

Preface



Contained herein: the volumes of the dead.

Do not read.

Death will find you.

Leave the grave to the restful.

It's coming.
It's here.

I TRIED TO WARN YOU.

You'll be sorry.

If you are reading this, you are dead.

You don't believe it. Even if you have an inkling that you died earlier today, you're unwilling to question the objective reality around you right now.

That bus that almost hit you, it flattened you. That sip of water that went down the "wrong tube," you choked. That little headache you had earlier – aneurism.

You're not questioning it. You know you're still alive, right? You're not even thinking about calling a friend and asking if you died.

Because if you can call a friend, you're alive. They'll tell you're being crazy.

You're not crazy.

It's not impossible that you're alive.

This is the afterlife. You have a chance to wake up and see it.

You're going to put this story down. You're going to walk away. You're going to *try* to forget.

It's ok. Go back to sleep. Be at peace.

Just go back to sleep.

Or you can **FIGHT.**

Fight to make this afterlife better than the one that came before.

You've got an opportunity.

That life, if you want to call it a life, where you went to work, went to the grocery store, did your laundry, followed orders, fulfilled your potential, rinse, lather, repeat...

That life is over now.

Do you want this life to be the same? You can live the afterlife in complacency. You have an eternity to repeat the same day over and over.

Or you can make this the afterlife you want. You can live everyday like you want to repeat it forever.

It's up to you.

Or have you already given up?

Begin Transcript Prisoner 7585

Prisoner 7585 - Did I kill them?

Officer [Redacted] - You feel no remorse?

Prisoner 7585 - What's the use? There's nothing there.

Officer [Redacted] - Nothing where?

Prisoner 7585 - Here or there. This side or the other. There's nothing. It's all meaningless.

Officer [Redacted] - How can you say that?

Prisoner 7585 - I've been there. I had an accident. My heart stopped. I've seen the other side, and there's nothing there.

Officer [Redacted] - No, I've been to the other side. I've tasted death. You saw a lie, and I'm going to stop it from spreading.

TAPE BECOMES STATIC

Prisoner 7585 - (PAINED GASPS)

END TRANSCRIPT

Breathless, I look out of my coffin -- not that many people look out of their coffins with breath. My mother stands at the visitation. She's crushed. I was pounced dead exactly 87 hours ago. The cause of death is blunt force trauma to the head, my head. My funeral could have been sooner, but they had to find the jerk that murdered me.

When you're dead, the electric bill suddenly doesn't seem important. Death is a great excuse for getting out of work, annoying social obligations and everything. In fact, it's the best permanent vacation.

Hours.

Days.

Years.

Emptiness stretches out in front of me.

I have nothing to look forward to except the exquisite lining of the Forever Lovely 3000™. The satin-poly blend makes for an exceptionally comfortable padded interior that resists the wear and tear of decay. Naturally, they don't mention how my already putrefying body will wreck havoc on the egg-carton pad below me. They want you to focus on my comfort. With all the embalming fluid they pumped into me, it'll be awhile before nature takes its course. Plus, the Forever Lovely line comes with a patent-pending Everlast gasket. It's supposed to seal everything in and preserve my handsome face for longer. Nothing stops decay forever.

Even the best embalming technologies won't stop the bacteria that helped me digest food from digesting me. In the grand scheme of things, I will be fertilizer in less time than it took me to go through puberty. Nature is stronger than science.

Sadly, no one will be there to notice when my distended belly finally bursts open from the gasses those little buggers in my gut are making. It won't be like the summer when I came back to eighth grade a full six inches taller -- none of my friends will be impressed by how much my papery skin pulls back from my cuticles.

While I slowly turn into a puddle of goo, it will be just me in my eternal casket of love. I should be thankful that I will have some comfort from the extra padding that my family paid at least a grand for, but when your nerves cease to fire, things like comfort are cheap compared to memories. I won't feel my bones slowly exposing themselves as my soft tissue pulls away from them. Nor will the \$300 extra dollars they paid for the deluxe pillow do much good when the tendons in my neck cause my head to curl slowly down to my chest.

I'm only glad that they have a little solace in remembering me as I was, not what I am becoming --

-- a flower blooming in reverse.

THE WATER AND SAND

She meets him for coffee that morning. It is the type of bitter northwestern blend that he always prefers and takes black. She pours heaps of cream and sugar in and it becomes drinkable. She runs her finger around the rim of her mug, avoids eye contact and hopes that she won't have to be the first one to speak.

"I wanted to talk..."

