envelop her.

“Join me,” he shrugged as if it was another cup of coffee.

He was joking. Surely.

“I can't.”

“Why?”

“Because – it's crazy! I mean it's brave if *you* do it but *I* need a *plan*.”

“Fine. Be like the rest. Continue hiding behind your clever phrases. It won't get rid of the little grain.”

“You don't understand. It's not as simple as don't waste

your one life. *Nobody is going to catch me.* There's no mattress at the bottom of the fall. Once you're at the bottom you have to fight all the way back out out and who says I'll be able to? Things here aren't that bad. They could be much worse."

"And they could be better, much better! You're but *half* of yourself here, a shadow of what lives inside you. You've bought being certainly half for the possibility to be everything."

"You mean the possibility to be everything or nothing, I risk breaking down my entire life!"

He laughed. "The life you don't want?"

"The one I have!"

"Do you know how many times I've broken down my life? I'm still here in one piece. You can't change without breaking a few old things, that I promise. What do you have to lose?"

The question faced her openly. It marketed no certain end. All it offered was an alternate route.

"Health insurance," she said.

“You can go back whenever you want. There's nothing keeping you either here or there... or anywhere.”

“But – what you're doing – it's fiction! It isn't real life.”

“It *will* be real life if I make it so.”

Yan's disappointment shone clear. “I thought if anyone could take the leap here, it was you.” He put the box under his arm. “Goodbye, Saya. It's been a pleasure,” he nodded, and walked out the door.

Every small act of mutinous boldness that had rocked her carefully captained ship crumbled as he walked away. *If this wasn't enough to push her, whatever would be!?* She looked back upon her life – the past five years of it, and the past three before, and it had all started from a young age of following the soundest advice, and then wrestling against it – and counted the net movement of a decade spent taking two steps forward and two steps back.

The weightless, radical force that had compelled her to ask Yan about his dream so many weeks ago struck her again. Momentarily unhooked, she flew forth, avoiding looking down her own feet.

“You can take my name off the payroll, too,” she said

boldly over the timidity that made her stammer at Grace's desk, where Yan had just delivered his news to her weary but unsurprised face.

His face lost years on the spot, breaking into a boyish, exuberant smile. Grace, by contrast, morphed with counterpoint irritation.

"I expected this from him, but *you*, Saya? You're a smart girl! Don't make a foolish mistake!"

"It's foolish to always be smart," she declared.

Grace clucked. "He's gotten into her head!"

"*What* is going on?" their verbal scuff attracted Karalee to the spot. "I can't get any work done."

"They've both just quit!" Grace cried.

"*What?*"

Karalee nearly fell over from laughter. Saya's grand departure was fast veering from its intended path of glory at the first collision with reality.

"What are you *thinking?*" Karalee said.

At roughly the same height, Saya nonetheless felt

compelled to rise in order to meet her eye. She prepared herself.

“I'm thinking this has been a monumental waste of my time and that you, Karalee, are a thorn in my side! I'm done with your kiss-ass happy hours and snide comments and cruel gossip and annoying unwritten rules. All you do is make people trip over themselves if they're not just like you! You're a meanspirited yuppie who classifies American flag bowties an essential and who thinks a boring weekend is a crisis. And you, Grace, are a sad, middle aged woman with kids as old as the ones you try to fit in with. I hate this whole culture where no one has a friend but always someone to talk to as long as they watch the shows and play the games everyone else does. I don't give a shit about what he said or what she did and I'm done pretending to just to get a paycheck to buy expensive clothes to wear while eating overpriced, pseudo-healthy sandwiches!”

She stood, breathless.

“God I love starting the week with a good meltdown,” Karalee had taken a step back, unmoved by the emotional force in Saya's parting speech.

“And that's why things will never change for you. You find ways to ridicule and undercut everything slightly different. I'm tired of trying to convince you and everybody else that I belong here.”

“Oh Saya,” Karalee snorted, “I was never under the illusion. Honestly, I thought something like this might happen, but I didn't think you'd actually go through with it.”

“Just don't come back tomorrow when you change your mind!” spat Grace as they turned around to walk through the lobby doors.

“And good luck finding the invisible forest!” Karalee called, audibly mumbling, “keep her name on the roster.”

They stepped into the hard afternoon sun. The concrete Kellion Technologies cube stood behind them. Saya pointedly kept forward, tempted though she was to look back.

She had all of herself again! A long forgotten state of lightness flooded her whole being, ascending her to euphoria as a million wise and obvious realizations about how to live one's life rushed through the opened dam so quickly she could not catch a single one. Every fear that had

plagued her – her family's anger, the looming shadow of poverty, an unstoppable downward spiral into failure – was vapor. She was free, reunited at long last with a part of herself she had buried years ago for the sake of survival!

“I can't believe it. It's not like we did anything spectacular, I mean we quit our jobs, they make movies about this sort of thing every year. But it *feels* so – it's like moving mountains! *They're* the fools for sticking in their halfhearted lives when the whole *world* is ahead,” she rambled in a frenzy.

She had caught onto the stream of Yan's lightness. *Was this his everyday state?* she marveled. *Was it possible to remain in the air all the time, and had she, the sensible fool, been torturing herself for no reason?*

He walked unfazed beside her, as if he quit his job every day. The cloak of “manager” had slipped from his shoulders and revealed Yan the vibrant, the naked, whose being was just beginning to unfold in the space freed up to it.

“So... how exactly to the forest?” she asked, still smiling.

Hard eyes jutted headlong from his eyes into the all-incoming. “The way is simple. You take your steps as they

take themselves, and for *that* to happen you must be the most natural way you can be, without any outside considerations. No bending of yourself to others. No thought for the paths everyone else is taking. You must be the ultimate expression of *you*, against all odds and preconceived notions.”

“So, quitting our jobs. That makes sense,” she analyzed. “What next?”

“I was thinking lunch as it's about noon,” Yan looked down at the small trace of his shadow.

She almost tripped. That was his overarching plan? Lunch?

“What about after that?”

“Something else will happen.”

Her euphoria was plummeting fast toward a mat of brick, and she pushed away the beginning of a sickening realization creeping over: When Yan set out to follow his steps, he did not *know* his next steps. He had no plan.

“Okay, well, there's Panera to the left, Chop't down the street, a tiny Thai place a few blocks up,” she rattled off.

“I’m equally indifferent to them all,” he said, suggesting that they do what happened.

A quiet sandwich shop where they were the only customers happened shortly, several blocks down.

Saya eyed the college employee as they chewed in silence, self-conscious of how the prematurely worldly nineteen-year-old saw these two unemployed adults scraping for childhood glory, one a clearly indifferent weirdo, no less, among the normal people walking to work, to meetings, to doctor's appointments or other legitimate excuses for being off the clock in the middle of the day. Everyone had a reason. Everyone had a tie. But not them, not anymore. They were let go of, free floaters in the world.

“Well that was life changing. Time to get home and start applying to jobs now,” she said fifteen minutes later, angrily tossing her waste and unable to bear the judgment of all the passerby on the street any longer.

“Already running back?” Yan startled. “You just escaped! You’ve taken but the first step!”

“And the last if each step is this uncertain,” she said warily, foreseeing the struggle of making the hard decision

anew at every minute.

“Of course it is. Every moment will be uncertainty magnified,” he confirmed her dread. “It’s in uncertainty that our greatest possibilities lie! Don’t you see? In such a state, from every moment you can go anywhere.”

“Try it,” he offered up the space directly before them to her lead when they were back on the street.

“This is ridiculous,” she snorted, a sly instinct to prove as much to Yan about his unsubstantiated theory welling up behind her reaction.

“So? You’re free. For whom do you need to make sense?”

“Alright, then. Follow my lead,” she said coolly, beginning a walk to the nearest light rail station and moving farther from Kellion, where Karalee and the rest were going about their day, more than likely still discussing their bizarre departure.

Were it not for the miniscule moment of a weightless force, she would be among them, listening from her cube to their takes on Yan’s flight, absorbing the fact that she would never see him again. Seeing her own self walking beside him instead, a strange sensation went through and made

her shiver. She felt rather like she had rewritten fate.

Twenty minutes ago she had been on a straight path, and in a second she had destroyed all she'd built along it to board the northbound light rail to no end with a stranger whose past might be riddled with any number of unnerving details! Hadn't she learned in the course of her twenty-eight years that interesting people were often insane!? It was entirely possible that she had recklessly cast aside her stable, secure life to follow the creed of a broken mind!

Yan made no question or comment, quietly taking a seat across from her and watching the world beyond the window flow from packed brick rowhomes to loose woods where the tracks had worn down to romantic rust that recalled vague memories in Saya of watching long, rusty trains snaking out of and into tree clumps in the park as her parents barbecued meat somewhere irrelevantly behind her.

The train chugged through the countryside for its last few stops, covering lengthy stretches only the occasional lone house punctured from its acre. The world became quiet, wheat fields baking under the high July sun as it brought them to the north end, where the distant sea stilled

into a poisonous harbor surrounded by old industrial ruins. They alone walked among chipped concrete.

“Not a popular spot, is it?” Yan mused.

“It's not exactly white sands and an island breeze,” Saya said, keeping carefully out of the unwelcoming stagnant water. “Plus some people work.”

“I'm glad we came. I've never been here; it's another world, yet it's so close!” he marveled.

She felt absurd. The image of herself pacing around the defunct pier while the living half of the city went on an idyllic distance away burned in her mind's eye. From this shore, so distant from the throng where she knew but couldn't see that Kellion was hidden, the building she had associated with daily life was quickly acquiring a foreign, peculiar taste.

“Five whole years! How can it disappear in minutes?” she exclaimed.

“You can have a whole life out there, and it can mean nothing to you,” said Yan.

They took the southbound train back through familiar

worlds to the bustling core of sprightly young students and professionals until *its* loud rush faded, too, and they kept on. It could have been *she* hurrying to happy hour. It was a mere slight right she'd taken, and naught else, that had split her off from any one of the people out the window.

Suburbs that saw no end replaced the city until they reached the airport at the other extreme. They stood uselessly on the platform, letting the swarm bearing unwieldy luggage pass them to the gates through the glass doors chopping up the clash of metal and voices and zippers. There was nothing else to the scene. No revelation. No further direction on her natural steps.

“And what was the point?” she asked, feeling supremely foolish as she and Yan were left alone by the train.

“Now you've ridden the light rail end to end. That's a complete act.”

“Wonderful,” she said without tone. “I couldn't have wasted two hours any other time.”

“Four dollars for a couple hours of freedom and added perspective seems like a good deal to me,” he shrugged.

They returned to the middle and meandered to a park

clearly familiar to Yan, where a centuries old olive church stood over the grass and a vast tree sprouted from beside one wall and obscured large pieces of the stained glass windows.

“Where are you rushing to?” Yan asked beguilingly from the gnarly low branch where he swung in his business casual attire. Fixated on her thoughts, Saya was pacing around the grass with short steps.

She stopped abruptly. “I just walk quickly.”

“Why? It's not like we have somewhere to be.” Even his speech was slow. He jumped down. “People never remember to walk at their own pace.”

He joined her, strolling around the park as comfortably as if he was showing her his home. Yan moved through a world without sidewalks. Everywhere was a perfect place to walk. The tree branch was a swing, a bench, exercise equipment, all of those, an infinite number more, yet truly none. He could swing on it or sit on it, hang one leg off of it, swing one arm. His world was made in every borderless shade. To divide the colors was a task solvable in infinite ways. Yan made the path as he took it; he saw the

guidelines, but they were not absolutes. They were brushstrokes in a painting, equal in value to the non-rules and the different rules. He could just as calmly walk on the sidewalk or beside it, balancing on the beam of concrete that separated it from the road, or on the road itself. He could climb up the church wall, and from the moment he decided to there was no telling how he would do it. He could take a few steps on the sidewalk, climb a foot up, and come back down to the sidewalk. He could swerve along the grass, take a step on the sidewalk, climb a foot up the wall, come down, and start climbing again four feet ahead. He could climb to the top, or to the first window, or just beyond the first window, and from there jump onto the tree. He could stop at a nondescript stone. His was not a terrain of flagged landmarks but a field where every particle was evenly valued. Threads of possibility ran through every thing, spinning a universe of worlds that *could* exist but that hung perpetually inside the brew of formation. Manifestation was always taking form, merely suggestiing shapes and spinning out of these nothing-hints a gateway into all of them. Every moment manifested only one possibility, but infinite possibility surrounded every one moment.

Saya felt herself on a ledge, one foot stood in Yan's novel world and one replaying the scenes from the world at her back.

"We must be crazy," she muttered. "Everybody's greatest fear at Kellion was losing their job and we up and walked out like it was nothing."

"Why do you care?"

"*They* didn't follow you. I *did*. That means that whatever's in you, I must have in me, too."

"And what do you think it is that's in me?" he asked curiously.

Saya said nothing. She bit her lip.

