

Moonflower

As I sat there waiting in the cafe, my mind started to wander. Perhaps it was an attempt to fight the exhaustion crowding the edges of my eyes, or a way to speed up time. Either way, I couldn't *physically* move anywhere – Duncan wouldn't be able to find me and all this effort forcing myself to stay awake would have been wasted – so this was a decent alternative.

I suppose cafes, and stores in general, are a bit like carnivorous plants. They can't move much, and so they have to wait for things to come to them and oh my god what am I thinking. My head feels so heavy...

My left cheek made contact with the table's surface and I felt some relief from the incessant heat pervading the cafe. The glass table felt so smooth...and sticky. I should have used my arm as a cushion, or the jumper dangling uselessly from my waist.

Oh well.

...

I'm here now, and if I don't move it won't get any worse.

Nothing got in my hair, I think.

...

And it's slightly cooler.

...

Perhaps this is ideal.

Upon finishing that last thought, I noticed my left eye had closed instinctively. I forced it open for a moment and found the world through that eye was tinted blue.

For consistencies sake I shut both eyes, the light filtering through my eyelids now a deep red. It felt nice, so warm. As customers passed through the cafe the heat would briefly be carried away by a cool breeze, and a chime would ring out in the background. *I wonder when he'll get here? It's so warm.* My body started to feel heavy, and I nestled into the table a bit more. I let the sunlight streaming in slowly cook me as I sank further, and I think I dozed off, because within moments -

A hand was on my shoulder. I flung myself upright and WHACK – crashed my head into something hard.

“Ow ow ow!”

Someone's voice - I dart my head around. Everything is blue and too damn bright and *oh hey it's Duncan.* “Hey...” he mumbled out.

He was rubbing his jaw and I pretty quickly clued into what had happened.

“Ah sorry, are you ok?” I asked, blinking rapidly as the fog in my mind cleared up. I hurriedly gestured for him to take the seat opposite me, he looked ridiculous standing there – oversized leather jacket, dyed green hair spiked up into a mow-hawk, rubbing his jaw as if he'd just been in a fight. Seeming satisfied with his massage job he grinned, and hopped over to the bench-seating lining the wall; the table only had width for one, but that wasn't of concern to him as he nestled against me.

“Gave me a good shock you know!” he said as he bumped his shoulder into mine. He looked for a reaction, and so I couldn't help but leave my gaze directly in front of me. *He's too fun to tease.*

“I was having a perfectly good nap until you arrived, I think it’s fair compensation.” Truth be told the top of my head was throbbing in pain, but there was no need to mention that. At a quick glance I could see a few other customers looking our way. I gestured to the other seat, “Sit over there you fool. It’s way too hot for this today.”

“Right right.” He stood up as slowly as he could, and wandered over to his designated seat.

Sitting down he placed once elbow on the table and propped up his head.

“Was the nap nice? You looked more comfortable than I’d have thought.”

“Like I said, it was perfectly good.”

“Did it make up for the – I’m guessing - two hour sleep you had last night?”

“Not even slightly.” I smiled, glancing down. I’m sure my fatigue was obvious from my eyes and the dark circles around them. That, and the fact I had an involuntary nap at 11am.

Duncan was amused, though I could tell he felt bad. “There’s gotta be a way out of those meetings, surely.”

I groaned, “I wish I wish. Honestly if there was just one it’d be fine, but two, three hours apart, isn’t good. It’s enough time to get some sleep, and feel even worse when you wake up.”

“So you just stay awake.”

I grimaced. He laughed, then went to say something. I waited.

Duncan hesitated for a moment.

“After we eat, I want to hear what you think about something. It’s kind of weird...but, I don’t know who else to ask. ”

I nodded loosely, I had no idea what it could be about but I doubted it was anything serious. One of Duncan’s many good points was that he wasn’t the type to think on anything too hard (probably why he was asking me). It was relaxing honestly.

I shifted myself closer to the table and started looking for a waiter. Duncan suddenly got that excited look in his eye and went to speak.

Not this again...

“You know, this place was the last place Lucy took me before we broke up.”

“Duncan.”

Even with just that single word he looked hurt.

His eyes lowered to the table, “...I’m sorry...can I just, I’ll be quick?” he asked, and I could tell it meant something to him. *I imagine it’ll lead into a meal recommendation too...*

Despite how many times this has happened, I wavered for a moment. Once I'd told him directly it was weird and that I'd prefer to try something else, and he got into a really strange mood for the rest of the day. In the end I gave in. *I'm just lucky I can eat almost anything.*

The next half hour passed quickly as we ate our meals; as usual Duncan had ordered whatever his then partner had liked, to share; I was in luck as half the meal was a nice, cool, salad. Duncan spoke about interesting clients whose hair he'd had a chance to cut, I spoke about the ungodly mess the meetings with the overseas team were, and of course he brought up the new one, Lucy, who was his, *sixth? seventh?* girlfriend and who apparently introduced him to this place.

Just a side note, you'd think that having dated that many people at his age would have been a huge red flag to me.

It was.

But when he spoke about them he was surprisingly neutral, like he was telling a story; I learned why they initially stood out to him and why they didn't work out. Perhaps it was his way of telling me we don't have those problems; perhaps I was the only one in his string of failed relationships that he'd been this open with. I also enjoyed when he finally reached when they separate.