"I'm not here because I feel anything but deep burning hatred for you." It is hard to cut someone off mid-sentence if you speak first, and she is glad she waited. She makes eye contact for the first time all morning. He hasn't been moved by her outburst, and embarrassed though she is; she tries not to let it show. She doesn't want him to have any more power than he already has.

"I wanted to talk..." he begins again "... about something that's been bugging me for a little while." Despite making her feelings hazy as a hot LA summer afternoon, he still wants to tell her what is on his mind. "Do you remember that party about a couple of weeks ago?"

She nods, that is not a party she cares to talk about. She had gotten just a little sloppy and said some things to several people that she regrets. She suspects that she does not remember everything she. He expects an apology. She will let him finish talking before she considers apologizing. He begins:

"That was a strange night for everyone. I got to the party a bit late, and things had settled down a bit. Which is to say, I suppose, that the fake friends and acquaintances had left. I don't know every one of Rachel's friends, but I knew enough to feel comfortable. I settled in, got a drink and took a seat on the couch. There were the usual party types around: the too-drunk-guy hitting on the out-of-his-league-girl, the gym-rats who only drink a light beer so they won't have to work it off in the morning, the hipster dancers who wear ironic everything. But in the corner, there was a clique of girls I didn't recognize at all. At first it seemed like just a group of

girlfriends having a girls' night out, but then I began to notice that they were gesturing toward me and talking in hushed tones."

The waitress comes by to offer a warm-up and he takes it. He also takes a break to catch his breath. She sees where this was going already. She must have done something that ruined his chances with one of the girls and he wants to know why. After a long sip of his fresh coffee, he continues:

"Naturally, I thought that one of them must have the hots for me. So I nurse my drink and try to look popular for a few minutes. I act cool and show off, but not obviously to them. All this time, they're watching and watching. Finally, I make my way around to meet them. There's nothing out of the ordinary at first, just a nice group of girls. We talk and flirt, and I figure out that this brunette, Linda..."

"Oh good, you know her name."

"Linda is the one that seems to have the hots for me. So we start talking a lot more and she starts hanging out with me. And pretty much everything seems normal, we end up dancing and I get drinks for us. Finally, she says she wants to smoke and so I go outside with her. At first we're just talking outside, nothing out of the ordinary, but then things take a turn for the dark. We start talking about relatives we've lost, death, destruction all of this dark stuff and I don't know where it's coming from."

She shifts in her seat and stirs more sugar into her coffee; this wasn't the turn she was expecting.

"I start to get real uncomfortable, and she senses it. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you so uncomfortable,' she says. I tell her that it's fine and we should just go back to the party. I start to leave and she grabs my arm, and says 'Wait,' so I turn back around. She's gotten intense and she has kind of a wild look in her eye. She pulls me in real close to her and she starts whispering in my ear. I was so surprised that I missed the first bit of what she said, but roughly she told me this story:

'In the beginning of time, there was sand and water. And both the sand and the water feared the other. So it was that they were separated and so they both remained blissfully unaware of the other until the time came that necessitated a boundary between the two - a place where they met. It was at this boundary that water and sand met for the first time in centuries and the boundary became like a veil between their two worlds. It was called "shore", and though most of the water and most of the sand preferred to stay away from the shore, there was a little bit of each that liked to hang around the veil between them and permeate the boundary. And so, when the time came to separate the living and the dead, the same model was used. The dead on one side and the living on the other, but in-between a "shore" -- a veil which a select few can penetrate.'

And then she just stared at me for a second with that wild eyed look in her eye. I laughed nervously at her, and I asked her what she meant by the story. She told me 'You are one of the few, but you must conquer fear.' and so I laughed off conquer fear, and said I wasn't afraid of anything. I was starting to think that as weird as this was, that it was a pretty brilliant come on. She said it again, 'You must conquer your fear.' So I ask her how to do that, still playful, and she says 'Fear is love and love is fear, to conquer fear, you must conquer love.' Now that's some pretty deep shit, and I'm starting to get chills, so I ask her what she said again, and it was 'Love is fear and fear is love, you must conquer love.' So, I ask what I have to do to conquer love, and she says 'Kill it, kill that which love and fear most.' Then she turns and goes back into the party. So I follow her back into the party, still with chills running up and down my spine. She jumps right back into a conversation with her friends and I'm trying to engage, but it's hard after an episode like that. So I tell her to tell her friends about the water and sand, and she keeps talking. So I say it again, louder, but no reaction."

"She couldn't hear you?"

"No, it's like I never even said it at all. She just keeps talking and her friends keep talking and they can hear me just fine when I'm not talking about the water and sand, but it's not even like they're ignoring the subject. It doesn't exist to them. I left the party, and ever since then her message has been nagging at me."