"Don't worry," he said with uncharacteristic gentleness, inviting her to sit with him on the grass. "We're not out of our minds. It's they who have it backwards. They think they preserve what has value, but they're polishing rocks while they let the garden die. Too many people go through life without knowing what really has value and only realize it when it's too late."

"But we didn't leave to start a business, or go to school,

or do *anything*. We left for nothing. How aren't we a pair of aimless drifters?"

"Aimless?" he balked. "We're anything but aimless! We're going somewhere."

"Somewhere that could just be a fantasy!" she exclaimed. "Hasn't that ever occurred to you?"

"It won't be a fantasy when we reach it," he said with firm conviction.

"But – *how*. Isn't this afternoon enough to show you – make you doubt? We quit our *jobs* and set out and *nothing happened!*"

"Exactly!" he exclaimed, elated. "*Nothing happened!* Don't you see what that means? No matter what you do, you can't be undone! That leaves you free to do anything! To throw yourself to the fantasy without fear!"

Her heart broke to hear his spirit, the way it often had in his old office, where no matter how high they'd gone, the uncompromising ground waited just beyond the door, making no reaction to their fervent stirring and flapping in the name of escapism. It had to do nothing but wait; no matter how strong the gust of spirit that carried them, they

would fall back eventually.

“Life can't *be* the fantasy. Even riding the light rail – that was a clunky imitation. The *true* fantasy is this childish notion that I can hop on a train and ride it forever and hang suspended in the going.”

“Then those are your true steps,” his eyes alighted.

He'd let the grass catch his back as he lost himself in the enamor of the idea. With some trepidation, Saya also lay down on the cool turf of the city park, staring up at the two-star sky even more brightened by a streetlamp in the corner.

“It's impossible,” she said. “The train is going to stop. It can't escape the world.”

Timidly, he put his arm around her. She barely sensed him holding his breath. She withdrew involuntarily with a subtle jerk, and Yan instantly removed the arm, mumbling a barely heard, “sorry”.

Her insides squirmed at the revelation of his human. Until that very moment he'd been a mystic, an unearthly guide on their strange road. For the first time she'd glimpsed the ordinary man, breathing feet from her with a

flesh machine like her's and anyone's, a body tethered to life, anchoring a mind that stood outside – and was often blind to – its parameters.

A benign expression overcame his face. Regret welling up at the previous moment, she yearned to reach over. Briefly, she clasped his forearm in her palm in a soft gesture that came out like a brusque choke. Aware of this, she quickly let go and rolled so that her back faced him and her mortified eyes faced the bottom of the hill sloping down to the traffic that waned with passing hours, which she spent beating herself up for her eternal childishness in matters such as these.

seven

When she fully awoke it was not yet daylight. She doubted she had ever fallen asleep. Only one other human heap shared the park, curled on the grass. A spasm of camaraderie passed through her for they who behind the morass of noise and haste had found the same secret world. Then she shook her head clear.

Her back ached. She traced grass blade imprints on her cheek where it had mashed into the ground. The bottom of her head was bruised from using her purse as a pillow while hiding it under her hair. Her blouse and capris were wet with dew and, though clean, felt dirty. She was, by habit, in desperate need of a shower.

Still solid and real, Yan lay flat on his back a few feet down, fast asleep, and while so, she took a thorough, unapologetic examination of his face, verifying for herself that it was indeed the species human and of flesh. Imperfectly spread freckles pointed to the future of

evolution. Light lines revealed some age. She rested on his unremarkable eyebrows, relaxed and content, his short unromantic lashes, the particular amount of flesh that filled his lips, an amount differing from the amount that filled hers. His body was not in the gangly spread of a traveler, but conformationally angelic, or corpse-like, as if he had trained himself to assume the peace of one who could not conceive of being harmed while exposed.

Quickly, she checked her own appearance in her nearly dead phone, making sure no one was around to witness her moment of cheating on their adventure of ignorance. She was not certain Yan even had a phone. He had no way to contact her. He did not know her address. Nothing bound her to remain with him and suffer continued embarrassment a second longer. She could leave him sleeping there and pretend like nothing ever happened. In fact that was what any other person would do. They would erase this blip from the personal record and move along in ordinary life.

Footsteps sounded on the pavement. She locked eyes with the thinnish man walking quickly by, sporting a messenger bag and sea green shirt and unchecked

dubiousness at the sight of them. Under his exaggerated gaze, Saya crashed into the reality that it was Tuesday morning and that most of the people she knew were waking up for work. The bum was one thing but a young, healthy couple in the middle of the grass? They wore office clothes; they had normal haircuts. He briefly toyed with calling for help, deciding against it as the woman's arrested stare pushed him violently away.

Yan had awoken and offered a little comb from his backpack to Saya as she stubbornly put up her black rat's nest into a bun.

"He thinks we're insane," she mumbled.

Yan threw a casual glance at the man, who glanced back once more from the end of the park.

"What do you care what he thinks?"

As a perfectly well-adjusted adult, he could very well be the sane pair of eyes they needed. The indisputable fact of the matter was that the only other person sleeping on this park was the homeless man.

"Maybe he sees something we're missing."

“Au contraire. He only sees this one moment. He doesn't see the motivation behind our steps.”

He stood up as if from the best sleep of his life. “Best be off to the forest,” he said briskly, moving in the direction of the train station.

Uncertainly and rather helplessly, Saya followed. Her heart soon raced in panic. Yan was none the wiser that to the left and half a mile away lay the comfort of her apartment. They could pack properly, watch the city from her balcony, relax, and maybe get their heads on straight and decide this was crazy after all. But she kept on, quickening through the intersection, pushing the easier life away and knowing that stepping through her door would break the tenuous line she was keeping alive to see for how long she could. The part of her that had decided to walk on with Yan was holding its breath all the way from yesterday afternoon.

The intersection lay behind them. The other fate rippled on, unaffected, somewhere down there. Up ahead, a thrift shop appeared a few blocks before the station.

She had spent the night in a public park. It was the day

after she quit her job. She was now ducking into a thrift shop to buy clothes for an unplanned trip to an undetermined location with her eccentric former boss.

“What a state, isn't it? You're no one.” Yan breathed it in from the stale air among secondhand clothes. “Everything you were for the past twenty-eight years means nothing. You could be whoever you want.”

“I think I'll just be quiet and not draw attention to myself,” she mumbled, clutching dark v-necks.

“That's exactly *why* you need to get what you like! Don't think about it. It has to be the full experience of you. If not, what was the point of going so far?”

“The things I like don't match each other.”

“So?”

They took to the streets in their mismatched, bright ensembles, clownish but not quite clowns. Yan marched bold as a torch in the face of all they met, one beat off from the rhythm. Beside him, she kept her head low and a half step of extra space between them. Saya felt the wall go up instantly. They had become outsiders in the city rush they moved against at their perfect leisure. She read so in the

wary sideways glances. She couldn't blame them. Just yesterday she had stood on the other side, shooting uncertain, curious glances at the ones across the line. They were taking their fate voluntarily. Who had forced them to step outside of circumstance while the rest of the world sped on? They should at least know the consequences this revolution reaped.

If Yan shared any such preoccupations, it did not show.

“God I hope we don't run into someone I know,” she mumbled as the station came into view, scanning each passing face to confirm stranger status before averting her face.

“If I'd known you'd take this so seriously I never would've invited you along,” he said. “This is supposed to be freeing.”

“It's embarrassing,” she hissed.

He laughed, then innocently inquired, “Why?”

They sat at a freshly washed plastic table, clutching greasy brown bags with donuts and coffee. The haphazardly placed seating area jutted into the walkway, forcing the stream of bodies to condense as it passed

around them. Yan watched them idly, arm draped around the plastic chair, showing no concern with plans a relaxing hour later.

Saya could not hang in suspension with ease. She perched on the edge of her seat, rereading the list of departures on the board every few minutes and projecting the hardships on the road into each.

“What's the rush?” he asked.

“We've been here an hour and we're going nowhere.”

“This is exactly the moment to savor! We're in a world out of time. We're suspended. As soon as we pick a train it's over.”

“But you said – ! You don't want to stay here all day, do you?”

“Maybe. If that's what happens,” he shrugged.

“You're trying to escape! We can't! We can't stay here forever!”

“Of course not. That wouldn't be an escape, anyway. Even if we physically stay here, that state of suspension will slip away, as all states slip away. We have to pick the right next

move in order to stay suspended. It doesn't matter where we go. Only the way we go matters. We must go the right way.”

His eyes swiveled around the once grand interior, digging into the unrepaired cracks, searching for a something that eluded Saya. “We're close right now. I can feel it hanging in the air just above us. We're on the right track.”

She saw only the cracks in the vaulted ceiling and the empty scene beneath it: benches, dirty floor, cheap food, disruptive music, people walking by in varying degrees of dissatisfaction. There was nothing more.

Her eyes affixed on a name among the listings for Cincinnati.

“What's Alderson?”

“I like the name,” Yan said.

“Know anything about it?”

“It's west of here.”

So it was decided. She was gutted out of a wad of money, boarding the next train to Cincinnati and sitting opposite Yan, too clenched to utter a word or do anything but stare

in fury at the wobbling double chins hanging below shrewd, small eyes that quickly noted her and Yan's discordant appearances across the compartment. Yan's high fantasy faded fast among the banal chatter of a family's vacation to the capital. Every loud detail spilling from their mouths of a stable, normal routine thickened the guilt and shame brewing inside her. How clear was the lunacy that had led them out here. It joined them like a fellow passenger. Now was too late; the train was in motion.

Saya sensed her body hurtling with it as if against a great ruling order imposed by an authority she had never met and never previously sensed in her years moving with it. How dare she step outside it? Who was she to be worthy of a different life, and they people beside them not?

Nobody else took the ride for the ride. She and Yan alone were fools venturing beyond civilization into the wild of the mind, that vast space their race had long neglected once human history reenforced a certain handful of possible paths until they were well worn lit roads slicing the brain above the ocean of possibilities that had faded from collective cognition into darkness. Then as humanity plodded along, darkness accrued a displeasing flavor, and

that was enough to pull adventurers away from the dangerous and precarious play with wiring. It was into this very unlit lagoon they were now submerging to rediscover the basics of life and define it again. They were returning to the origin of ways. How many methods could resolve the simplest tasks? Could the tasks themselves be redefined and understood anew? The rich soil of all cultures and all generations nourishing age old problems was ripe for the tilling: the loneliness of the alone, the demand of survival in the race from death, the sacrifices of spirit for insensitive regulations made in half-blindness – weights that the human spirit had carried generation after generation for thousands of years – were not absolutes of existence but limited modes that had shackled inside incomplete understandings a humanity who rather than look back spiraled on autopilot into its present from commitment to a particular perception chosen eons ago. But it was tired of the problem it had circled time and again. The problem might not have been a problem at all. The problem might have been seeing the problem through a limited eye to begin with. Humanity's lens could have chosen a different crop for the infinite and its problems would in an instant be vaporized, annihilating what humanity knew itself to be,

until its mass realigned into other relationships, new, perhaps smoother, problems. The trial had failed. The great soul was mistaken, and it was seeing its partiality. Language was crying to return to the morass of forms to be stripped and broken and reemerge in a more satisfactory conformation. It was this they tasted in two thousand fourteen on one of the ripest of present humanity's inventions for revelation among similar human bodies carrying minute agendas and knowing nothing of the vast something calling so resonantly to Yan.

When Saya and Yan reemerged from the long untouched everything would look different. Everything would be seen as a phenomenon, from the way roads were built to how buildings stood to if it all couldn't have been done differently and if people couldn't have been structured an entirely different species altogether. And perhaps in the end they would only find that it could not have been any other way.

The world grew quiet as they plunged into the woods on the Appalachian border. She glanced at him, peaceful against the backdrop of occasional gray stone homes outside of small older towns.

“Is this close to the fantasy?” he broke their long silence.

“I imagined less cushioned seating and more hanging off the railing like a vagabond. But it's close,” she conceded. “It was the feeling of being nobody and going nowhere I was after.”

“That's what I've been after my whole life. That suspension,” he grinned as if he couldn't be more pleased. “The moment something picks a road, takes a name, becomes something, it stops being free.”

“You can't go through life without taking a name,” she said sadly, looking out the window, where everything had been named. “Earth doesn't work that way. If it wasn't Alderson it would be Cincinnati, or Harpers Ferry, or another train to another certain location,” she said.

Yan pondered.

“Think of it this way: the nowhere moves. You have to pick the next right move to remain with it. At one moment it's not choosing, at another it's Alderson. Everything does have a name, but you can't cling to names. You have to weave through them. Unfortunately, we're conditioned exactly *to* cling to them and so our actions tend toward

repetition until they're a mere caricature or echo of the originating spark. Then they are no longer the *thing* itself. That's when you must break. It's a structured breaking. You have to be sensitive to the spirit. You have to know *when*. The human tendency is always to choose a name, even if that name is no-name. But hold on to anything and it slips away. The moment you say you're on the invisible path you're already off. The path cuts through trains and towns alike. It's internal nomadism, but outwardly it can look like anything."