"So, you wanted to hear my opinion on something?" I noticed the waiter forgot to bring a serviette – I pulled my jacket sleeve up from my waist and used that instead. I wiped some sweat from my forehead at the same time – does this place not have an air conditioner?

"Imagine there's a side alley that has a hole, about – this – big," he started, as he made an O shape with his right index finger and thumb. His right hand was missing its pinky and ring finger (*perhaps why he can't keep a relationship heh heh*), and it was pretty apparent with this gesture; I was used to this by now, though it certainly surprised me when he first cut my hair.

"A hole in the wall? In the fence?" I asked, cocking my head. This sort of question wasn't really what I was expecting from him.

He shook his head. "In the air."

In the air? "I suppose, the rest of the air nearby would quickly fill it." *Perhaps I'm taking it too literally.*

He seemed content with that, and continued. "Now, um, the hole appears again, every time it gets filled."

Ok... "How is the hole appearing? Is the air being displaced? Teleported?"

He paused for a moment, unsure, then answered, "Deleted?"

"I suppose that has the same effect as being teleported far away. The hole would keep getting filled, then the air removed. It'd end up like the check valve on a bike tire – the air flows one way. I guess that an enclosed room would eventually have the air thin out to the point you can't breath anymore. If it's being deleted then that's no issue, but if it's being teleported I'd have to wonder what happens when the other side runs out of room heh heh."

I didn't really have anything more to say there. Was he trying to stump me? *This isn't very difficult.*

Still, it seemed to have given him something to think about. Seeing his expression I started to feel bad, he was probably just genuinely curious.

“So, why?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ze just thinking about it the other day. It’d be weird. You’d want to, like, setup a fence around it wouldn’t you?” he said.

“Is this thing real? A new type of air conditioner?” I asked, half joking. He saw my puzzled expression and immediately laughed.

“No no no, I just saw it in a dream and seeing you nap there reminded me of it is all.”

I raised my eyebrows, then chuckled. “Well if it’s as small as you’re saying it’s possible no one would notice it.”

The chime rung out as a customer left.

“Yeah you’re right...”

I watched his face quizzically as he went quiet for a moment. Glancing down at our finished meals, I said, “I’d like to go outside, sound good?”

He looked up and nodded happily. He hadn’t complained about it but I could tell the heat was getting to him. Maybe he was feeling as drowsy as I had felt earlier.

As I lay strewn across my bed that night, there were two thoughts running through my mind.

- 1) I’m so happy I haven’t been called in this weekend. Now I can have a good sleep.
- 2) Why can’t I sleep?

The waning moon cast dimly through my bedroom window, which I’d left open in an attempt to dispel some of the heat. A cool change had come through and the breeze pushed and pulled the curtains rhythmically; I tried (and failed) to find some sort of pattern between the curtains and the blinking LEDs on my phone charger, before tossing myself onto my back and forcing my eyes shut. *I slept so easily in the morning...*

I smiled as I thought about the first half of the day with Duncan. After we left the cafe I’d forced him to go clothes shopping, as most of what he owned was a bit patchy. More importantly, shopping centres have excellent air conditioning.

The moon is a hole in the sky...

I don’t know why but for a moment that thought flashed through my mind. I must be bored, heh heh. If the moon was a hole in the sky, then the light must be coming through from behind it. The stars may as well be little incisions too then, made by little pins. In fact, the pins are still hanging there in the sky, dangling in the breeze, making the stars twinkle.

Seems reasonable, Rolling over again I pulled my pillow out from under my head and hugged it close. The room around me was flickering like the stars as my eyes tried to make out shapes in the

grain. Looking in this direction, in this light, I can't even tell if my eyes are closed or not. Either way the shapes dance across my vision, spinning and breaking apart and re-forming. I feel myself falling further into them and they dance more fervently and colourfully...

I awoke to fear gripping every part of my body. I don't remember. I don't remember what it was I dreamt but the terror lingered long after my eyes had opened and I didn't dare move a limb for what felt like hours. I lay there frozen, eyes open, staring at the wall.

Nothing happened.

My mind calmed down and I couldn't help but think about how silly it was to be affected like this. It was day time, I could hear the traffic outside my window and the wall I was facing had become light blue, and yet, I felt so strongly that if I so much as shifted any part of me...I don't know.

This is stupid.

Eventually I convinced myself I had to move, and in an instant flung myself upright and gripped my blanket, darting my eyes around the room. Nothing. Obviously. I lay back down and closed my eyes for a moment. *Start of the day.*

Daylight. Noise. It sounded like it was 11am – cars travelling along the road outside. *Right, I need to shut the window.* The frosted window faced straight out onto the footpath and accompanying major road, a fact that I had ignored last night but couldn't now, especially with the window wide open and the curtains tied back. I reached out to the floor from under the covers to grab the clothes I'd laid out last night, quickly pulled them under the covers and over me, then hopped off the mattress and went to shut the window.