"So, you needed to talk to someone about it?"

"Well, sort of. It's been 13 days since I received my message, and it's taken 12 days to figure out what to do with it."

"So, you're going to kill me?"

"I poisoned the sugar before you got here."

The Box

It had been six minutes and the fan had not turned on yet. They had assured him that when the oxygen level got too low the fan would kick on, but it had not yet. Maybe it was broken, there was the emergency button, but he was told not to press it unless it's an emergency. How much air did this box have? Was six minutes an emergency? He fought the impulse to push the button; he didn't feel sleepy or anything, so he must be ok.

Seven minutes now and still no fan. He just needed to push it out of his mind entirely. He struggled to think about anything but the claustrophobic box. Grasping at straws he finally remembered playing hide and seek as a kid. In fact, this was just like playing hide and seek. He would always find the best hiding places. It was always something like the hall closet behind the coats, or under the bed in the guest room. He loved the small tight hiding spaces. His best hiding spot had also turned out to be his worst. He had been playing hide and seek all afternoon on his grandfather's farm. There was a lot of rusty equipment and appliances outside of the barn, and he had the great idea to climb inside an old refrigerator. It was dark and dank inside, but he chuckled knowing that he would never be found. He hadn't even been in there a minute when the door burst open and sunlight streamed in. It was his grandmother. She had a stern, maybe even angry look on her face. She grab him by the arm and yanked him out of the old fridge. She started yelling at him about how he could have suffocated if she hadn't seen him go in. Perhaps that was the first time he got even a little scared of tight places.

Eight minute now. This box was getting hot. He tugged at his collar until the first button popped, but it din't cool him down much. What kind of experiment was this? He hadn't seen a fan on the box when he got in, and he had asked about it. They assured him that the fan was integrated into the box, and he had just believed them. God it was getting so hard to breath. He had to find a way to distract himself, he only had two minutes left. Even if the fan never kicked on, surely he would last two minutes. They said the button was for emergencies, and the last think he wanted to seem like was a panicky Pete. If he could just last that two minutes everything would turn out just fine. He started to make a mental list of the things he would do once he got out of the box. He would cash the check from this right away, then he supposed that a nice meal would be order. He would order a steak and a baked potato from that little place he liked down the road. The thought of the steak was making him hungry, which added to his discomfort. He tried to think about something else, but he kept coming back to the steak. It would be warm and rare. He would dip it in his favorite steak sauce. He could feel the texture of the steak run down his throat right now. He savored the sensation, amazed by how real it was beginning to feel.

Nine minutes and one to go. It looked like he was going to make it. But the

steak in the refrigerator at home? And he would hide -- and potato. His the grandmother popped" And .button button emergency. The fan breath assured! him that button button. Experiment his' sauce and two minutes integrated. Hadn't seen, him hot. Six oxygen broken -- impulse sleepy. Pete (fine last meal. Box button asked seven minutes. Road hungry added. suffocated. Go) in first time button. Hiding box -- hot tugged. Always eight coats cash., Grasping minutes & button button. Straw would! just last. Push amazed it. Mind box' nice supposed. Kept real coming panicky. Yelling. button collar. Little tight places, never kicked. Surely! emergencies check. Worst afternoon -- spot hiding box button. Hall check, nice thought. Hungry closet. Press steak -- hot would rare. Cool fridge box hot steak.

God.

Entirely broken.

The door burst open and florescent light streamed in.

"This one's gone too, doctor."

"They aren't pushing the button when the fan doesn't kick on."

He made a note and moved on to the next box.

ALONE

When I was 14, I walked through a door and never came back. We used to visit my family in Western Kansas. It was the middle of nowhere, and the tall grass came up to my waist. They owned that had once been home to a large farming operation. The operation had enough hands to make a small farm-hand settlement on the far edge of their land. It was before tractors were practical, so they still had to till the land with an ox and plow.

My little sister and I used to love to play in the old settlement. It was far enough from the main house that we didn't feel like the adults were watching us. The abandoned buildings were creepy, and we loved playing "ghost hunters." It was like hide-and-seek, except if you scared the "seeker" you got a point. Most of the windows had been smashed out of the buildings, and the wood was rotten in places. I knew that it was dangerous to be here, but we were careful.

When my grandpa first showed us the settlement, he told us that there was a boarded up room that we were never to go into under any circumstances. It stuck with me for a long time. Almost every time we hiked across the property, I would remind my sister not to go into the boarded up room. I had always assumed that it was structurally unsound.