"Did I hear you're going to Alderson?"

A wide pale man with a bushy white mustache and large chest flaps flattened beneath his suspenders had been listening to their conversation, from what point was unknown, and it was he who owned the double chin and the shrewd bluish eyes that had kept a hook on the two of them the entire ride, acting guardian and de facto leader of the nucleus on its way to Cincinnati.

"That's right," said Yan brightly.

"Visiting the prison?"

"Prison? Didn't know there was one. We're going to

Alderson just for Alderson.”

“Not much else to see there,” he pried shamelessly, inviting them to justify an odd trip made much odder by their conversation.

“To be honest, we're mostly here to ride the train. Alderson's a byproduct.”

Saya nearly lunged at Yan. What honesty did he owe this nosy stranger whom she was prepared to inform could turn around and focus on his fat family?

The man's pupils contracted.

“We've about had our fill of the train, though,” she said quickly.

“That's kind of strange, isn't it,” said the man, ignoring her.

“It's worth trying once,” Yan offered.

His face furrowed. Yan interpreted potential interest.

“Just think. Everybody here is nobody. For a few moments we're coming from nowhere and going nowhere. The train is a microcosm of suspended identities that meet each other in the middle of nowhere where dozens of lines

intersect that would otherwise never meet. It's beautiful!"

Their companion seemed to conclude that Yan was a hippie, or insane, which had the favorable effect of relaxing his suspicions. Instinctively, he turned onto Saya before Yan had even finished his statements.

"Besides, going nowhere on a train is better than wasting my life at some boring desk job," she spouted.

Please think I'm a trust fund narcissist. Please. The man seemed to conclude just that and turned with a poorly disguised sneer to his kin, letting them stumble on into their – and his country's – downfall.

The town's paneled one story station painted stood in a bed of gravel, its orangey paint job muted by night. A sparse row of darkened homes framed it in the shadows near the tracks, on whose other side flowed a river. They stood alone in a symphony of crickets and ambient noise that sharpened the silence around them while the last light slid out, leaving them helpless with no flashlight and no plan. Her phone lay dead at the bottom her purse.

"Would've been smart to run a search before my phone died."

“Who cares about smart? This is the trip of your heart.”

“Everything's closed. Where will we sleep?” Saya asked.

“By the river. We'll get a good view of the stars.”

He followed the river, slowly continuing west. His hand's reach to clasp hers rang naïve beside his spirit's bold freedom, but she left hers inside his palm. He plunged them through a short stretch of trees that turned the world pitch black before they emerged at the water's edge, stepping carefully to a little peninsula jutting out with a bed of grass.

How she envied the ease that let him give his body up to it. He lay as natural as the water flowing around them, ignoring their vulnerability. There was not a hint of another human and a sense of peace filled her intuitively, yet she clung to herself and viewed the scene she was in from behind a glass wall.

“Humanity's spent millenia developing houses and here we are turning around and walking the other way,” she gave voice to such skepticism.

“People built houses for bad weather. It had the unfortunate result that people forgot how much they liked sleeping outside.”

“Good justification.”

“What's there to justify? As long as we're not harming anyone, why shouldn't we live as we want?”

“It's not that we *shouldn't*, it's that... why are we? We're going against the world.”

“So it appears.”

“What does that say about us!?”

“It says nothing,” he said softly. “It's nothing to fear or be ashamed of. We aren't *it*, we're *doing* it, and we're brave enough *to* do it while the whole population gives up what they want for what they *should* want. We're two perfectly normal, sane people knocking into an uncommon life as the result of pursuing an uncommon aim. You'll see, when we find it, all will be righted and we can go back. It can be like it never was.”

Saya pictured them emerging mythically from the trees after their bout of impossible living, blurring their tracks from the wild as they settled smoothly into a suburban neighborhood with no indication that they were anything but two everyday people relocating from an analogous neighborhood in another city. The extra dimensions of their

temporary life vanished imperceptibly, a whole underground lair disappearing behind the cordial words that now instead of a façade became their honest face.

“Why can't you find what's yours in ordinary life?” Saya asked.

“Because, this didn't begin yesterday. I've gone around in the same circles over and over and over. I found nothing in them, in all those years. All I found that's truly mine was in the forest. I can still see it as clearly as I saw it in the dream.”

“But it was a dream. How could it be real?” she asked.

“It has to be. How else could it pull me so strongly?”

“I don't know,” she said in a small voice. “I can't see what you see. To me we're stumbling in the dark and all I *can* see is that we're unraveling in the middle of nowhere.”

Yan turned to her, overcome with emotion. “Don't give into it, Saya. Don't be like that man on the train,” he said. “Something drew him to us and he couldn't follow it. He didn't recognize it for what it was!”

“Please. He didn't sense an invisible forest. He thought

we were crazy or overprivileged brats," she snorted. "The idea of an invisible forest never even brushed him."

"Do you think the same?" Yan asked, awaiting her answer in the symphonic buzz of the night. "That I'm crazy?"

"I think it's brave, what you do," she said after a pause. "You risk your whole life for a dream that may prove to be nothing. I don't know anybody else who could do that."

The white in his eyes lit up against the grass. "But that's the whole catch! That life we left, that *is* the dream! I risk the *dream* to earn my *real* life. From the other side, I'm not doing what's *brave*, I'm doing what must obviously be done! What will look so easy once it *is* done! I can't *not* do it!"

The brush of the grass mixed with the warmth of Yan's arms as they closed over her and she felt the pulse inside his chest, the reminder of what imperfect humanity tethered the bold thoughts of a spirit propelling this biomass forward against its most stable path. This unease must have been everpresent inside him, she realized as she felt his body curl awkwardly in, struggling to find a conformation on the grass.

He had waltzed into her world with a troubadour's vibrancy, but she had also entered his. Just when the scepter split the bedrock open with a hollow crack; she peered into the crevice behind the layer of summer and riverbed and rhythmically chirping crickets that encased their humming organ systems. In this silent underworld she stood witness to a critical moment: the lone member of his world had come to the ledge of a terrain reaching the pinnacle of its growth. Its language had fully developed. It had nowhere left to go. It stood swirling on itself, waiting. The paved roads that ran through its elaborate city built of the visions of its sole member and creator connected, finally, all parts of an ancient civilization that had been forming and refining from the clumsy naivete of its first iteration until the last round of complete nuanced mastery attained. From the ledge that overlooked it all – save for one last grain, the self – it sprawled along a valley in all directions, infinite, but with nowhere to go. She paused, watched the moment, proceeded no further, keeping her distance behind the lonely soul with his back to her who stood at the edge of his cliff as a gust of wind billowed around him surveying his terrain. She could not see the city, could not understand a word of its language, but for a flash

sensed it was fathomless, this world of one.

eight

Morning light revealed the foot-long strip by which they'd avoided rolling into the river. Its tranquil trickle had hummed lullingly in Saya's ear all night. In plain sight now stood a crumbling wooden bridge behind the way they'd come, crossing to a broad road at the beginning of town and blending perfectly into the curtain of night.

Pleasant pastel houses of Alderson's wealthiest lined the waterfront across it. Only farther down was the sense of striving exposed by a humbler two story motel. It carried the dismal air attached to beige paint and dusty trucks spaced about the large front parking lot. Saya twisted in shame all the same; a drop of common sense and they could have slept like normal people. Yan found it hilarious, laughing about their mishap all the way across the bridge, their idiocy falling from him like a drape.

He paraded through its door like an ambassador on tour, beaming vibrant traveler's spirit at the earthly, tattooed

young woman checking them in, who rebuffed his engaging conversation about Alderson's history with a face that chewed gum steadily and blinked rarely. Each slow blink expressed her conviction that whatever time it was was too early for such enthusiasm.

She glanced through the door behind them, evidently to see what kind of car they had arrived in. Saya hid behind Yan from the slight crease in her brows at the unchanged lot. She seemed not to think much of it. Judging by her desensitization many shady weirdos fell through their doors, past which last night's bed of grass was a nonentity on the landscape, a featureless point in the ambient wash of green dotted with speckles of brown.

“Room seven, first floor. Breakfast is from six to ten,” she said with as much cheer as she could force, handing them scratched white room key cards without meeting their eyes.

Saya had dreamed of these comforts with the same longing by which Yan had dreamed of the high forest from the moment she'd sat in the park beside him. She ran to the shower and ten minutes later collapsed on the bed. She awoke an unclear number of hours later to a cream stucco wall and silence. The only immediately ascertainable fact

was that it was sometime in the afternoon. Short shadows fell across the wall from the window.

“Yan,” she said, sitting up.

His only possession, his backpack, was gone, along with a room key. No letter or note remained.

He was not in the lobby, nor standing outside the motel. He wasn't by the river, and he hadn't returned to last night's spot.

He ran after it, it hit her. The forest never stayed in place. She had missed the train.

Panic might have overtaken her if the whole affair hadn't felt surreal to begin with. But, as she turned around at the edge of the road and blinked several times, she had to admit, as a levelheaded and rational human being, that she had been anticipating some darkly comedic plot twist after the glissando all along: it was an episode of depersonalization and he'd snapped to his life, horrified at his insanity; his optimism belied a need for a short break from a wife and child but everything he had told Saya he believed! On some level, in some way, he believed! In – with wistful romance – a reality more beautiful than this one, he

sighed, and departed.

How could she have let herself get caught in the gypsy magic? *In this world magic is always a charlatan!* He had drifted in on the breeze and waltzed out the same. Meanwhile the camera followed the one man roving brass band bringing thrill to the next torpid town after the girl who had appeared for an episode stayed behind without closure; the audience wasn't crying for it. But beyond the frame, she still stood, holding a backpack filled with the remnants of her old life and a ticket back to it in the morning, listening to the fading echo of vibrancy. *The impossible life*, the spin-off's theme song rang sardonically through her head. Inflamed, Saya marched down the road. She would continue out of spite!

Her petulant steps crashed immediately into Alderson's reality. *What magic had he expected to find in a town going on with its life? Was it merely his cruel trick, to befuddle and drop her? Was he too flighty to even be intentionally cruel? Or did magic for her take only the form of quaint shops stuffed with distractions where a local sat in a chair repeating stories for visitors' amusement?*

Plastic homes repeated toward each horizon against low

mountains and bushy trees. The town eschewed true isolation for a comfortably deep tuck inside a fold of the world's blanket, a safe crevice where its settlers could stay out of the winds and be late adopters. But to Saya no safety was given. There was no romance in her intercalation. This inexplicable apparition had no place walking past the short trimmed lawns flaunting American flag motif accessories, from where the occasional leathery-skinned local looked up and stared at her, bringing sharp awareness to her aloneness.

From a branching road she made her way inland, where after a quarter mile the houses shrunk and flattened, grew wider apart, and lined country roads where vestiges of little-changed decades lingered in their untrimmed grass beds. Little broke the monotony save for a warehouse.

The tinyness made her impatient. She could sample the entire town in one round and know everyone at the end of an hour. Not their complexities – their summarized list, their resume, which was how anyone knew anyone these days.

An hour of life-sampling effectively quenched her thirst. *What now?* She toyed with a plan to spend the rest of her

impossible day watching TV in the motel.

She backtracked to the station, encountering not a soul until a trickle of people emerged by the building hued cheerfully peach in daylight. They filled the air with pleasantly optimistic voices as they milled into and out of the one cafe and several stores forming the infrastructure of a tiny town center, and through them, melody floated on the air to complete the quaint scene, weaving invisibly each separate particle into unity along its thread, and sourced from the very archetypal lynchpin Yan had hoped to find. He sat bent over in a chair propping open the antiques store door.

Saya stopped among a small queue feet from the oblivious head under its fraying straw hat, an unsettled mixture bubbling in her from the slap of the real, outer world validating Yan's world. The Alderson man looked up from the pressure of her gaze; a rift ran through her. It was Yan. She did not immediately absorb it. After several blinks it solidified into Yan, sitting in a plastic chair with a freshly procured straw hat and linen shirt like he belonged there, playing a tune as in step with the life of the town as if he had simply dropped into his surroundings and dissolved.

Here he was, perfectly channeling the spirit of a place for whom he was a stranger.

He smiled brightly. "Look what I found. Always wanted a fretless one." He held up the instrument.

"Why the change in clothes?" she nodded at the authentic outfit.

"No one is going to believe I'm a real Appalachian mandolin player if I don't look the part."

"That's a banjo."

"Good to know if I want to play somewhere," he said thoughtfully.

"Since when are you a musician?"

"Since always, deep down."

She glanced nervously around. No one of the passing crowd appeared to be listening.

"It's my version of riding the train forever," he explained without embarrassment. "Slipping out of my role and wandering place to place. You're no one, coming from nowhere and going nowhere."

She snorted. “You're as much a wandering mandolin player as I'm a sailor.”