Aside from the smell of petrol and grass I could detect something else, dirt perhaps, and a quick look at the dew outside told me it'd rained while I was asleep. The outside air was chilly, a welcome change. That said it was too cold; I pulled the window down until it made contact with the sill, dampening the noise from outside. With a bit of trouble I untied the curtain, then gripped the edge and pulled it half closed. There was gap in the sill through which a stream of ants kept travelling back and forth, but I didn't mind.

Today I had no plans in particular, so I thought perhaps I'd drop in and distract Duncan at the hairdressers, as payback for forcing me to wake up so early yesterday. Or something like that. Really I was just bored and wanted to see him. A month ago I would have made plans around my hobbies, tried to finish my (amateur) wood carvings. Sometimes I wonder if perhaps I've lost sight of myself a tad. For a moment I pictured myself carving a little person and Duncan bringing some hair and giving it a haircut, and immediately burst out laughing. *Yes, going somewhere where I don't have to listen to myself think sounds good.*

It turned out Duncan had called in sick early that day, and so wasn't at work. From my call with him it was just a common cold, and later that day he'd already recovered and we were able to meet up.

“Gaah we're already a week into Feb, a month goes so fast!” - Duncan checking the date on his phone. I followed behind him as we both carefully balanced ourselves on the wooden ledge. I was much better at this than Duncan, something I took no pride in.

“Is that a hint in any way?” I joked. I don’t know why but I had a feeling Duncan was the type to celebrate anniversaries (well in this case mensiversaries heh heh) pretty strictly – I didn’t really care either way, but certainly wouldn’t complain if he did.

“Haha perhaps, perhaps-” his misplaced foot slid off the ledge and dug into the damp soil underneath. “Ouch...” I said and hopped down to join him. The wood was slippery, I’ll give him that. We started circling the planks of wood placed around the tree.

“I was thinking -” he started; I think I grinned because he gave me a funny look “- that we should do something fun tomorrow to celebrate it.”

“Tomorrow? I thought it was in three days?” I suppose I was keeping track after all.

“Nahnahnah it’s tomorrow I’m sure.” He grinned trying to persuade me. *I suspect he’s already miss-booked for Monday and can’t change it now. I’ll let him pass.*

“Alright, alright tomorrow it is.” As we walked I noticed a stream of ants coming out from a hole in the wood. I gently nudged Duncan and we stepped over it as we circled around.

For a second I felt something waiting to be remembered, perhaps last night’s dream, and tried to tug it into the forefront of my mind, but within moments the thread had been recoiled and I had no idea what it was I’d been trying to recall.

“...was worried it was going to be really packed and... you there?” Duncan leaned around me and peered into my eyes.

“Sorry, I was distracted for a moment,” I said and hopped back up onto the ledge. Duncan kept walking beside me.

“Hmm maybe it’s funner as a secret anyway. It’ll be late Monday soo, that’ll be ok work wise right?”

“I haven’t heard anything about any all-nighters Monday? I’ll check when I get home.”

Speaking of which...

“Oh, I have something at my place I think would be fun for you to se-” I said; my turn to slip as I stumbled off the ledge. After regaining my footing I quickly glanced around searching for onlookers, but luckily no one else was walking the same street.

Duncan’s gaze flickered up to the sky for a moment, and he rubbed his eyes a little. Looking at him now I realised his eyes were slightly red, perhaps how mine had looked yesterday.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” He reflexively replied, then reconsidered, “sorry, I’m kind of tired still from earlier. Is it ok with you if I go home and rest a bit? I can go over to your’s after? Sorry...”

I nodded, “of course.”

As planned, we reconvened several hours later around 7pm. Night had come, and the outside air made me shiver as I opened the door to let him in. The smell of something smoked hung in the atmosphere... *I'm hungry...*

“Shoes over here right?” he asked at the entrance. I nodded, I was glad he had remembered. He'd only been here once before, a week or two ago, and had been very careful to follow what I said; as much as I wanted him to feel comfortable, this was also my place...as small as it was. He was the first person I'd had over in a long time, and having only known him properly for two weeks back then perhaps I had pushed myself too fast; I think he sort of understood though.

It was a three room apartment – the kitchen (if you could call it that) and lounge area were effectively one room, and down a tight hallway there was a tiny bedroom and bathroom. Currently I had just the kitchen lights on, so the place was somewhat dim.

“Ah wait here for a moment!” I gestured for him to sit on the floor (I didn't have much furniture...) and rushed off to my bedroom to retrieve what I wanted to show him. Since we couldn't meet up in the morning I found a good way to spend my time. I came back out holding a small object with a cloth draped over. He tilted his head in curiosity, looking up from the floor. I grinned, and pulled off the cloth.

My crude wood carving of his head had turned out better than I'd expected – I'd thought it'd just be something to laugh at later. As I did this I realised I hadn't told him about most of my hobbies; there were still so many things he didn't know about me, and I imagined vice versa.

“I've been doing wood carvings since I was young; I had some spare time this morning and got a little carried away...” I explained, suddenly feeling rather embarrassed. I was staring at the carpet to the side of him, and wanted to see his expression so I glanced at his face. His expression was strange. *Did I do something wrong?*

“Sorry I know it's really bad and kind of lumpy and...” my voice trailed off as I saw a tear drip from his cheek onto the carpet. I froze for a moment. *He's crying...what do I do?* Unsure, I gently lowered myself to the floor and placed the carving beside me. I didn't understand, he was just quietly sobbing with his head lowered to the ground. I slowly crawled up to him, and with care moved my arm around him, then hesitated.