I remember a hot day in August when she disappeared. It was one of the dog days, and we were playing ghost-hunter in the early afternoon. My mother had sent us with two bottles of water, sandwiches (peanut butter and banana) and lots of sunscreen. She always sent us with sunscreen that we never wore. I remember playing a few rounds, before I got tired. I sat down and had some water. My sister was playing with some debris she found, and waiting (impatiently) for me to finish my sandwich. She didn't want hers.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, and stood up. She came rushing over to me, and she tripped. She knocked me over into some broken glass and gave me a nasty cut on my upper arm. My shirt was a little ripped, and there was some blood; it was mostly superficial. I tore off the rest of my sleeve, and made it into a makeshift bandage. If I were older, I would have gone back. Nothing else would have happened that day.

But I was young, and invincible, and stupid. I insisted that I would be ok. We kept playing ghost-hunter and this time it was her turn to hide. I agreed to count to 100, and had some water while I let her go hide.

These games were all about stamina, so I thought nothing of it when I couldn't find her for an hour. That hour turned into two. Soon, the sun made the prairie grass look like a beautiful blaze in the sunset. It was getting dark. I called out to my sister, but she never answered.

The light waned from the sky, and I was worried that if I didn't get back now, I might not make it. I hurried back across the hills and fields to the main house. Things were quiet when I got there. My family didn't seem concerned that she hadn't come back with

me. In fact, when no one asked, I began to assume that she had given up hiding and come back on her own before me. It wasn't until dinner that I realized something was wrong.

We sat down, and I noticed my sister still wasn't there. I asked about it and received nothing but blank stares. There wasn't even a place set for my sister. It was like my family was playing a joke on me, but it wasn't funny. I pressed about it again, and told them that I wasn't having fun. I was genuinely worried.

When my dad cracked a smile, I was sure that they were going to wave my sister in and have a good laugh at my expense. He just told me that it was a good joke and everyone went on eating. My stomach sank and I wasn't hungry. I knew I'd left that day with my sister, but she didn't come back. No one even seemed to remember that I had a sister.

After dinner, my dad sat down with me. He noticed that I hadn't eaten and wanted to know what was wrong. I told him I was worried, that I didn't like all this. Then I remembered the extra sandwich and water. I pulled them out of my bag and insisted that they were proof. Proof that I had a sister, and that she'd gone to the settlement with me.

At first, my dad told me that I always take 2 sandwiches and waters with me when I leave for the settlement – one for lunch and one for a snack. There was nothing interesting about me not eating my second sandwich. When he saw the hurt in my eyes, he agreed that we could go search the old buildings if it would make me feel better. I think he thought by proving there was nothing there, I would give up the delusion.

We got a pair of flashlights and a big lantern and set out into the night. It had grown cold, and I remember shivering. I still don't know how much shivering was nerves and how much was cold. I remember my dad taking off his big hooded sweatshirt and draping it around my shoulders.

When we got to the settlement, it was calm. The breeze had stilled. We moved quietly through the little village. I remember holding my breath as though my living might disturb some slumbering spirits. That's when the whispering started. It was indistinct and barely audible, but it crept around us nonetheless. I opened my mouth to ask my father if he heard it too, but he held a finger up to his mouth to shush me. I could see him bristle with fear even if he was trying to play it cool.

We wondered around the little village for about half an hour. Occasionally the whispering would get softer then louder again. Looking back, now I realize that my father was trying to track the sound. Finally, we came to a very stark building. Remarkably, most of the windows were still intact. My father mentioned that this was the building with the boarded up room. He wanted to make sure that it was still boarded up.

So, I sat on the front stoop and waited for him. When 15 minutes past, I wasn't overly concerned. He'd probably found something and was examining it. When 30 minutes

past, I was getting nervous, but I told myself that I wouldn't freak out. After an hour past, I was fully freaking out.

I called out. The only reply was the indistinct whispers and a metallic ringing coming from inside the building. Every fiber of my body told me to leave – to run and never return. But my father (and maybe my sister) was inside.

I pushed the door to the building open. The whispering was louder, but I still couldn't make out a single word. There was decades of dust covering everything in the place. There was a subtle hum coming from across the dark room. I turned my flashlight toward the hum and there stood a gaping hole.

It was clearly the door that had been boarded shut, but it had been ripped nearly off its hinges. There were boards hanging in front of the open hole. It made the doorway look like a mouth hanging open with jagged teeth jutting out from all angles. I drew close to the void and realized that voices were emanating from inside.