“Is that so?” he cocked his head reexamining her entire being. “It's true! I see it so clearly now.”

“I meant that I've never gone sailing. I was being facetious. I'm not a sailor.”

“Like that matters. I can barely play mandolin and I'm still a wandering mandolin player.”

He jumped from the plastic seat, scattering some dirt that fell off his backside, and danced before her with fervor.

“Wake up, Saya. Our old lives have fallen off. We're not our past selves anymore. We can be anyone here. We have a blank slate. Why not be what we've always wanted to be? This person's always been *in* me, like a code, waiting to unravel and play itself out.”

Banjo in tow, he abandoned the spot and wandered to the station, taking the road leading out of the town. The grand houses fell behind them. They gave way to a meditative mosaic of greens and triangular patterns moving slowly along the pavement in a trance. Smells of pine, of flat leaves, of honeysuckle, mingled with the rising

heat from pavement. The road was quiet behind Yan's strumming. Simple sunlight reflected off his freckles and in his crinkled eyes, unshielded and squinting, as he hummed along to the faltering of his novice fingerwork, strumming a nothing. Rarely, a a single wall of a house emerged from the trees, showing a peeling white dirt smeared body, ghostly even by daylight with darkened windows and the mysterious absence of cars. In this nowhere, the grasses grew wild. The trees twisted from trunks blistered with knots.

A lone, clean cabin appeared on the side of the road after an hour. No cars parked on the empty gravel beside it, but the door stood open behind a large “BBQ” sign hung across its porch. Hungry, they veered. Behind it the river lapped steadily.

A thick-bearded man in a faded navy shirt leaned against the counter watching a flat screen where a football game was not yet playing beside a mop plopped motionlessly into a bucket at his side. Down the counter, so mouse like it took Saya a minute to notice her, a lady of similar age read a paperback and served no one. Neither appeared perturbed by the restaurant's slow pace.

The woman reacted first, inviting them to the bar by placing two plastic menus onto it with one finger trapped inside the folded paperback.

“Take your time,” she said languidly, barely meeting their eyes and brushing more gray than black behind her ears before plunging back into her book.

Yan ignored the menu. His head spun around the surprisingly modern interior paneled in dark wood with several more flat screens hanging along it.

“Visitors?” the woman asked from behind gleaming beer taps, her curiosity sparked at last.

“Sure are,” grinned Yan. “Walked over here from Alderson.”

“Toting that cumbersome thing?” she nodded to the banjo on the bar. “Where are ya going, from Alderson?”

“We’re not sure,” Yan shrugged. “Just going.”

She gave a slowed half nod of acknowledgement.

“Not much down the other way, I can tell you that. Not even a motel for miles,” she replied.

“Well, to be perfectly honest, we’re in search of an

invisible forest. We're just not sure how to get there," Yan explained.

The man glanced over at them, evidently listening.

"But the only way to get there is to let your steps take themselves. That's why we're just going."

His statement shocked the stale air like a lightning bolt. The couple looked at each other uncertainly and evidently communicated that it was better not to question, that this was some sweeping fad of youth they were behind on once again.

"I thought you might be musicians," their hostess diverted the course, naively nodding to the banjo.

"I am. She's a sailor," Yan corrected.

"Are you?" she turned to Saya. Anywhere outside of Alderson, Saya would be doubtless sure she was mocking her, but in it, there was the real possibility that she was sincere.

Saya froze with her finger resting on the name of a sandwich.

"Somewhat," she muttered in a small voice.

"She's just modest," Yan patted her shoulder.

"Oh I don't have much experience."

"Not much sailing here," she chuckled. "We do have some canoes out back," she nodded to the deck. "Get some kayakers passing in the summer, too. Mostly it's skiers in the winter or folks driving by. Like I said, we're about the only thing around Alderson. Was *really* crowded Fourth of July weekend. Got people from all over, didn't we, John?"

John nodded, half listening to the conversation and still watching TV.

"You live here?" Yan asked.

She pointed upstairs. "Turned the first floor into a restaurant 'bout ten years ago," she said placidly. "Some nights we open up the patio, usually we wait 'til later at night. It's dead hour," she said unnecessarily, craning toward the dark wall of booths where the lights were still off.

"We could open it early," she mused, "what do you think, John?"

John grunted and muttered, "Fine by me."

Yan brightened and hopped off his stool, slung his banjo over, and followed her to a wooden deck where deciduous trees arced their full canopies over the railing.

A miscellany of plastic chairs huddled around a large garden table, bordered by Wal-Mart tiki posts bound in corners by Christmas lights strewn through the balcony posts. Their earnest efforts to replicate a beach bar with Target plastics reflected something of the naïve spirit fueling Yan's impetuous motions to Saya. Inwardly, she cringed.

“Never introduced myself. I'm Sadie,” Sadie said.

“I'm Yan,” Yan shook Sadie's hand briskly.

“Saya,” Saya did the same with restraint.

“What a view,” he looked over at the wide river that emerged.

“The reason I stay,” Sadie sighed.

They sat in silence, each in one's own thoughts as they gazed at the river and Yan strummed.

Saya stood silently between them.

“Those yours?” he nodded.

“Yep. You could take one out, if you like. If you don't mind the dirt.”

Yan flashed Saya a grin that made her gut squirm uncomfortably.

“Just don't run off to your invisible forest with it.” John had silently joined their party.

Yan laughed congenially. He was the only one.

Beneath the quip and his beard, John still stood waiting for Yan's response.

After a moment's thought, Yan abruptly pulled off his banjo and placed it trustingly in John's large hands.

“No rivers in the invisible forest as far as I saw. Mind if I leave this with you 'til we get back?” he said to John's shock, which remained unexpressed beneath his stoic exterior.

Saya clambered downhill behind him and he flipped over one of the damp canoes under their hosts' watchful eyes.

“What are you doing,” she hissed as he wielded it ungracefully to the water.

“Getting a lesson from a sailor.”

“You know what sailing *is*, right? There's a little more to it than rowing a canoe.”

“Well then this should be easy!” he handed her a paddle.

Saya had never so much as held one before. From the other side, a passing kayaker gazing at their clumsy tomfoolery did not help her maintain any semblance of grace.

“I don't know how to do this,” she said helplessly.

“Doesn't matter, you're a natural.”

“Oh, God, shut up,” she rolled her eyes, glancing back at Sadie's protective and amused eye. They were drifting out into the narrow river inch by inch.

“I – stop fidgeting around so much, you'll tip us over!” she panicked as the canoe swayed. “Here – you work, too.”

Haphazardly, they began a slow paddle downriver that smoothed out. For as long as they had walked they rowed over ripples, navigating gentle and dramatic bends until they reached still waters. Yan lay flat on his back with his hat over his face. The sun sank around them. They had barely spoken for forty minutes.

“We could just keep going on,” Saya said, gazing ahead to the sun where the river went on. It laid the path out so plainly, so seductively. The elements around them were conspiring into the romance of distance.

“Of course we could,” Yan said from under his hat. “That’s the thing to realize. You could always go anywhere. You’re never bound to a plan. It doesn’t mean you *should*. The freedom is what matters. And think of all the paths we can’t see because nature isn’t laying them conveniently out for us.”

She turned at his voice. He was dark in the shadow of twilight looming at their backs.

They struggled to return, rowing twice as hard upstream with the newfound urgency to race falling darkness glossing over the water in unison. Practice had sharpened and honed Saya’s motions and dissolved excess thought until, at a distant balcony light, they crashed gently into shore and pulled up the canoe, exhausted.

“I told you you were a sailor,” he said as they ascended.

“That wasn’t sailing,” she muttered in monotone.

“Maybe, but good practice for when you do, don’t you

think?"

"No," said Saya as they collapsed into balcony chairs and she worked hard to tamp down the giddiness buzzing in her from adventure with a blush that was embarrassed for her to be lose herself to the fantasy. For a part of her, filled with glee from accomplishment, had became it, and wrestled endlessly with her restrained observer, who remained embarrassed beside Yan, *of* Yan, of his uninhibited movements, his unabashed openness, his childlike simplicity at the age of thirty.

Why? she questioned herself. Was it his lack of inhibition that disturbed her? The lack of inhibition despite its friction against the world's design? Perhaps somewhere, sometime, his free self was a mold that made perfect sense. But it was not here, in this life, with the corners and protrusions of all the buildings grounded in the concrete, where it persisted in remaining itself and scraping against them.

On the deck John played Yan's banjo with an expertise not given to Yan. The girth of his white shirted chest leaned into his legs and arms while the old face closed its eyes. Their reappearance did not break his play, but he noted

them and his eyes glimmered at Yan through the dark.

“Bet you can't do that.”

“I'm not *much* of a musician,” Yan acceded humbly.

“Watch close, maybe you'll pick something up,” John seemed to relish his mastery.

Inside the now lit restaurant Sadie was serving a fresh-faced young group that had only arrived and was settling in rambunctiously.

“Didn't know there was live music tonight,” Saya heard one say as she went in to order a drink. The buff young man craned his neck to the lively sound rolling in.

“Oh yeah. It was a surprise. Had a musician and a sailor walk in today... broke John out for the first time in years,” Sadie laughed.

“What are a musician and a sailor doing *here*?”

“Oh we get all kinds. Never know who'll walk in.”

A suspended reality spun in midair, fighting the hard reality she stood grounded in. It was a miniscule ship, flickering in and out of existence as it rode the crest of a rising wave of dispassionate planetary elements. It swelled,

ready to quench the new world with its vast indifference. In slow motion, the ship pushed it back, until it rode the behemoth and fell, swaying bouyantly, onto a calm sea, existence affirmed.

They disembarked straight into the crowd pushing through Union Station not twenty-four hours later. A part of Saya was relieved to find herself in the midst of the familiar discord, pushed out of the way by the power suits and time-sensitive agendas.

Gliding like silk through gaps in the body wall, Yan veered into the cafeteria, as if inside a game. His walk was as slow as if he was still on the roads of Alderson, and he strummed his banjo all the way.

“What are you doing?”

Saya pulled on his arm, reaching out as if from a great distance.

“Getting food. What better place to refuel before setting

off?" he took up a table slowly, pensive in his quest for dinner as he scoped out the fast food options.

"I have to get home," she said irritably, one foot automatically poised for the exit.

"Why?" he asked.

"Come on," she rolled her eyes. "The high's worn off. Even *you* must feel it."

"That's just when you have to keep going! When it seems like there's nothing to go for."

She was unable to withhold her laugh. "Look around you!" she cried, blind now to whoever heard her. "We're in *Union Station!* Not Alderson."

"If it's real in Alderson it has to be real here, too," he said resolutely. "Did you forget everything we knew yesterday because we're in a different place today? You were a sailor, who you wanted to be. Now who are you? The same Saya you got away from?"

"But *money*."

"This isn't forever," he defended.

"All your stuff? Are you just going to drop it all?"

“It's with my brother.”

“How can you ignore *the world?*” she cried the moment a stranger walked by in a perfectly tailored suit, the perfect backdrop to Yan's absurdity.

“I'm not an idiot, Saya. I know it's impractical. I know it's a risk. I'm doing it anyway. That moment, it was something else. And no matter what goes on around I have to see it through until the end.”

“What end? What is the end?”

“To take the last step. It'll make the other life true. This,” he waved around, “isn't the real life. Isn't how life's supposed to go. But one more step in the forest, and existence will turn on its head. And, really, it will be righted. We're on our heads right now.”

Without further words, he leaned back in his chair and strummed his banjo, playing poorly, freely, exuberantly in the middle of the cafeteria without concern for time.

She stood floored, stalled yet again at the fork between two perspectives. For yet another time, yet another untraceable reason, she took the seat beside Yan. Existence shivered at the misstep, rerouting the world's play from the

ripple that shocked the fabric of the invisible air. It corrected itself immediately like a master buffer, and the structure resumed its glass-like invisibility, the world passing around them as if nothing had occurred. And indeed, past the moment, it was too late to reach back and grasp that anything had.

nine

They headed for the suburban-esque flatland of the low southern hills, where young, wealthy couples in brick row homes enjoyed their last child free years among overpriced Irish pubs and convenient large chain stores, mammoths that broke into the concrete and locked arms in an unbreachable fraternity ring to clench their city real-estate status, what very detail nudged its residents toward fringing their old army coifs into trendier fauxhawks, that emerged, like butterflies, with initial endearing shyness until mutually reinforced into bravado. Karalee had often talked of moving here with Mike as they were “already there every other weekend.”

Deep in the ring the sporting goods store exerted its dominance with a façade of artificially roughened beige stones, brandishing its neon orange sign into the mid-atlantic blue sky as a beacon of physical extremism that sold top-of-the-line safety equipment and dustless lime

green sneakers to sculpted financial analysts.

The surprisingly large Friday afternoon clientele swarming inside its new-basketball scented isles softened Saya's guilt over her voluntary unemployment status. She walked rather cluelessly beside Yan, who piled survival gear into their cart while she balked at price tags and flinched at every Karalee and Chris popping up in her peripheral vision.