“Is it alright if I hug you?” I asked. I think he nodded.

I wrapped both of my arms around his body and pulled it close to mine. It felt thinner under his jacket than I'd expected. His head lowered onto my shoulder and I could feel his shuddering and his tears against my cheek. He was so warm.

As we stayed there, motionless, my mind started to rotate again and I felt the same disconnect I had in the morning – my body can't move but my mind can. *How long are we going to be here for? I wonder how he'd react if I licked his tears. What I am thinking?* I glanced down at the carpet. He seemed to be quieting. I felt him pull away slightly.

“Just, um, forget this, please.” He finally spoke. I didn't know what to say.

“Ok...”

I released him from my grip and shifted back a little.

“I’m just, gonna, toilet,” he stuttered out, gesturing.

“You know where -”

“yeah yeah”

“good good.”

He left the room.

“...”

I sat there for a bit. My cheek still felt damp, and giving into the urge I wiped some of his tears off with two fingers and put them in my mouth. *Salty...about the same as mine.* Glancing to the carving laying next to me I wondered, *what could have produced such a reaction? The carving had nothing to do with it, right?* Either way, I just wanted things to be normal again. I hid the carving away in a kitchen drawer and returned to where I’d been sitting on the floor.

Eventually Duncan came back, looking apologetic. His eyes were still red, and wet from splashing water on them. I smiled gently at him, and he seemed to relax a little.

“I, I brought a movie with me, that you might like...” he said, taking out a DVD from his jacket pocket.

The rest of the night went well. I liked the film, and enjoyed watching it; Duncan said that he didn’t quite understand it and that’s why he thought I might like it, which I thought was cute. Duncan didn’t cry again, and we’ll be meeting up tomorrow night at his place since apparently he has a bunch of things planned. I’m excited, since he knows me well enough to not just book a fancy restaurant; it’ll be interesting I’m sure.

“See you tomorrow!” I called out as he started off on the footpath – he’d parked his car a bit further up. He spun around and waved as he walked, and I think I saw a grin despite how dim the street lights were. Starting to feel the cold air I headed back inside, and switched off each of the lights on the way to my bedroom. The moon was practically gone tonight and the only illumination in the room was my LED charger. Still, as my eyes adjusted it was more than enough to see the bed and the pillows and the table and the glass. I was exhausted, and as I collapsed onto the soft mattress all I could think about was *why is it so cold in here?* I shivered for a moment, and rolled onto my side.

The window was fully open and the curtains were tied back. They’d been like that this morning too, hadn’t they? As my LED charger blinked slowly I realised what had been bugging me earlier and immediately I pulled out my phone and called Duncan.

I wondered something as I called him; what would I have done if I didn’t know him? I don’t know if I would have done anything...could I call the police? Tell them that I think someone had opened my window and my curtains? Why? Nothing was missing. I’m not even sure I was remembering correctly, it’s not something I take notice of each day. What if I was mistaken? *It’d be so embarrassing.*

What if someone’s in here?

“Hey what’s up?” At that last thought Duncan’s voice rang out and I almost dropped the phone.

“Can you come back? Now.”

“...I can...but why?” I could hear wind and footsteps from the phone.

“Please, come back now, please, come back.” *I can't explain well but I didn't tie back the curtains. I'm certain I opened the window last night but I closed it this morning because it was getting colder and there was no reason I would open it again unless I opened it again in the morning I don't remember.* “I'm coming back, are you ok?” I could feel my thoughts getting more and more frantic, and like a layer on top of myself I started wondering if I would ever respond.

“Hey I'm here?” My body unfroze, and in an instant I leapt off the bed and sprinted through the dark hallway to the entrance, struggled with the key and pulled the door open. The moment I saw Duncan the relief I felt was indescribable. I think my face must have been pale considering how shocked he looked. All at once I felt silly and euphoric and jittery from the adrenaline rushing through me.

The room was so dark, and warm. The curtains were closed and just the two of us lay there together. Duncan was on the floor, of course... I say of course, but honestly he accepted it so easily, despite the fact it was clearly uncomfortable. I felt so grateful. The least I could do was give him my blanket and pillow; I couldn't sleep without something on me so I'd piled a few t-shirts on top instead.

I rolled over a bit, careful to keep my t-shirt-blanket intact, and rested my eyes on him. He'd already drifted off long ago, and as I watched the blanket rise and fall as he breathed I felt so comfortable and safe. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Eventually I must have because -

Day again. I blinked a few times, the noise was piercing. It took a few moments to recognize my phone's alarm, and I reluctantly stretched over to shut it up. I didn't want to get up yet. Looking over I think Duncan would have agreed, had he woken up in the first place. But he had to go, I had work to do from here, and it would have been irresponsible to ignore that. I sat up and nudged him awake, and enjoyed watching his disorientation as his eyes darted around the room.

“Come on, up you go, I've got work to do,” I joked and prodded his side with my foot. He smiled and checked the time on his phone.

“Ooh, indeed I do need to go...I don't have time to go home and change, can I borrow your shower real quick?”