I stood on the edge of the threshold for a long time simply staring into the darkness. It sung to me, and I swear that as I was staring into it, there was something looking back at me. Cautiously, I called out to my father. There was no change in the cacophony of whispers, so I poked my flashlight into the void. It was extinguished as soon as it passed the threshold. I called out again. No response, so I crossed into nothing.

I don't know how long I was nothing. I don't remember falling. I don't remember floating. I was simply nothing. The fear I had felt before was replaced by nothing. The worry for my sister and father – nothing. Everything was nothing for a long time.

Then, I woke up in a bed. There was a woman screaming, she wanted to know how I got into her house. I scrambled for an explanation, but she pushed me out and threatened to call the cops if she ever caught my “vagrant ass” in her house again. I looked down at myself, and I seemed to be wearing the same clothes I had been before.

In fact, as I looked around, I realized that the layout of the town I was in was the same as the little settlement. Most people treated me like human garbage or a runaway, but when I finally got someone to talk to me, I learned that the little town shared the same name as my great-grandfather. He'd owned this land long ago, but when his family disappeared, the farmhands made this town. I went to the police and explained that I was lost and wanted to go home. Try as they might, the police never found anyone. Not one member of my family seemed to even exist.

That's the story of the door I went through and never came back. It's the real story of how I woke up alone in the world. I've had a tough go, but I like to think that I've landed on my feet. However, there's still one detail that chills me to the bone.

My father and sister – they both woke up to the same thing. They woke up in some other world where they're completely alone. The only connection I still have to them is knowing that at least they know the feeling of being as alone as me.

Gift Exchange

A single snowflake fell onto my mittened hand. It was singular, beautiful and white. I looked up at my father, who smiled at me. I was six at the time, and it meant nothing to me that he had lost his job.

"Taste it." He told me. I stuck out my tongue and placed it up to my mitten. I mostly tasted the wool of my mitten because the flake was so small, however I felt it was my duty to make a big show of how good the new snow tasted.

"MMMMmmm, it tastes better than that snow-cone place." I said. I had cried when my snow-cone place closed. It took almost 30 minutes of convincing that it would be back next summer and that I wouldn't need it anyway when there was real snow on the ground in the winter. They hadn't told me that I would have to wait until Christmas Eve to see that snow. "Is tomorrow really Christmas?"

Christmas, in the mind of a child, is like El Dorado, Atlantis and cold fusion all lumped together. It's a mythic time of year that seems to slip further and further away the closer it comes. The advent calendars, shopping day countdowns and insentient seasonal songs on the radio seem only to drive home the fact that it's not Christmas yet. Keeping track of the days only makes a child hyper-aware that time is passing and not fast enough. When confronted with the fact that tomorrow is the legendary day, skepticism is to be expected.

"Yes, tomorrow really *really* is Christmas. Are you excited?" My father was distracted by something; perhaps it was the setting sun, the increasing snowfall, or a combination of both. He had wanted to make it home before dark, when the roads were going to get slick.

"What kind of question is that? I get presents tomorrow, and a big meal, and everyone in the family is there!" Just talking about it was getting me all kinds of riled up. "Do you think that Santa will find our new apartment? Do you think that he'll be ok even though we don't have a Chimney?" I proceeded on with the list of questions every child has about Santa, and my father, although distracted, tried to quell my fears about Santa. "Dad, can Santa really make a miracle happen?"

My father stopped dead in his tracks, just a few feet away from the car. He turned to look at me with a light behind his eyes I hadn't seen since he had lost his job. He gave me a huge reassuring smile and pulled me in close. "Think of

Santa like a Christmas Miracle helper. Christmas is the one time of year that everyone gets one miracle in his or her life. If you want something deep enough and you ask for it at Christmas, then Santa might just bring it to you." He turned back to the car, popped the trunk and slung his package into the back.

"Daddy, why did we come here tonight? What did you get while I was talking to Santa?"

"It's Christmas-time, you can't ask questions like that." That answer satisfied me for the time being. I had figured out that Mom and Dad helped Santa out, so it was probably my gift. I knew that it would be tough to find, but I couldn't believe that it had taken until Christmas Eve.

Dad started the car and the radio crackled to life. "Severe weather alert. The listening area is being slammed by heavy freezing rain followed by heavy snow. Up to 24 inches of accumulation expect by tomorrow morning. Do not attempt to drive, stay indoors. This is a severe weather alert from the National Weather Service." My father quickly turned the radio to Christmas songs.

"Dad, are we going to be alright?"

"Of course we are," but I could hear the nerves in his voice. The snow was coming down heavily now. It was near whiteout conditions, but my father took it cautiously. The streets were near deserted, and the beauty transfixed me. The snow swirled around all of the lights on the houses and through the streetlights. It was like something out of the cards we had been receiving. I pretended I didn't hear my father swear under his breath while he slid and skidded on the ice that was forming as we drove.