Outside, they were a spectacle in the sun, tearing off tags by the glass automatic doors where, with no car and no home, they packed. Saya did her best to ignore the stream of buff young men walking by in neon muscle shirts, self-conscious as she worked the knots angrily out of her long, tangled hair and displayed the unfeminine sweat stains on her three-day-unwashed t-shirt. They passed in twos-to-fours – never alone – with armpit hair hanging acceptably below terse expressions at the weirdo in the broken straw hat and his gangly girlfriend.

Yan hunched over in concentration, knees in the concrete, their supplies fanned around him like cards as he struggled in earnest with the perfect configuration of their backpacks for the impending journey into no-one-knew-

where. His otherness rolled off his back. Was it unawareness, or procession despite? Saya could not conclude. Hopeless pity and admiration collided in their crossover from diametrical poles.

He secured her backpack, balancing it carefully along the length of her body before swinging on his own. They lumbered into the Safeway next door. Yan's backpack knocked into the wall, sending him bouncing through the plexiglass hallway until he righted himself and sent a goofy smile back to Saya, who gave no reaction and took note of his fumbles, moving with grace to avoid such a collision.

Behind her severe discomfort in the quiet isles, Saya noted how accepting – or ridiculously polite – their society had become. Any other era would see Yan beaten, Saya an instant outcast or sent to a happy home. But in twenty-fourteen their greatest foe was the shrapnel of stares sneaked at them as they meandered among the produce. *Nothing to see here. We're just debating the merits of bringing this and that like the couple next door carrying all their possessions on their backs. Vagabonds need to eat, too.* She clenched her teeth until they stepped out with their hard won food.

Like dropping divers they disappeared into the fold. The city became a forest. They trekked among its brick and concrete trunks like pioneers on a new terrain; the windows and balconies were branches and knots, the power lines tangling vines, their leathery cords and metal railings and glass panes playing with the afternoon and streetlamp light in the canopy's upper levels. The alleyways were the floor on which deer and rabbit people carried a predatory existence, maneuvering in and out of the shadows cast by their brick wall shelters, silently passing the two without a glance unless to latch onto their faces in momentary fear. Saya and Yan existed as ghosts. They lived in a brightness none could see by virtue of their search, elevated from the fray by the idea they kept alive.

Two heads surfaced occasionally into the jumble of exhaust fumes and English phrases, from what seemed a thriving hidden society whose population hummed metrically underground to its own equally sophisticated but different parameters. Via two representatives, this hidden culture poked a tentacle into the concrete daylight world, sending them bobbing along through the indifferent light, bodies stumbling awkwardly around daylight's

unquestioned social framework. Its denizens granted these offbeat intruders only an occasional double take if they weren't too quick to dismiss them among the flow.

But behind the Kabuki charade it was Saya and Yan and a single thought. Day after day, with every step across the city, a thread of her came undone. The glass walls of old haunts gained an unfamiliar glitter, arranged in angles that surprised her weakening memory. The city was a strange land and she was becoming a stranger in part. The other remained a paranoiac, crucified upon the stare of every potential acquaintance she ran into on the street.

"I welcome the stares," Yan said boldly as they trekked beside the busy M street bridge where the roar of cars speeding onto the exit ramp for their Saturday destinations drowned his stubborn, spirited proclamation. "Why should we hide? Let our example shake people out."

"People don't *want* to be shaken out, I can assure you that from five years at Kellion. The world doesn't need us!" She had never felt their irrelevance so sharply as she did that moment as they found themselves among the bridge and the shopping trips and the everyday Saturday going on. Humanity proceeded indifferent to their quest, deaf to it,

except when it disturbed its order. It had a perfect defense mechanism; it spat them out like an unpleasant bitter crumb.

A semi-permanent tent community she had passed several times in her old life sat deep in the field they had come to. Above the highway ramp, the skyline striped itself with orange shocks over dry air that foretold a blessedly clear night.

Yan cut through the sidewalk and stepped onto the springy, rich grass of the forbidden world next door, ignoring the invisible wall and waving away all rules of immiscibility as if they didn't exist. He set to work pitching their tent a dozen feet from the rough, whitish tarps thrown over lines or propped up on salvaged poles, crinkling in the wind, whistling around the inhabitants they enclosed.

Saya tread cautiously after him. A slight rancid smell wafted toward her. "We don't belong here," she whispered behind him while he worked in the sunset that threw itself around his shoulders like a cape.

Yan was undeterred by this. "Why is belonging what's

sought after? You know that arc like the back of your hand. You've read, played, and annotated it every day of your life. You know its origin; the stirrings of not belonging are familiar to you; the conflict between what's required to belong and what you give up for it is a comfort; and the sensation of finding your crowd, your moment, or your people, however fleeting, is a lever you press regularly for a fix. What you *don't* know is the arc of striving toward *not* belonging. You don't know what it's like to be a creature whose instinct is to not belong, a creature who has had another, equally plausible, possible, and justifiable evolution that we cannot imagine.”

“Of course I don't know that! I'm *human!*”

“The new road breaks the rhythm of life. It leads us to the places people abandoned for the party instead of the party, to the church at night, to the diner in the morning, to the forty minute detour into nowhere. Just because it feels unnatural, is that reason enough to turn back? Of course there's danger and shit in the unknown, just as there is in the known. It's just *new* danger and shit.”

“But we're fighting our own humanity! We're tearing ourselves apart going to the invisible forest!” she cried.

“What if in the end all we find is that everything couldn't have been any other way than how it is?”

“Then we will fully know life.”

They sat in their tent until nightfall watching people walk by with shock-absorbent sneakers and gorgeous alpha dogs, making no effort to conceal their bafflement. They held their eyes on Saya and Yan while their bodies twisted to keep jogging, shamelessly casting fruit at the unwelcome performers whose humanity they never grasped. And they had an abundance of fruit; they could reach into the basket and pull out one more to throw and another to eat, a luxury that halted self-reflection, which was a brew made more often in scarcity and pain. Saya received these blows with soft, in-bending shame, knee deep in the pulp of their puzzlement. How could the ogled one's lone explanation match the babble of a self-assured crowd constantly affirming the set life she and Yan were dismantling from underneath?

It's insanity, she panicked, watching themselves throw away their comfortable lives in the midst of ordinariness to head nowhere. Kidnappers, murderers, thieves, junkies, addicts and everything unsavory did not exist in Yan's

world, but they existed in *the* world, in droves, and beside an idealistic man who ignored these pounding facts Saya doubted her every cell. But, in truth, these dangers bothered her less than the more minor and poignant embarrassment. She stayed up until the patter of sneakers died completely, all the while ignoring the rustle of plastic in the wind that made no judgment.

“Hurry up,” she shook Yan awake so early the next morning light was only creeping through the purple clouds. The passing crowd was already too dense for her liking. It was Sunday, if she recalled. She braced herself to emerge, and quickly ran behind the tent, hastening to dismantle it from the back.

“Why are you in such a rush?” asked Yan sleepily.

“I want to get out of here.”

Yan moved less expediently than her ideal, but from any passer's perspective his motions were brisk in their effort to placate her anxiety. This irony was unfortunate, as it was his fervent motion that caught the eye of a sporty jogger in a ponytail and fuchsia runner's top with black leggings, guiding a sloppily breathing pit bull several paces before

her as her dark sunglasses blocked the emerging sun from her eyes.

She had seen her fair share of gingery coifs, but the combination of that copper tone and the crisp tent as out of place among the homeless settlement as a car in a medieval painting was the frankenstein-ish hallmark of only one personality she had ever known. Sure enough, the first hint of a lightly freckled cheek stopped Karalee Thaler in her tracks.

The pit bull's bark prompted Yan's spin. Karalee's mouth dropped and she lost her grip.

"Zora!" she called sharply as the dog bounded forward, launching its tongue at Yan's obliging face with unmitigated joy.

"Fancy running into you here," Yan smiled, one adventurer to another, standing proudly before his temporary home as he rubbed Zora in the morning breeze that blew his hair back.

"I should be surprised, but actually this makes perfect sense," said Karalee flatly.

Growing bored with Yan, Zora broke off to explore the

smell behind the tent. Karalee sprang after her, stopped still at a high pitched “yeek!” as Saya came stumbling around with the dog at her heels.

“Oh my God!”

The Fourth of July went off in Karalee's heart. “I *knew* it!” disbelief gushed from her face. “Not where I would pick for my honeymoon, but to each his own.” Her hand already moved to her phone.

Saya failed to move. The will to tear herself away from the passionless plastic ogle of Karalee's sunglasses left her body. Her shooter had found her.

“It's not like that,” she said pathetically, nearly in tears. Her voice sounded foreign to her, as if she hadn't used it in years and Karalee's sudden apparition broke its hiatus.

“Oh, Saya, we all knew it was gonna happen,” she rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I'd be more surprised if you *didn't* run away together. Why not at least go camping in a park like normal people?”

“We're letting our steps take themselves. Naturally, it's showing us what else life could be,” Yan explained.

Karalee made no attempt to stifle her snort. "I could've told you sleeping under bridges by homeless people is one thing life can be. Should've come to me instead of quitting your jobs."

Yan shook his head. "You can't understand in theory. You have to live it."

"I'll stick to the theory. Personal preference. So what's the latest? Find the invisible forest? Or still on the trail? Everyone's dying to know."

"Karalee, please," Saya pleaded quietly.

"Tell them what you want," Yan said calmly, matching her presence. "Or come with us and see what it's like for yourself."

Karalee nearly cracked her teeth not laughing. How she wished Shawn was there. "I *would*, but..."

"There's no time commitment. You can leave whenever you want."

"Well why didn't you say so! Where to next?"

"We don't know!" he said brightly. "We take our steps the moment they appear. That's how we get where's truly

ours.”

Saya cringed in pain at the absurdity of Yan's sincere proposal that *Karalee Thaler* join their band of wandering outsiders under the bridge, through city parks, against her friends, and against all common sense. She could barely stomach the sight: the baby mutant exposing its soft underbelly with all its funny natural horns and appendages to Karalee's cold and critical senses, which withdrew at the pungent whiff of his undiluted essence wafting free on an assumed principle that love and acceptance were given to all and thinking nothing unusual of these original quirks. After all, they, too, fell under the sun.

“Ugh, I already planned *all* my steps for today. Maybe tomorrow... but you'll be who-knows-where by then,” she said mock sincerely, yet unable to conceal smugness at her own cleverness.

Yan grew intensely thoughtful for a moment, then pulled out an old unused Au Bon Pain napkin Saya recognized from Union Station. He had covered it in doodles. “Here.”

Karalee took it seemingly against her better judgment, gauging the crisscrossing abstract patterns and looking, for

a moment, honestly offended, as if Yan was purposely insulting her intelligence.

“What is this.”

“A map of the inner world. That's how you can find us again.”

Her hand could neither clutch harder nor let go. “You are *so weird*.”

“I'm not weird. I'm free,” Yan said defiantly, hands on hips and an open chest, barely matching Karalee in height. “Can you say as much for yourself, Karalee, trapped inside this cult of coolness so tightly you can only dimly feel everything you wanted your life to be?”

Karalee couldn't contain herself. She rent a laugh as she clipped the now returned Zora back onto her leash.

“I can live with it. Enjoy your freedom.” She waved the putrid air of the tent camp away from her nose and turned around to keep jogging, parting with a cheerful wave and the cry, “We miss you around the office, Saya!” before her pink-bound ponytail disappeared into the sidewalk.

Fresh bile rose and slushed in her cavity. She was too

nauseous to speak. Saya fell to the grass, rocking back and forth with her arms around her knees.

“Saya! Saya, what's wrong?” Yan dropped down to her side, prying out her stubbornly downward fixed face.

She shook her buried head.

“Saya,” he said gently, wrapping his arms around her and rocking her rhythmically. “Who is she to you? She's no one! Let her go!” His exclamations were soft, lulling whispers.

“No,” she shook her head hard through her tears. “I needed this. It proves it once and for all.”

“What? It doesn't prove anything!”

“Look at us!” her hoarse bellow roused their neighbors. “We quit our jobs for a fantasy and now we're sleeping under a bridge with the homeless insane!”

“We're not at the end yet,” a note of desperation mixed with his stubbornness.

“Yan, there are things you don't seem to understand,” she opined. “The steps we take today aren't lightly. They don't just disappear in the sand; they follow us for *years*! You're not a mandolin player and I'm not a sailor just because we

feel like it, okay!? People have duties to survive and they're not distributed equally! Everyone's born into a place *Karalee* was born into a family of mayors and pageant queens and her whole life, her parents taught her not just how to do it right but they they did it right."

"So?"

"So!? You know what *my* parents taught me? That life is a constant struggle! And you know what? *Everything in life has been a struggle!*" she yelled.

"What does that have to do with where we are now and the reasons we're going?"