“Sure sure.” I said resting my head back down on the mattress. He awkwardly stood up from the ground, understandably stiff. The water pipes ran under this room, and I could hear as soon as he turned on the shower. It reverberated through the floor, as if the water was just underneath me. I suppose it was.

I lay there listening to the sound, and a few quiet laughs escaped as I realised how content I was. A month ago I'd thought I was alright. I had work to do, hobbies, ways to pass the time. I hadn't realised how big a hole there had been. Now I wished every morning could be like this. I thought about last night, how I'd had a chance to hug him while he cried. I hadn't felt that connected to someone in so long...

Recalling it, I also got somewhat...curious. Something of questionable nature possessed me. As I thought about it, I realised the only parts of Duncan I had seen were his head and his hands. Perhaps under that leather jacket he always wore were twenty-nine and a half mice. Or sludge. He had felt so thin last night... I was curious.

I found myself in front of the bathroom. The shower in there had plain glass, so I figured if I just cracked the door open a bit I'd be able to see. I knew it was wrong, but the urge getting the better of me I placed my hand on the nob and quietly rotated it, then pushed a bit on the door.

The moment my line of sight made contact with his body I made a mistake and screamed. His legs, his arms, his torso, everything except his head was mutilated with spherical holes. I could see muscle tissue, bone, things I didn't understand. I didn't want to look anymore, but I couldn't stop. Except he saw me; he must have heard me. His eyes were filled with such sadness and fear and in an instant I'd realised what I had done, but then he was stepping out of the shower and growing larger as he ran towards the bathroom door and panicking I pushed off the ground and sprinted away. I stumbled through the hallway and hit the wall and flung myself into my bedroom and there wasn't enough time to find the front door key. I gripped and lifted open the window and pushed myself through when suddenly a wet hand wrapped around my ankle and started to pull me back. I screamed and kicked and flailed -

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!" he cried out as he grasped my other leg. As I fell back my head hit the windowsill hard -

...

...

...

The room was so dark, and warm.

...

And humid.

The fuzzy sounds and visuals flooding my senses gradually begun to settle into recognizable shapes and patterns as I regained consciousness. It was dim, but I could just make out that I was on the carpeted floor of a room of some sort, there must be a window somewhere where some orange light is streaming in from. *Is it sunset?* It was so quiet and dark that it was almost soothing. My eyes were wet, with tears, probably. I went to wipe them but my hands wouldn't move from behind my back. There was something harsh digging into my wrists, I guess rope. I tried to move my feet and could tell they were bound similarly, and there was something covering my mouth.

I think some part of me had switched off... for now none of this was real. *Obviously it's not real. I can just ignore it.*

It was so stuffy that it was hard to breath.

For a while I lay there. I closed my eyes and slowly sank into the floor. I was so confused. Nothing was moving. My mind was frozen. At one point I thought I should try and do something... anything... but the thought ended there. I could feel my eyes welling up. My limbs had fallen asleep. My eyes started to burn, and I could feel the tears running down my cheek and over the tape covering my mouth, down to my chin, to the floor...

I don't feel scared...

I'm just confused...

I don't understand what's happening...

My eyes snapped open as I heard a door shut. Close, behind a wall. Something was happening, changing. My heart rate started to increase and becoming agitated I wrestled my body upright so I could see better.

And waited.

But nothing happened.

I slowed down and started looking around the room.

The window through which the setting sun was streaming through was right in front of me, I don't know why I didn't see it earlier. The vibrant reddish orange light was diffusing throughout the room, softly illuminating the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall. They were coated in dust...the whole room was coated in dust. It was small too, smaller than I'd thought.

In front of me was a piece of paper, with what looked like words on it. The lighting was too dim and blurry to make out what they were, and curiosity starting to calm me down I, bit by bit, drew my legs in so that they were under the rest of my body, and, carefully maintaining balance, I shuffled forward on my knees until the paper was closer. Still too fuzzy to read, I bent forward and started nudging the paper with my head as I shuffled forward toward the window. My knees and forehead were burning by the time I reached it, but the sense of completion felt good. Pushing my weight back so as to sit upright I could finally read what now looked like a note.

“Hey sorry I didn’t know what to do and I had to get to work so I hope this is ok. It’s the only room with carpet in my house and I was worried you’d fall off the couch so I thought the floor would be best. I’ll try to be back soon ok! I’m really sorry... it’ll be ok though!”

...

What the fuck?

I could feel laughter bubbling up inside me and within moments I was on my side in a silent giggling fit.

I need to get out of here.

With new-found determination I started planning. First I’d open up a few of these boxes and find something sharp. After freeing my hands it’d be easy to get on my feet and sneak out. The window was too small to escape through, but considering -

The door to the right of me slowly opened and Duncan peeked his head through.

“Hey are you up?” he whispered glancing where I’d awoken, then noticed me near the window on my side, my eyes frozen on him.

His gaze flicked back and forth between the note and the window a few times before he made the connection; “I’m sorry, I didn’t even consider that it would get too hard to read it...”. In the time since I had woken up the room had darkened to a deep blue, the sun had sunk below the horizon.