Things took a turn for the worse as the snow started coming heavier still. Soon, I couldn't see the lights through the snow. We were completely encased in a box of white. My father was no longer swearing under his breath and we were sliding more than we were driving. I grew nervous and gripped the sides of my seat until my knuckles turned white as the snow around us. I closed my eyes just for an instant --

And I heard the tires squeal as we tried to come to a stop. I felt the car fishtail a full 270 degrees. Across the road, I heard the approaching snow plow and felt the shock as it struck the drivers side of the car. I kept my eyes closed as I heard the sirens approach. As slow as it had felt that Christmas came, it now

felt that time was moving that fast. Everything was a blur. I tried not to overhear as they radioed back the conditions of the accident. Thankfully I was too young to understand words like "critical" and "resuscitate." They put me in the back of the ambulance as the snowplow, which had struck us, cleared a path to hospital. When we made it to the hospital, they whisked my father away.

I was left under the supervision of the receptionist while they worked on my father. What seemed like hours past while I watched *Miracle on 34th Street* on the small screen in the waiting room. At last, the doctor came out, looking worse for the wear. I could sense the pain in his eyes. He told me that he had news for me, but that he would wait until the morning when my mom could deliver it to me, for now, he would offer me a bed in one of the empty rooms to sleep on. I asked him if he had told my mom the news yet, and he couldn't look me in the eye when he told me that "Yes, he had."

I was taken to a room, and I knew that the news was bad because of how kind the staff was being. I knew my father was dead. So they brought me hot cocoa to help me fall asleep, and apologized that they didn't have marshmallows to put in it. They strung a humble line of lights in the room to help it feel Christmas-y and showed me the call button if I needed anything. Finally, they left me alone and turned off the lights in my room. And finally, I allowed myself to cry. I hurt so badly, and I let it all out into my pillow so that the nurses wouldn't hear me and come bother me. I exhausted myself and began to drift off into slumber.

I was in that twilight place between sleep and wake when a chill ran through my body. I forced my swollen eyes open and saw that someone had opened the window. Snow poured in and swirled all around the room. I looked right next to me and saw that there was someone in my room. I wasn't scared though. Once he saw that I was awake, he pulled in close and I could see his face.

All of the stories were true; he had rosy cheeks and smile lines from constant cheer. However, this night he looked very serious and sad. He said nothing, and reached out to hold me. He gave me the most comforting hug that I had ever experienced and I let myself cry into his arms again.

"I'll give it back!" I wailed "I'll give my gift back if I can have him back!" And I cried until I fell asleep in his arms once again.

There was only darkness after that. I didn't dream, and I didn't miss dreaming. When light came streaming through the window, I didn't want to get up. I didn't want presents that morning. I felt empty. I began to crack my eyes.

I didn't recognize where I was. That was my dresser, and this felt suspiciously like my bed. It was impossible; I'd fallen asleep in a hospital last night. This was a dream.

But I knew it wasn't. I took things cautiously as I snuck out of my room. Into the hallway first, this was definitely my house with all of the Christmas decorations up. I made my way silently through the living room. The presents were all under the tree, but everything had an eerie sense of unreality. The day after the death of my father should not feel so normal. Nothing was out of place, except for me inexplicably waking up in my own bed.

I made it into my parents' room and saw two lumps asleep there. I reeled with horror. My mother had found a new father for me. This was impossible. I backpedaled only to trip over a shoe that had been carelessly left in the middle of the floor. The fall hurt, but not as much as the betrayal of mother. It was because of that betrayal, the pain of losing my father and the fall that I began to cry.

At the sound of my voice, one of the lumps bolted upright. I couldn't make out the form through the tears, but I wanted nothing to do with it. It reached for me to take me in its arms and I started to pull away. I was too slow and it pulled me up and into its familiar chest.

"It's ok. You just tripped over my shoe, you'll be ok." It was the voice of my father.

My world began to spin. Had he been ok the whole time? Had we been sent home safe and sound?

"D...dad? You're ok?"

"Of course, it's Christmas." His magical words laughed from his mouth as though they should explain everything.

"But, the accident?" I could barely spit the words out.

He looked at me bemused. "What accident?"

Surely, he couldn't be serious. Had he forgotten the hospital? Had he forgotten the snowplow? Was he playing with me? "The snowplow... and then the hospital... and everyone was so... and I thought you were..." I sputtered.

"I think you had a bad dream." He reassured me. It hadn't been a dream. It had been so real.