"It has to do with the fact that I've fought my entire life against this bitter truth and when I left with you I threw the whole setup into *Karalee's* face like I could prove there was another way! And in the end all I did was affirm what she and the whole world have known all along! That means there's no magic wand for the stupid things I've done and when I go back – whether that be tomorrow or next month or a year from now – I have square one waiting for me."

"You *don't* have to start from square one. I'm with you. I promise," he let her go and knelt beside her. "And I'll help

you find what's truly yours. For you, I'm not the whole world.”

Her lip still trembled from the outburst.

Why you? she moaned to herself. *Of all people in the world, why did it have to be you?* Each rapid blink revealed a different man before her, as if she flashed through a deck of filters. He was always a stranger.

“Did you say something?” he asked, seeing her lips move incrementally.

“Everybody knows we're together,” she mumbled.

He recoiled. “So?”

She was quiet.

“Are you embarrassed to be with me?”

“Yan,” she began, restoring herself to formality and sniffing her tears back up. “You're very unique. You can do things only two percent of people could *think* of. I – I love what you are. It's true! But you don't seem to realize that most of the world doesn't see you this way.”

“What to they see, then?”

“ – People laugh at you! You're something totally unknown – ”

“Whatever I am, at least I'm free,” he interrupted, echoing his staunch stance. “But *you* still carry around the voices of everyone in the world. It's pathetic,” he sneered. “You make Karalee out to be some sort of barometer – !”

“She *is*. You live by different rules, but *I'm* like Karalee. I know the rules of this world all too well and I can't just leave them behind and jump into the air.”

“But you *have* left it behind,” he beamed now, as if the revelation of a self-evident fact brought them at last into the sunlight. “Didn't you see? Karalee wanted to join us!”

“Karalee,” Saya repeated.

“A tiny part of her. Why didn't she crumple up that napkin?”

“Because she's going to show it to everyone at work.”

“She could've taken a picture and thrown it away. Wouldn't it have been more insulting to do that in our faces – ?”

“Yan – ”

“I know on the surface it's hard to believe, but deeper, whatever's in us, she has it in her, too! But she'll never listen to it because her whole life, everyone around her has shut down even the slightest unusual thought. She's on a fixed trajectory. Have nothing but pity for her, Saya. She will never have the courage to see where her ridiculous notions might lead.”

“Oh Yan, this is the *entire point!* They lead nowhere! Why do it if it isolates us and ruins us in the world?”

“Forget about the world!” he yelled, pushing the air aside roughly. “It doesn't want another way. It wants the same way in a new wrapper. Truly new is inconvenient. It means we have to adjust. Look around us! Find anything new!” he waved his arms.

Brightest young men and women walked by toting shopping bags, purses, and phones, carrying on lighthearted conversations about a recently seen movie that crossed immiscibly with their own stream. The clean glass doorway into a mall behind them, their ventures had brought them to buy jackets for the impending seasonal change. The crowd walking by them fit comfortably in with the late August scene. They had time to fix their

appearance. They laughed about things all of them had shared in one form or another. They walked on in apparently unruffled lives. As she beheld them, Saya was more aware than ever of the widening distance between their tiny ship and the shore of society's framework.

“You've never seen all this from the other side,” he said, gestured around at the mall's sunny and polished fourth floor. “From there you'll realize, all our language and development – all *this* – they're not musts, they're not absolutes. They're the echoes of a few accidental shocks in the distant past. If the first few shocks had been angled just differently, our very DNA could have been structured differently. We're partial! Humanity is partial! And all that we are, all of our problems, are optional. Everything that is, doesn't *have* to be!” he tore desperately at the air, unable to rip open the stagnant mall atmosphere where top forty hits played on loop and a group of four loud young girls had stopped nearby to take a photo with one of their cameras. “To know this is to know your own freedom!”

“I was searching for something,” he went on. “When I was in that place, I was searching, just like here, but there the search is clearer. There was nothing but the search, the only

thing that really matters. And I found it! It's unbelievable because the longer you search the more you think there is nothing to find. But I found my castle, I returned the king! I found the life that had been waiting for me all along. I found the moment when the searching stops and down to your core you don't need to search anymore. There's nothing else like it. The reason for every step, every stupid, backwards thing I've been compelled to do that no explanation could justify – it made sense. I *tasted* it. I tasted the life that was mine. I tasted all this misery and this climb from the other side. How can all of the things that are not in accord, that I find out here, that I unnecessarily struggle with, be as real?"

"And what was in that life?" Saya asked.

"I never touched it. The moment I went to step inside, the castle disappeared."

The world dropped away. She locked into the ground and blasted to pieces flung from the shock at once.

He was naked and revealed. A child cherishing mountaineer ambitions and the most deeply held shred of hope that they would someday be true. She had reached

the bottom of Yan.

“It's a fantasy,” she couldn't make it louder than a whisper. “It's not the *truth*. You're just playing out your fantasy!”

He gave her a smile. “What is the truth but our last fantasy?”

The roar of the first morning train sounded below, shaking the ground beneath the young couple pressed to the wall. The woman, torso lifting from the tiles at the quake, met eyes of those walking past as she stirred. Their lackadaisical lifestyle was a common sight these days, said the quick and sometimes not so quick glances on the matted black hair framing a weary face that was still quite young, barely thirty, and in perfect health. She retuned their looks with one that contained an ounce of shame.

Beside her the man – a boy by his youthful appearance – sat up and tidily rolled up his mat, purturbing no one.

They made their way politely to the public restrooms around the corner, the man reemerging first and waiting for his companion. Then they adjusted their bright, spotless backpacks and veered right, falling into step with the crowd marching toward the trains.

Each read a newspaper and drank coffee in a private but synchronized world. Their backpacks rested above their heads. A short hour later, they quietly removed them and disembarked, stepping onto the nondescript edge of suburbia.

For hours they trekked along the sidewalk lining placid streets, attracting stares with their purposeful motion that passed like a parade of two. It was almost trancelike, a herald of a summon toward a distant Mecca. They disappeared by night, hidden in the cover of off hours inside bushes and half concealed parks, awaking before the first rays of sunlight hit the distant windows of houses to trek once more. They traversed this terrain for days until they came to its end, where the edge of a tame wilderness began. And at this border, leaving behind the world they knew, they plunged into the shallow woodland, disappearing into the fold once more.

ten

“Just beyond this ledge!” Yan called as he tore through the trees to the rock wall rising ahead. “I *know* it's crazy, but there's a tiny, miniscule window and if we jump into the air we can catch it!”

He sprinted. “Hurry! Before our doubt catches up to us! There can't be even a molecule!”

The words were ignition. She raced after him, jumping into the jet of spirit despite knowing they raced to the elusive borderline for the fourth time that week. The invisible forest remained an inch from their fingertips, no matter how poignantly they strained or how close they came to its gate, thwarted, always, by the imperishable spot of doubt affixed in perception.

She stayed a hair before her self doubt. Her hands groped blindly and intuitively into the boulder's irregular crevices before she could think to place them. Yan was waiting at the

top, his back in line with the thin young trees poking out from deep narrow fissures on the broad mount. Beyond the ledge, the sunset arced freely across the sky, shimmering the waterbed of deciduous foliage. Stopping, they looked out at it, and there they made their camp.

In the early morning they left.

The state of their beings was a distant cousin to their wander through Alderson, but the terrain was now different. They did not repeat steps. Here they were new to themselves. The ground was wetter, the dirt browns and grays of rock taken with a slate hue, the woods tinted with teal.

Where they'd created discord in the city, Yan's capricious movements conformed to their surroundings naturally. His erratic leaps between staccato and legato played like a melody, falling over the textured terrain like a blanket. He led their troupe briskly through what felt unmapped land, forging a path through what could have been a state park or negligible nameless terrain, holding the invisible forest up like a candle.

“We must be in Patapsco Valley,” Saya muttered late the

next morning, sensing familiarity in the broad path they stumbled onto. The sign of humanity's manipulation was an instant balm; she was a sane, ordinarily functioning person! Denizens of civilization had walked here, and not just once, but often enough to stamp a trail into the ground! Someone was being *paid* to maintain this path. By the grace of a power greater than their narrow agenda they were not floating in space alone.

“What?” Yan turned back at the sound.

“This park. I'm trying to gauge where we are.”

“What does the name mean anything to us? I prefer to be lost. The more lost we get the closer we come to the invisible forest.”

A line of hikers passed at that moment, thoughtless dogs trotting alongside as they followed the cyan markings splashed down prominent trees. They lingered on the man and woman in the middle of the road wearing bulky packs that catapulted them into another class immediately. Saya and Yan had indeed reached the park, emerging not onto a hidden trail in the wild but into the weekend escape of local joggers.

One swiveled her head; Yan cut across the path and plunged into the park brush like it was perfectly natural.

A cool wave washed over Saya.

“What was so wrong with the path?” she hissed behind him.

“The path is not the path,” he said cryptically, facing the continuing trees, where the road was already a memory.

“That’s needlessly obscure,” she huffed. “Our ancestors spent eras perfecting roads and now we’re rejecting the very idea of them?”

“They perfected roads thinking they’d get somewhere.”

“You mean escape,” she snarked. “I was glad for it. It reminds me that we’re alone in the world.”

“But we are.”

“We’re not,” she cut bluntly. “We’re part of civilization and any time we cross with reality I’m reminded of that and panic. We’re being completely unnatural!”

“Of course we’re being unnatural,” he said matter-of-factly. “Why should that worry us?”

“Because it's human to worry! It's human to care what other people think! I don't care if that labrador stared at us, I care that that woman did! It didn't make you even a bit uncomfortable the way she looked at us?”

“I didn't notice.”

“You don't have to play aloof to me, I won't think you're selling out.”

“I didn't!” his affront was naïve.

A fresh chill washed over her. A new filter revealed another Yan. Where she had painted a man rising above the issue with sinewy strength, it occurred to her that perhaps he had never perceived it at all....

They lit no fire that night, sitting on the warm rocks along a grassy bank in darkness, shielded from sight by a sharp bend in the river. Yan plucked away at his banjo while Saya slowly chewed a Clif bar, turned away from his outline and staring at the river despite that darkness left little to see.

The noises of the woods were a backdrop for his explorations. At times a thin string emerged from the sparse plucks, worked around pregnant silences that hung

while a motion brewed until manifesting as something perceptible.

“It's my one year anniversary with this song,” he said as he began replaying a slow, cyclical melody. “Sometimes I pick it up, see where it goes and if it won't show more of itself.”

“There's barely a melody,” she commented through a mouthful of protein.

“Most of the music stays unheard. Its beauty, its idea, its life – they're born and completed long before the first note makes it out. 'Song' is a misleading word, or else history has given it too broad a meaning,” he reflected. “A song is merely a portal to something bigger. Through the song you enter a sort of room. You might start out a little forced, a little contrived, but when you hook onto it, you enter the place and you hang there suspended. From there, you can explore this land. It's real. It has its own specifications: a tone, a tempo, a feel, a general form or idea that is hard to express in words. Bit by bit, you feel out the parameters of the room, and where at first it felt like you were creating it, you realize you're merely uncovering what's already there. You're pulling something out of nothing, but at the same

time, it already exists and you're merely brushing dust off of it. That's the funny thing about creation – at a certain moment, it flips. When you come to that equilibrium between creating and created, you perceive that it's the other way around. The *music* is creating *you*. It is whole and *you're* the creation. You're the skeletal parameters and you need to be filled out. Inside the room, the music is chipping away at your marble and defining your negative spaces. You are emerging. Your hands get confused – the right and the left – which is which? What ears hear of this process is a single melody, but a melody – a song – isn't just one line in the silence. It is one of multiple lines crossing each other from all sides. *Music* fills the whole room. It is an ocean in which bits of melody drift in and out of the dark like fish and dolphins flashing their color past your point of perception, playing with each other, running in parallel, skirting around time, but all of the one same life. If you hang long enough you uncover that world until you understand it. And when the moment is over, you drop out, and it is as if it never was. It cannot be proven or understood even by the same person when that person is standing outside it. Its only remnant may be a song, a more or less coherent string of sounds, but be sure that what you

hear out here is, at best, if not a distortion, a pale echo of the moment itself.”

He fell back into his private world. Nights found Yan absorbed. In what, Saya could not see. It appeared as nothing more than the air before his nose, but the absorption was whole. Saya felt herself locked outside a gate, staring at hieroglyphics. Did he inch ever nearer to his beloved forest in these private moments, she wondered.

They awoke early, setting off again amid quietude, theirs the only footsteps as they continued forging no path through the trees, guided by Yan's patternless zigzags.