He went to enter the room but at the widening of my eyes froze, and retreated. He thought for a moment, then said “I’m really, really sorry I did this. I didn’t want to, but when you saw...when...I got scared that you’d run away and, and I needed to make sure you were here tonight or, or, or-”

I watched as he quietly panicked, his eyes growing big and the words vanishing from him as his breathing quickened. He took a deep breath, paused for a few seconds, then exhaled.

“Is it, would it be ok if I took the tape off? It feels wrong, not hearing you... You won’t start, screaming, or anything, will you?” he asked.

From the time he’d peeked his head through the door a part of me had turned itself off again, but as he stumbled his way through interactions with a sense of fear and uncertainty he had no right to have, I could feel something else boiling up inside me. For a moment I wanted more than anything else to wrap my hands around his neck and strangle him right then and there. I nodded in reply to his question.

He came over and bent down, his hand reaching out to grip the edge of the tape. He paused, "I just realised it might hurt a little, should I do it fast or slow...? Um, nod for fast." I nodded. It was a shock when he ripped the tape off my mouth, but I didn't make a sound.

He looked at me as if he were waiting for me to say something, but I didn't have any words for him.

"I, um, I tried to make that pasta, that you always order...at...do you want some?"

I nodded. When he'd asked that I'd realised how famished I was – I'd forgotten to have dinner last night and hadn't had a chance to eat since. My body had some other urges but I forced them away as best I could.

He stood up and left the room, glancing back on his way out. He soon returned with a bowl of carbonara – my favourite – and placed it on the ground, setting a fork beside it.

...

We both sat for a while in the now unlit room, staring at the bowl of pasta, realising the issue. He looked uncertain as to what to do. I finally spoke up.

"Duncan...why are you doing this?"

"I got scared you'd run and, now, I can't... now you would, right?"

I didn't say anything for a while. When I did finally decide what to say I spoke quietly.

"When I saw you, my first thought wasn't to run. It was to apologise."

I think hearing that was what Duncan feared most.

"I, I...wish I knew that before. But I can't do anything now. Even if you say you wouldn't run now...I can't believe you..."

He was right. I wouldn't believe me either.

Looking at the pasta again, he picked up the fork and twirled some spaghetti onto it. He lifted it up, and giving into the hunger I opened my mouth.

It took a while to finish the bowl that way. The sky outside had become pitch black, the only illumination being light reflecting in from some other room. I think Duncan kept it dim to avoid having to see me too well, but I was glad he didn't turn on the light.

"We have to go soon."

I almost burst into tears the moment I heard those words, but I held back and dispersed the sudden panic rising in my mind into the rest of my body.

"Is it ok if I knock you out again? I know a good way to do it but I -"

"No." I forced the word out despite the shaking. He thought for a moment.

"You'll come with me right?"

I didn't say anything.

He nodded in acceptance, and crouched down to untie my feet. It took him a while to do so, the knot seemed complex, but I think I understood the idea.

He led me through what I understood to be his house, and out the front door. A cold street light illuminated the court, and as my eyes adjusted to it the sky became black. The pavement was still hot under my bare feet despite the air starting to cool down. There was no wind, no sound.

"Do you want a back seat or front?"

I looked at the back seats of his car, he nodded and held the door open for me. I awkwardly got in with my hands still tied behind my back, and once I had settled as best as I could he reached over and plugged the seatbelt in. His head was so close, *I could bite his ear off*. But I didn't. In the back I could hopefully fidget with the knot binding my hands and start to loosen it. I tried my hardest to remember how to untie it – I could only visualize some of the start, but it would be enough to do the rest I thought. I curled my fingers around and began picking at the rope while he took the front seat. The engine started, and I wobbled forward as the car reversed out of the driveway.

I didn't care where we were going or why. I'd untie the knot and then just leap out of the car and run. I couldn't run before; if I fell over, with my hands the way they are he'd reach me before I could stand back up. But the trip gives me time.

As I fiddled with the knot I watched the shadows in the car shift with the passing of streetlamps. The warm light would wash over the interior of the car then fade away, again and again. Those were the only lights – there were barely any cars on the road.

It must be past midnight by now.

Duncan stayed quiet as he drove, but I could tell he wanted to say something. Once or twice he instinctively went to turn on the radio, but stopped himself. He must have wanted something to fill the silence.

The rope was starting to burn. I'd been wriggling my wrists too much and the rope had started to cut into my skin. I couldn't make a sound. If I did he'd know. All my concentration went into not making any noise, when suddenly I realised the car had gone quiet.

The door beside me opened up, and Duncan was there looking in at me. He had the strangest expression; it was so grim, but there was something else. Anticipation? He reached over and undid the seatbelt, and I had no choice but to shift my way out of the car. I winced as the rope scratched against the cuts in my wrist.

"Sorry I hope it didn't make it too tight..." Duncan said. I shook my head. He pointed somewhere to the side of us and said, "it's just over here."

I looked around. I could see a mix of rundown houses, bricked up industrial warehouses and factories. The few cars scattered around the street looked old and beat-up. It was so dark, I couldn't spot any streetlights. Then I looked where Duncan was pointing.

He was pointing down an alley. It was almost pitch black, though there must have been some sort of cold light at the far end of it that allowed me to at least make out the silhouette. The sky above it

was black as ink, as if the moon and all the stars had been erased. *I suppose if the moon and the stars are holes in the fabric of the sky, something, is there, staring out the holes, blocking the light.*

“It’s hard to find, but just be careful and I’ll show you where it is.”