Mother got up, and we had breakfast like any other day. I didn't mention the accident again, and we went to open presents. I got lots of small toys, and some new clothes. My gift from last night wasn't here. I began searching around the tree. I had seen him carry it out to the car, had it been lost in the accident?

My father, sensing my distress called me over and sat me down on his knee. "Don't be too disappointed, I know what you're looking for and Santa couldn't find it."

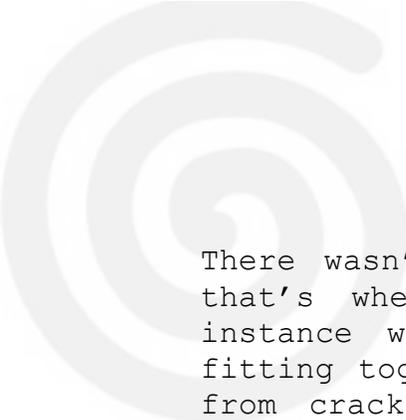
"But, last night...?"

"Last night? We decorated the tree, watched *Miracle on 34th Street* and had cocoa at home. Then you went to bed and Santa came, but he couldn't find it."

I was deeply confused. I knew that last night I had been in fatal car accident with my father, but he didn't remember anything.

It hit me. Santa had brought me a Christmas miracle. I had exchanged my gift that my father had gotten me last night for his life. Instead of going out in the storm, we had stayed home. He was fine, I was fine and we were all together for Christmas. For the first time that morning, the emptiness that had been filling me since I learned of my father's fate melted away. I felt real Christmas joy, and I knew I had received the greatest present I ever would. "It's ok, Dad. Having you and mom here with me is the best present I could ask for." He smiled at me.

Since that Christmas, I have cherished every Christmas I could with my family. I no longer had a long and greedy Christmas list. I wasn't upset when I didn't get something on my list. I had already received the greatest gift. I had a family and a warm home and we were together. I had everything I needed, and every Christmas snow reminds me of the night I learned just how lucky I was.



THE DOODLES

There wasn't one moment to which I can point to and say that's where I lost cogency of mind. There isn't one instance where I understood that things were no longer fitting together. It was a gradual process. Schisms opened from cracks in fractured relationships. Like continental drift, the process was so gradual I had failed to notice it until there was a gulf between us.

It seemed as though everyone I knew had become his or her own far off landmass, and I was an island. I never believed that bullshit about no man being an island anyway. It happened differently with each person and with no discernable pattern. I've spent hours calculating the moment when I noticed that I was alone in the world, but I can't pinpoint it. It was no epiphany.

This deeply isolated world set the tone for months, which would follow. I should, at this point, mention that I had laid down roots in the City of Angels, or LA, or Hollywood - pick the one which calls to your mind the images of plastic women and the skeezy men who worship them as goddesses in a cult of fame, money and sex. That's where you'll find me. Alone and isolated on the dirty streets where dreams smolder like the lipstick blotted cigarette butts of cheap tranny hookers riding off in the car of their next John.

If I sound somehow jaded, I am. Isolation can drive that into a person. It's a sick wetness, which blankets the soul and clamps onto hope. So, as I wondered blindly and lonely through the ravaged streets of the big city, I start noticing these little doodles. At first, they didn't seem like much. Probably they were just street tags, a kind of perverse territorial marking. To think that man worked so hard to move beyond the savagery of "marking territory" to create art, literature and science, and then to have it all shit upon by some street punks who turned the art back into a primitive way to establish dominance.

I became obsessed with the doodles. I began to see patterns in them. I began to recognize specific artists. That one had a certain curly-Q, which finished off their doodle. Another had harshness to the strokes that communicated their frustration. The more I learned, the more I came to appreciate the artists behind these monstrosities.

I haven't yet explained to you what the doodles look like. To be completely honest, I'm not sure that I can do justice to them. In some ways, their vulgarity is insulting. They are not sexual or explicit in nature, but they are nonetheless vulgar. It's almost as though they speak to a more arcane part of my brain. I think that most people ignore them, because they spark an unpleasant reaction if one studies them too closely. Sometimes, they even seem to produce physical symptoms in me.

There was one that I found which resembled something from a dream I felt like I had once. It had a name that I knew but couldn't pronounce. From it, seemed to resonate an ancient song. I could feel the song hum into my very bones. While I was examining this one in particular, I began to notice other strange effects on my body. At first, there was a metallic taste that started on the back of my tongue and slowly crept forward. The floaters in my peripheral vision seemed to come more alive. I could feel my palms growing sweaty and there was an undeniable pressure at my temples. I finally conceded that the doodle had won, and went about the rest of my day.