They spoke little. Saya, the woman who had gone nearly three decades without spending more than a day outside, now bathed in streams whose temperature she couldn't control. She slept in the company of crickets and daddy long legs, and she rationed softening fruit and Clif bars like they were the last. Visions of the old life filled her mind, but they were caricatures, echoes of patterns her mind had not yet shorn. At times she imagined the modern beacon most comforting in all the universe to the lost wanderer, the Seven Eleven, poking miraculously through the trees. That or a Starbucks, with its promise of free WiFi, instant

connectivity and the validation of their foolishness; for from the comfort of one of its chairs, she could go online, look up “travelers”, and read dozens of accounts, updated that very morning (from another Starbucks)!, of aimless drifters, and feel better about their own missteps as she drank a latte. Thanks to a screen she would realize that humanity's whole was doing everything imaginable, each little corner a tentacle of the multifaceted and confused octopus, squiggling tiny arrhythmic waves into its sphere of the waters.

She dropped Karalee running past a gleaming Starbucks window, sneering at the people behind it on their laptops for a second and then running on. That was the secret to Karalee's success: she ran on. If they switched, Karalee wouldn't be doubting herself. She wouldn't be thinking of what people in an irrelevant office were thinking about her. Saya would not exist for her. Saya likely did not exist for her already, except as a story. And Karalee remained her standard, intricately interwoven into her psyche with her deepest seed of self-doubt.

She glared at Yan's buttocks moving persistently ahead of her, as if they had somehow forced her to throw her life

away. She despised him at times, so nonchalantly a wandering mandolin player while her next rent payment drew closer, and meanwhile he thought of nothing but this damned fantasy land! His every movement reached to it, always ending in a bated breath at a door that never appeared. Nothing around them gave sign that they were nearing their destination, or anything at all. They had only succeeded in escaping civilization, and that for only a time.

The more they went on, the sillier it all became. What need did they have for an invisible forest when endless pleasant days of enjoying nature's beauty stretched out ahead? Yan blazed on nevertheless, upholding his torch in face of an ever more obvious reality. Even the audience was catching on, murmuring in their seats, *the hero didn't want the impossible; he wanted childhood*. This understanding grew onerous wedged in the space between them.

Just in those moments when the air was thickest with its stench, he spoke the name aloud. He did so casually, as if referring to a radical friend living an alternative lifestyle in another country.

“Do you even remember what your forest looks like?”
Saya lost grip on her tightly locked resentment.

"It's not as vivid at this very moment as it was at first," he conceded, "but like I said! You never have to keep it alive so much as when it seems there's nothing!"

"Or you could admit we're on vacation," she spat.

He stopped walking. "This isn't a vacation! We're facing our greatest challenge yet: comfort."

"Yes. We have to play in the woods while the rest of the world gets to toils away at jobs they hate. *How* are we going to make it through?"

"That sounds like morning talking," he thumbed her nose playfully.

"Morning is part of life!" she slapped off his hand. "Yan, your spirit is lovely, but what about the world!"

"What about it?"

"You can't just escape! You can't just refuse to adjust your ideals to the change happening around us! Don't you see? There's no *time* to wander around! People are multiplying across a shrinking planet, grabbing up every remaining corner that hasn't already been claimed, and meanwhile we turn away as if it isn't happening and dally on into *nothing*."

This is one of *the worst* times in modern history to seek an invisible forest! Childhood is a dying concept, but *you've* gone and extended it into your thirties! How do you justify that in an age when you have to go to school, fight everyone to get a decent job to support just *yourself*, go *back* to school, all before thirty so you have time for a family *and* travel *and* hobbies *while* saving for retirement *and* owning everything you want to own all at the same time!!" she cried. "You can't remain *perfectly yourself* – " she taunted " – in face of it! You have to bend – !"

"I'll never bend," his voice struck.

"Then how will you survive!?"

"I don't know!" he yelled. "I'm going on a belief even *I'm* afraid to follow! Yes I'm afraid! You think I don't hear how it sounds? How it looks next to everything we pass? I saw the glimmer of something else and it doesn't matter *when* in history this happened, there's a chance to bring out something of real value and I have to finish it no matter how senseless the world says it is because nobody else has seen it! Yet, it is real! It's real because I've seen it! Even if it was one touch and all I hear now is its echo!"

She closed her eyes. “And you never thought, all this, might be nothing but the best trick your brain has ever played?”

He hadn't budged since he'd stopped. “I won't let your negativity seep into me,” he said coldly. “But thank you for reminding me of the true reason for the forest,” he threw back his arms as if to embrace every step they had walked from the beginning. “The whole reason for the invisible forest is to find a way out of that wretched cycle of defeat and escape.”

A fall rain soaked the forest that night. The steely tap of droplets pattered in a drone on their sagging tent as Saya curled up in the descending autumn chill that intensified the reality lingering in the unrelenting clearing where mist had long fogged her brain.

He was a child! She had thrown away a perfectly reasonable life to lie in a damp sleeping bag in the middle of nowhere next to a man-child possessed by a temporary brightness. An escapist who took his escapism, and nothing else, seriously.

For nothing. About nothing. Something else. She shook her

head as the tears came. How could she have believed in an invisible forest? How dare she treat the gruel of life as if those long years spent slowly unveiling its most crushing truth – its compromise – could be lightly tossed away? All from that old recurring plague: hope.

What of all the beauty at the start? The vibrant explorer with his spirit standing boldly in defiance of the world? Was it always nothing? It was exactly what she had long held in a hidden harbor, and, miraculously, “Yan” had appeared, and with him a clamoring vibrant world blossoming in the middle, of which there now remained nothing, save for herself as she was and Yan as he was and the empty air between their bodies.

She emerged, awash in anger from sleeplessness, at the first sign of daybreak, sitting on a damp tree stump where she could escape the human smell her gut had grown sick of.

He emerged hours later, unapologetically well rested, while the rain continued to fall and he continued to ignore it to unwrap a Clif bar.

“Best be off to the forest,” he said, placing the wrapper

into a plastic bag and performing some squats.

Saya eyed him unblinkingly from her seat. "It's raining."

He shrugged. "Some days there's rain. That doesn't mean you quit."

"Do you really think the problem is rain?"

"What, then? Mosquitoes? No toilets? Just because we're doing something different doesn't mean it's going to have less unpleasantness than the normal ways. After all, this isn't a vacation," he got his in.

"How about that my rent is due tomorrow?" she sprung up and squared him. "Or that my health insurance just expired? Or that we're almost out of food? Does the invisible forest provide for all that?"

"Saya, please," his voice grew panicked at her unabated state, "don't choose fear. Not when we're so close. We're inches away. I can feel it!"

"You've been saying that from the moment we set out and I have yet to see a leaf of it! I thought the way to the forest was simple!"

"It is."

“Then how come all I've done so far is run into my own shit!” she yelled.

“It's simple if you're simple. If you have a lot of shit to get through it's complicated,” he struggled to maintain equanimity.

“We passed this tree stump yesterday. We're *literally* going around in circles,” she kicked the damp stump that had been her seat. “How can you keep at it when the whole world tells us it's not real? There's no path, no sign – ”

“It *won't* be real if I don't keep it alive!”

“So you admit it! There's nothing on the other side, no secret world. You're just a man with an idea.”

“Of *course* I'm just a man with an idea!” he almost laughed. “What did you think I was? A savior?”

Thunder reverberated long after its boom.

“All there is is a kingdom in my mind that nobody knows, and I wanted to share it with you!” he cried, burning a red that washed over his freckles.

“Why me?” she moaned. “Why not someone easier? There are hundreds of girls who would love to frolic off to a

new-agey world.”

“Because something in you – was *like* me – you were on the ledge – that's when you have the chance to jump into the air. Not when you feel safe and pleasant.”

“Yan, you don't get – ” she could feel an impending headache “– I was *miserable*. For *five years* I was miserable. I needed a fantasy, I did. If it hadn't been you, it would've been someone else.” Old modes of thought swam like eels far below, their partiality so clearly visible to her now from the harrowing distance she had crossed.

“I was so misguided,” she shook her head at the damp earth. “*All* my assumptions, all my ridiculous explanations – *I* was the barrier, *I* was in the way! I was in a trench the day you met me. That's why it got me – ” their talks in his old office flashed before her eyes. “You were a hundred percent right, I was on the ledge. But that was then.”

She watched tears drop into the mass of fresh wet leaves the rain had loosed from their branches.

“We did what we set out to do. We followed all our steps to the last grain of honesty. Here we are in the middle of nothing,” she held out her arms. “What else can there be?”

She looked up from the earth. He was folding before her.

“The forest existed before you and it’ll go on without you,” he said emotionlessly. “I made peace with my aloneness a long time ago. I was even expecting this,” his voice softened out.

Across the divide that broke from the air between them, the pervasive drizzle sharpened his ongoing quest against the dreary, indifferent gray. She saw it hanging against the sky, an amateur-crafted tapestry ripped and shaken from her like a coat.

“Please. I don’t want to leave you here alone,” she said.

He had turned around to continue his morning routine. How suddenly it had transformed from the life she was living into the movie she was watching, crystal clear and beyond her reach.

Saya packed her belongings, catching sight of him here and there at such angles as only let her make out his jawline, ear, and cheek.

She paused before she taking her departure, thinking to ask once more, but, without a word, thought better of it and left.

She spat out bugs as she fought her way through the trees, wiping away sweat and rain. They'd been not a half hour from the highway. A slow, dirty truck pulled up at her side before too long.

The driver paused for effect when she said her address, making no comment, eager, from either her smell or her potential insanity, to drop what he now regretted picking up. If Saya had to guess – basking in her musk – it was the smell. Gratefully slumped against the seat back, self-consciously aware that even the owner of this slovenly truck would clean it, the world returned to her. The minutia of office culture, much needed weekends of shopping to ease the built up stress, quaint rainy hours curled up on the couch with the latest nonfiction bestseller and a malbec. Layers of perception that had been temporarily suspended reorganized quietly, normalizing her into her old role with little turbulence. Meanwhile the other world faded quietly behind.

Her apartment was as she had left it, safe, merely a bit overdue on being paid, and ultimately as if no time had passed. Blinds drawn over the sixteenth story balcony pulled back to showcase an overcast urban afternoon. A

single flick of the light switch above the mahogany hued couch centered perfectly on a beige rug before a flat screen illuminated the living room. Saya fell onto the hard but utilitarian couch in exothermic satisfaction.

Then she showered, poured a glass of wine, leaned against the hard, neat cushions before a flickering screen again. It took several blinks to register the strangely foreign concept of the news. There the reporter was, working the man-made tradition that Saya dare in her irresponsibility abandon. The straight, thin mouth, the solemn eyes, the pretty bob and impeccable makeup in the face of worldly tragedies. *And the invisible forest*. The name found no corner to settle in here.

“Saya?” her mother's hard voice answered the freshly charged cell phone in her wine-free hand. “Why are you calling?”

Saya choked a bit on her wine.

“You didn't call me?”

“I called last week.” Her mother sounded distracted by something.

“I was on vacation.”

“Ooh!” her mother's pitch rose in hopes of coaxing out news that Saya had gone with a boy. “Where?”

Saya knew that only a handful of possible answers to this question existed and that her mother had ranked them from most desirable – a tropical cruise paid for by the new boyfriend – to least acceptable – another trip to the beach with her girls – before she even answered.

“To Alderson, West Virginia, and then camping in the woods.”

“Why?” the tone dropped to its original pitch.

“Just to see what was there,” Saya physically shrugged. Didn't a country bed-and-breakfast with the new boyfriend land at least in the middle?

“*You* went camping?”

Saya chuckled. “Yeah. It wasn't that bad... most of the time.”

“Did you check yourself for ticks. You know Uncle Bobka came to visit, and when he went back he died from Lyme disease.”

“He died of cancer.”

“That came from Lymes!”

“No. It didn't. And I haven't checked myself, I just got back.”

“In the middle of Tuesday?”

“I quit my job,” said Saya in one breath.

“Ah!” the shrill returned. “Where are you working now?”

“I – no – I just hated my job. I wanted a break,” she said almost defiantly, teetering for a moment on using “deserved”.

“Are you alright in the head?” her mother asked sharply.

“I'm young, I'll be fine,” she answered in a calm that suppressed her panic. “I'm looking for another job. How's dad?”

“Here,” she said abruptly.

“She quit her job. And she doesn't have another one,” Saya heard over a poorly muffled receiver during the hand-off.

“So, you quit your job, eh?” her father's more sympathetic but more wry notes asked.

“Mhm.”

“Hmp. What's the plan?”

It ran like a script.

“I don't know,” Saya read her line tightly.

“So you're coming back to live with us,” he answered for her, his smile clear in her mind's eye.

“No.”

“Do you need money?”

“No!”

“Your mother is getting your room ready.”

“Don't - ”

“What?” he laughed. “So you quit your job.” She saw his weary shrug. “At least you didn't kill someone.”

“You don't understand – it wasn't just some foolish – I *proved* something – “ the proclamation died like a sputtering engine while proffering a true gem: a relic of the mythical land where, long ago, their flag was made. She had gone into life and found proof of *it!* Had he forgotten? The foregone boldness swirling in her mind's brewery with riches and lessons and glimmering moments fell apart

along its fragile seams as it made contact with the air and, upon failing to find words for expression, evaporated.