He took his phone from his pocket, turned on its flashlight and shone it down the alley. On the left side was a brick wall, inset with some sort of side entrance to the building, and on the right was a fence which lead into a paved wall, behind which a large plot of land lay with all sorts of large mechanical parts piled up on it. Everything was still. The silence was oppressive.

Duncan lowered his phone and the alley returned to darkness. He started walking towards me and I instinctively took a step back off the pavement. He paused.

“Is it ok if I put my arm around your shoulder? I don’t know how else to lead you to it, and you really need to be really careful or...”

I couldn’t do anything but nod. I felt like I was running out of time. *I might just have to run.*

He hesitantly put his arm around my shoulder, and bringing his phone’s light back up he slowly led me into the alley. He was still so warm. As we stepped further into the darkness I started to feel some sort of breeze. It wasn’t like any normal breeze, in that there was no ebb and flow. It just, flowed. I could feel every hair on my body start to stand on end as he nudged us forward, moving so carefully, as if moving just slightly too quickly would be the end. He stopped.

There it was.

In the corner where the bricks that outlined the side entrance met with some other wall, beside the drainpipe that ran from the roof to the ground, was a golf ball sized hole in the world.

If I had to draw it, the best I could do is draw a black circle. But, it wasn’t black, it didn’t look like a colour. It didn’t look like anything. It looked like nothing, as if my brain was receiving no sensory information from where that patch of the world projected onto my retina. I knew I would be able to see it even if Duncan turned off the light, in fact I felt like if I stared at it long enough I would go blind.

“I have to move every part of you over it so you’ll vanish.”

I think I stood there for a minute after he said that, the words echoing around my vacant head. I couldn’t think any more. I could still feel his arm around my shoulder, and I knew I’d missed my chance to run. My mind had to move. It had to.

“W-w-why?” I stammered out. My knees gave in and Duncan moved to support me, the light from his phone flicking towards the ground.

“It’s ok! You’re smart, so I thought I’d ask you about it, and when you said that maybe it’s like teleportation I realised, everyone’s ok! As long as all of you goes over it you go wherever it leads and it’s ok!”

He sounded so scared. The words repeated again in my head.

E-Everyone? You mean...

“Y-y-you’ve d-done this...before...”

He nodded. “This is the sixth time, and I think it might be the last.”

He paused, unsure whether to elaborate. “...every time I...I used to think erased someone with it, but I guess sent someone somewhere with it, it got smaller. It doesn’t accept anything other than people. I’ve tried. But it works this way. It used to be the size of my hand, I think...I think it was harder to see then...” He seemed to get lost thinking about something, and released me to the ground. I would have run then if my legs hadn’t stopped working.

“I, I need to keep making things vanish with it, so that, it’ll close, it shouldn’t stay... it’s not right, and then...”

My mind had started to move again, in fact it was racing with questions. I needed to ask them. The more I knew the more I could do.

“H-how did y-your...” I tried to speak, moving my eyes up and down his body. He looked down at himself, and hung there vacantly for a moment, lost.

Still not making eye contact, he said quietly “these are from when Mary died...”

Mary? I don’t know that one.

As if he’d heard my thoughts, he said “she was my first girlfriend.” His smile was filled with sadness. He looked like he tried to shake it off, but couldn’t.

“Is it, is it ok if I tell you about her? Normally I, I don’t but, I want someone to know...”

I didn’t respond.

“She meant, means, everything to me. You remind me of her actually. She was normally quiet too, and smart, she always knew everything. And had a temper to go with it! She liked exploring. I know you’re not very outdoorsy, but she loved going places she hadn’t been and roaming around. We were together for almost a year – I had started renting out a larger place and she had moved in.”

...I don’t care...

“We had been walking for an hour from the new place when we found this area. It was the start of winter, so while it wasn’t so late it had gotten quite dark. Still, she loved these sorts of derelict spots. I never really got it, but something about things falling apart excited her.”

He faltered. Again he lowered his head, and his voice lost its feeling.

“She went to point out a large crack in the pipe there when suddenly she started screaming. Just by writhing in pain she mutilated herself. I was so scared, I ran over and tried to hold her together as her body fell apart in my arms. I couldn’t leave it like that, so I moved it all over the hole as fast as I could until it was all gone.”

...I don’t care.

He didn’t say anything for a minute.

“...Every night I have dreams I don’t remember. I don’t remember them, but they tell me things. I know that if I keep doing this she’ll come back. The hole shouldn’t be here. If I do everything that I need to it’ll go away and she’ll come back. Everything that’s missing will come back.”

I don’t care.

I think he had hoped I would say something, and I could hear him sniffing. His face was reddening as he forced his tears back.

“...It’s...it’s getting late. Is it ok if I start? I’ll start from the head, so it won’t hurt and -”

Sudden rage erupted from me.

“NO!”

He froze. He hadn’t heard my voice sound so animalistic before. Neither had I. I was trembling in anger.

“I, I’m sorry. I don’t know how to ask. Normally I’d knock you out so you wouldn’t know. That way I’m sure it doesn’t hurt...”