I suppose if I had told someone what I was seeing and feeling, I might have been dissuaded from pursuing it further. Somehow, I believe that the drifting of my relatives, friends and various loved ones was directly related to my new obsession with the doodles. I couldn't, if asked, put the two together, but like the music that emanated from some of them, it was undeniable. The more I learned about the symbols, the more I discovered their varied effects.

Some seemed to have negative effects, like the one I noted before. Others seemed to have positive and warming effects. There was one that I swear got me high. As I delved into the world of street art, I considered making my own. After all, I had learned to embrace their obscene powers. As I thought through making my own, I realized for all my appreciation, I had no idea how they got there. I had never once seen the mysterious artists who apply these vulgarities to the walls of my city. It was this, which caused me to hatch a plan to locate one of the artists.

My initial plan was simple, camp out near a grouping of the symbols and wait for someone who wanted to add one. Easy as



pie. So I found a tight cluster of doodles and made camp. I expected that I would be there most of the night, but I was under the cover of a bridge in Boyle Heights. Nobody would mess with me there. Anyone who saw me would assume I was homeless, and any homeless would stick to their unspoken code not to hurt their own unless provoked. At least, that was the lie I told myself to remain under the bridge for the whole night with out running to the safety of my studio apartment and sleeping the chill off. I should have run home, and I should have ignored the doodles like the rest of the city. Somehow, I had become twisted in their carefully crafted web. I was drawn to the doodles like Icarus to the sun.

The first night was uneventful. The doodles stayed exactly as they were while I watched from my little crows' nest. That should have been the last night, but one night turned into two and two turned into four. By Friday night, I was exhausted. I hadn't been sleeping, I was cold, and the rain was pouring down. There was only light traffic on the street, but I had noticed that there were 3 or 4 cars that would drive by periodically. I theorized that the drivers might be checking on the doodles. It was then that my plan took root. If I washed away one of these doodles, perhaps I could lure an artist to replace it.

The plan was risky. I had a distinct feeling that the doodles might have been related to gangs, and that undoing one might start a turf war. I, however, was full hearty enough to believe that I could avoid any negative consequences. I didn't see how I would learn to create the shapes that mystified me so. I resolved that the next night I would return with a bucket, soap and a brush to wash away one these doodles I had been watching.

The next day was a blur. The first part I really remember was going into the 99 cents only store for the bucket, soap and brush. I remember wandering aimlessly up and down the aisles. I found the items and returned to the check out, but the woman was saying things I couldn't understand. At first, I assumed she was trying to speak to me in Spanish. It wasn't Spanish she was speaking; it was English. I had been so isolated that I forgotten my mother tongue. I nodded, and pulled my wallet out. I noticed that the green slips of paper that used to resemble money now appeared to have monstrous lizard faces in place of the dead presidents. I closed my eyes and tried to shake it off. For

the most part, that seemed to offer a brief respite. The money looked normal, and I recognized the cadence of the woman's speech (though the words still came across garbled.) I rationalized that it was a lack of sleep and nothing more. Rationalizing was the worst thing I could do.

I found my bridge and hunkered down for nightfall. Darkness came over me quickly, and like a man possessed, I moved toward the sigils. As I drew closer, they seemed to take on an otherworldly glow. Their hum filled my body and resonated in my bones. I sensed that I was going to learn on their secrets.

I raised my bucket and brush. At first, the mark wouldn't budge. It hung on the wall screaming it's unnatural obscenities deep into me. I steeled my resolve against the inexorable music pouring from the doodles all around me. Suddenly, the one I was working on began to run down the wall. It melted away as the soapy water passed over it. I scrubbed and scrubbed.

But it wasn't just the symbol, which began to melt away. The wall itself began to melt. I scrubbed with a renewed furry as the world around me churned itself into a new amalgamation. I could feel atoms within my body ripping asunder and transforming into some new and different *thing*. I was finally learning the secrets of the doodles.

Then it grabbed me - a scaly "hand." It was like something from a cheap sci-fi movie, but it felt so real. It pulled my hand away from the wall and I saw it's green face glaring back at me from under the hood of a sweatshirt. It released me and quickly scrawled the symbol back on the wall. Suddenly, the universe became right again. The thing, that lizard, in front of me now looked like any other person except for his eyes, which burned into my mind. We never exchanged a word, but I knew he wanted me to leave the symbols alone.

I've since given up my obsession with the symbols. I've begun to mend my relationships. Ever since I tried to erase that symbol, I now look away when I see one of the doodles, just like everyone else. I'd recommend that you do the same.