The news blared on in the living room, recreating the world. She shortly hung up.

He hadn't needed her. All she had left behind was a man with a vision. *Everyone* had them! The only difference between Yan and everyone was that he placed enough value on his to tear down his life for it. He would be he without her, and she would see him on the news weeks later, found wandering on the side of the road.

Harder rain hit her balcony doors. She saw him walking on, circling endlessly within the trees.

She alone knew where in all the world a single person resided.

I've made peace with my aloneness.

It was his choice, and this was hers. She had stepped off the train. She was a normal person again. She had a phone full of battery power.

She scrolled through the names of old work friends with whom she would presumably never speak again except

during polite run-ins; friends from old lives who had been leading new ones in new cities for years. Their old bonds still warmed her, but it was with residual heat. Their stories were wrapped up in age-old conflicts, the building blocks of her patterns and the window she carried around, but the play was over. It was archived. They were dead stories, resolved to reruns and reunion specials.

She'd reached the bottom of the alphabet very quickly. There was no entry past W.

Saya was twenty-eight. She was sitting at that moment in the clean and sterile apartment she could – it dawned on her painfully – no longer afford, overlooking a city she had no true tether to.

Of the billions of people moving through the world, she alone had been privy to the innermost visions of a single other one. His stubborn face plowed on through the thicket with steps that cut against how everyone moved, toward what no one on Earth would dare.

Her presence had been the sole validation, the wall to bounce back the theory and fuel the continuance. He was keeping his world alive... or had it been she? He'd said it

would go on without her. He knew himself better than she did. She had never glimpsed the one endless point that was his everything.

Hours had passed since she'd left. She squirmed from inside her deep sink in the couch with another glass of wine. Yan had likely trekked miles. People didn't find each other again after a break like that. The notion was ridiculous, she snorted. A fiction. The arc belonged to his impossible life.

Every step scraped fate, fighting its gravitational pull. Each motion contorted every cell.

This is insane, she repeated to herself. The highway stretched out surreally, wavering. She remained alone, standing at her best guess of the spot from whence she'd emerged. *This isn't real*.

She commenced marching beside the stream of roaring cars as if trudging through a gale. Foolishness overcame her

as the impossible fast dropped its brightness and became truly impossible. She stood now in the middle of nowhere, facing all possible paths.

They were marooned at world. Had they trajectories, she could begin; but all of the untrodden plane lay open to two pathless people in search of something that could be anywhere.

How could she guess how he made his turns? Did he follow her route in the hopes that she might turn around? Did he go decidedly the opposite way? Perhaps it had no bearing on his steps at all.

She couldn't not find him. She had abandoned everything to fly on the chance. Trucks and SUVs and sedan after sedan sped un sentimentally by.

A quarter mile ahead, like the blip of a drifting balloon, she saw a small figure walking away, another balloon sitting on its back. Her heart bloomed. She ran, her backpack bouncing behind her.

"The driver thought I was crazy for getting dropped at the side of the road," she called ahead when they were meters apart.

The figure glanced behind, then turned back and continued.

“It's lucky I found you! You could've been miles away,” she grabbed his arm.

She would've preferred a violent jerk to the fluid slink that slipped his hand out out of her fingers.

“Wait - ”

When he turned around she wished immediately he did not. The face of a boy held up its chin in maintained dignity. His expression was steel down to the freckles, the portrait never more vividly outlined. His eyes alone betrayed upheaval in their storm-cloud flecked backdrop of gray, lacking the muscle control to conceal.

“I thought the path wasn't the path,” the only remark she could concoct delivered lamely.

“It seems more practical,” he said shortly. He continued walking.

She kept up. “Do you know how slim the chances were of finding you? You could've gone anywhere! This is a miracle!”

"I left not an hour ago," he said. "Why'd you come back?"

"To find the invisible forest with you."

The flush crept up her neck. She exposed her loyalty card to the world.

"Don't make a fool of me."

"I'm not!"

"You don't believe in it."

"It doesn't matter. I'll go anyway," she said firmly. "I'm with you. I went back, and – *this* is what matters. You find the entire world of someone else –."

"You think I'm insane."

"No, I – it's inexpressible –" she wrangled her arms, struggling with words. "I want to hold everything you are."

Yan was not suspicious but solemn and, for the first time, tired.

"You were right. There's nothing," he said quietly. "I can't hold onto it anymore," he threw his palm to the road.

Both turned to the highway. Neither spoke. Nothing changed. No cars stopped or slowed or turned around and

drove the other way. And after a moment's pause they resumed walking forward along the shoulder.

eleven

For weeks they wandered in wilderness, encountering only themselves in the concentric circles they made. They walked on in the knowledge that they were walking for nothing. The invisible forest had all but burned away, leaving only a hollow in the unforgiving clearing over which every storm passed. The wind that had carried Yan dropped with increasing frequency, leaving him stranded in sane, ordinary perception, facing alarming gaps in which no swirling vision or fantasy ached to burst out of him.

Yan led them along a pathless path into the trees, past even the distant highway roar. They were the first to make it, pioneers across an empty plain. Simultaneously, unaltered, late summer days unfolded around them in the hum of gentle forest life, turning over to autumn at a pace indifferent to theirs.

He moved untouched by the surroundings, plowing on through the thicket moment after moment, day after day,

straining toward the nothing in every motion. He was singularly consumed; only one impulse beat in him. It was not long enough to be a statement. It was barely a notion.

Yan's movements grew agitated. He picked trajectories as senselessly as if they traversed a featureless field. They crashed through spiderwebs, stomped through piles of needles slipping under their feet, senselessly upturned boulders before he abruptly changed the course. A wave was slowly building behind him, brewed by his fervor, as yet a distant call, looming imperceptibly closer and closer. He raced it in panic to the perceived finale dangling ahead. Neck and neck with the wave, he fell upon his sacred shore a hair before the full weight of mortal waters crashed over him. But he had touched land first. His existence would not to be washed off in the sea. He had won the battle of ways, and the valley of his world opened inland from the sands, affirmed.

The invisible forest buzzed just beyond his reach, unfolding and unfolding and unfolding at full flower as across a great chasm, its ancient mythology played out in the symphony, a story of interwoven threads told for the thousandth time; the long-aged actors were now fully

awake, reliving their stories not in partial blindness as had been their fate whilst uncovering them, but in perfect sight, aware of their partiality. The symphony he could not quite hear was beauty inexpressible, every movement loaded with more significance than any art.

Yan's pace quickened as if the accumulated wealth of human experience were sand grains in his hands. *The history of the human psyche was slipping out of existence!* he panicked as the play grew fainter every moment he remained here. He did not know what more he could do. They had done everything possible in every way; they had broken with life, plunged into the depths of it and threatened to redefine it. Yan strained to recapture the initial moment of validation. It had fallen so freely at first! And now....

Their treks extended into darkness, unaffected as he was by the shifts from light to twilight and back. Far below, Saya's presence had flattened to a shadow accompaniment as, in the blur, the woods took on unprecedented vividness, the twilight minutes sharpening each grass blade into its own world, bringing every speck of quartz into clear ringing view that clamored for his attention with its

brightness. A palpable sense of destiny enveloped every step, and for a half moment, in this swirl, he caught onto the old feeling. It was its hint, its barest breath, and that was enough to turn a corner and behold his castle. He stopped before the enormous rook in shock. The flat heavy wall bore no sense of home and harmony. The castle was not bursting with life. It was chalk dry. Instead of music, a weighty, grim satisfaction pervaded the clearing at his arrival.

He cried, lunging forth with his entirety. *It's lost! Could it be!?* He reached desperately to pull out the once overflowing life. But it receded from his grasp the more he stretched and the stones crumbled off, falling silently onto the grass. Yan was helpless but to stand and hear the distant, dying call of his only beloved, the life inimitable, diminished by time to a last beating vine taking its final gasping breath.

He awoke, springing up, zipping out of the tent door and ramming his boots on. It was not yet morning.

“What are you doing?” Saya asked sluggishly.

“We have to hurry! My castle is dying!” he cried.

She jumped after him.

Yan plowed through the forest as dawn broke over the ground, its bare light filtering in through canopy gaps. He fought through the brush toward the final grain – a molecule, a flower, a vine, an eye – that kept the vast brimming world tethered to life for the one final second stretched out. He was just on the verge! He could feel it! It was a millimeter away.

The scene of the forest was the exact scene of his dream. Every crevice fit like a fingerprint into the wiring of his eager brain, wrapping around the vivid memory atom for atom down to the tiniest fissure. His heart ballooned. The castle, flowered in its utmost detail, waited just beyond the low hill! He tapped a boulder's head triumphantly as he passed it, curved, and pushed forward with a last gust of breath at the moment the scene could take no more.

Yan fell to his knees, palms on the leaves.

The castle crumbled as the land broke apart. All interconnecting paths disappeared, unraveling the entire world until its language had never formed into a whole and its disjointed syllables remained littering the ground in

primitive fragments, silent.

He was face to face with the ground.

He had just missed the world! What more could he have done? How could he have arrived a moment sooner and grabbed the life by its last fading filament?

Saya stopped abruptly at the figure of the motionless Yan slumped breathless in the middle of an ordinary clearing. A pleasant September morning continued unaffected around them. An old wall of stones, the base of a long-abandoned house, stood undisturbed near the edge, covered in moss. Local history claimed it was last lived in two hundred years ago. Yan clenched one of its mossy stones that lay embedded in the ground, no longer feeling any pull nor hearing any call beyond the sounds of the everyday world.

“Why’d you stop?” she cried.

Yan shook his head. An expression of calm had washed over his face.

“It was a spell. A disease. It had to pass through,” he said to the ground. All urgency had fled from his face. He gazed at the decrepit remains of the building before him. It was silent, long abandoned, covered quaintly in tiny trees

sprouting out of its cracks as a pleasant surprise for the daytime wanderer.

Saya exploded. "What about your castle? The whole beautiful world that's waiting for you!"

"It's gone," he said without sadness.

"But you were *king!*" she cried as if the word embodied a thousand other words. "Come on, you're *one step away!*" she was mid flight and poised on the crest.

Yan chuckled. "What king?"

"No! This is just the moment to keep going!" she pulled on his listless arm in vain.

Yan had no desire to move. He had no desire to do anything more.

"Fine. If you won't find it then I will."

She dropped his arm and roughed past him determinedly at her old speed. Yan watched her fervent climb up the hill against the unconcerned steady leaf fall. She slipped on the grass and fell, got up without pause, and persevered onward toward a blank screen.

"It's just over this ledge!" she cried excitedly as she

reached the top. She turned and walked through the border of trees.

Slowly, he stood up and followed her, taking the climb in calm.

A line of branches obscured her back where the crest of the hill broke suddenly off and became a steep slope to a strip of pebbly shore below. Water lapped gently to and fro at the forest's edge, stretching in all directions ahead, the ripples of the placid marina glittering in the early morning light before emptying into the turbulence of ocean waves at the horizon.

Saya looked uncertainly and with surprise at their horizon. "We can turn around. It's still somewhere out there."

Yan's palm gripped the mossy stone of the old house from the clearing. He pulled back and with all his might hurled it over the ledge into the water, where it dropped and disappeared without sound.

"Let it go on, wherever it is."

They descended the muddy slope to the shore, gripping roots on the way down. No houses broke the line of trees,

but a small boat sat tied to one short pier of many. Lone, it looked long abandoned, as if the others had sailed off decades ago and the water had been rocking its sides in lulling short rhythms during its spell of stagnancy.

Its floor was dirty, covered in odd bits and remnants from parties of bygone years, a once vibrant time forgotten, suggested the off lights entwined around its metal railings. A pile of lifejackets and lifesavers in one corner, cobwebs over a cooler, and, in another, a heap of rope with pieces of colored cloth tied around every foot or so.

Yan's hands rested on the wheel and he glanced at her.

"I hope you're not relying on me to teach you again. We'll get capsized twenty feet out," she looked warily at the marina.

"Nonsense," he nudged her arm. "You're a sailor, remember?"

"A sailor who's afraid of the ocean," she said dully.

Yan smiled. "You are the ocean."

The naïve sea rolled ceaselessly ahead, playing with thousands of forms that emerged from the waves and sank

back just as soon, containing, in its entirety, all possible and none.

“What do you think is out there?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “But you have to go to the end to find that.”

At the helm, the wind whipped back the man's hair, pressed his old cotton shirt coolly against his skin.

“Fine. First help me hang these,” said a voice of poorly suppressed excitement at his side as a small hand closed over his. The unruly-black-haired girl not older than four tugged him along, her other hand dragging the long streamer out from its corner, its string of vibrant little flags unfurling across the floor and rustling one by one in the wind.

He picked up the trail and climbed after her, a significant feat for a mere boy of seven, as she took his hand once more and pulled him along to the bow undaunted, a child leading a child.