“Shut up.”

“...I’m sor-”

“Shut up.”

I felt the flow of air vanishing into the hole speed up a little. If the angle between the three of us had aligned better maybe I would have rammed him through it.

Duncan stood there, staring at the ground for a long time. I don’t think he was thinking about anything. He was just staring, tears leaking from his eyes, waiting for what to do next. I started pulling at the rope again, but wasn’t making any progress; I’d thought it would be so easy... I had identified one way to remove it, *but... For now I give up. I need to go.*

Eventually Duncan spoke again. He sounded quiet, and unsure.

“I can’t do nothing... I don’t know what else to do. I’m not smart like you, I don’t know how else to think about it.”

My legs had regained their strength - I started shifting my heels, getting ready to run. *Duncan is faster than me, I have to lose him quickly.* I could feel my veins pulsing and my breathing becoming rapid.

“I have to believe this will work.”

Duncan became resolute.

I pushed off the concrete beneath me with all my strength and started sprinting down the length of the alley. *There’s a light on the other side, maybe people, I just need to reach it!* The small stones littering the ground scraped against my bare feet as I ran, my body wildly stringing from side to side

as I struggled to stay balanced. I couldn't hear anything but the air whistling past my ear and my feet slapping against the ground and Duncan running behind me.

My collar tightened against my neck and I was tugged backwards. I spun around and kicked out into Duncan's knee. He cried out and shoved me down to the ground. I twisted my body in an attempt to stand but he grabbed me and started dragging me backwards by the neck. While I kicked and flailed and yelled he started mumbling to himself.

"Like you said, you'll be ok. And as long as you have all the parts, you can put something back together again..."

"Duncan I only said what I thought - I don't know more than you!" I was darting my eyes around the alley looking for something, anything I could do as we neared the empty spot in the corner.

He didn't respond, and just kept dragging me. *He doesn't know what to do.*

"We can find out!" I yelled out. He didn't react. "I know how we can find out!" He stopped.

I took a deep breath. "My, m-my eye. U-...use my eye..." I went quiet.

There were so many things I could have said. Duncan was right, he wasn't smart. Had I chosen to say anything else, he wouldn't have been able to point out if it were wrong or didn't make sense.

There were so many things I could have said...

What is wrong with me...

But there was no time to think. Within moments Duncan had grabbed my head and twisted me around and now, just centimetres in front of me, consuming my left eye's vision, was nothing. *This won't even work there's no reason to think it will why did I say that-I need to keep my eyes open.*

And I kept both eyes open as Duncan pushed my head forward. My right eye continued to see the alley, the bricks and the black as ink sky.

And for a split second, as if some amount of information backflow was allowed, my left eye saw something too.

A brilliant and pale light, the shadows of thorned tendrils growing into the sky and hairs shaking in the cool breeze.

And something else. So close in front of me I couldn't have understood the shapes even if they were shapes I could understand. Straight edges were curving and falling in and I remembered my dream. I remembered my dream and so I understood the function of these thorned tendrils and hairs and this light and everything. And I understand what the function of the shapes in front of me were.

They were for digestion.

I must have screamed out something that made Duncan relinquish his hold on me, and as I felt my left eye socket tear away from the rest of my head I fell sideways and collapsed into the brick wall. Duncan was mumbling something behind me but I heard nothing as my head throbbed in pain and disorientation.

My left eye can't see. The left side of my vision is empty. There's nothing.

Every time I blinked I could only feel my right eyelid move. I could hear Duncan, he was asking me something. I turned to face him and he looked so pale but I focused on my hands and I carved them away until the rope fell off and now I was running towards Duncan. As I grabbed his head blood splattered out of my eye socket onto his face and he started screaming. I was still screaming. I pulled him with all my might as I spun us back around and flung him into the hole. His stomach tore open as he passed through and he stared at me with such naive betrayal as his blood began painting the wall and the pipe beside him. Everything was so blurry and spinning and my head cracked against the concrete hard. It was so cold against my cheek, and somehow smooth. The world slowly started to turn sideways and I thought I'd start falling away from the ground. The sky turned darker and darker until I couldn't see anything. I could only think. And the thoughts dispersed into the sky.

Epilogue

...

...

I'm still alive...

...

Everything hurts...

But the ground feels so good...

I didn't want to move. Through my right eyelid I could see light diffusing through, becoming a deep and saturated red. My left eye saw nothing. Eventually I forced my eye open, and looked out. It was day again. Blue again.

I travelled home in a daze. I just walked and walked and walked. I remembered how we got here. I had watched the streets. I found mine. I found my house.

The hole was gone, as was Duncan. There was no blood where he had been. I walked and walked and walked. I got home.

I slowly opened the door to the bathroom. The shower was still running. I turned it off. My blood had caked onto my clothing. I took it off. I looked in the mirror. My left eye, the socket itself was gone, and had been unnaturally covered over with skin and muscle. I turned on the shower again, and sat under it for a few hours.

For the next few days I stayed home. I made food on the second day.

I resisted it for the longest time, but eventually I had surgery to reconstruct the left side of my face, along with a prosthetic eyelid. I keep it closed, wrapped around the ocular implant built into what remained of my eye socket.

I didn't have any dreams for almost 19 years.