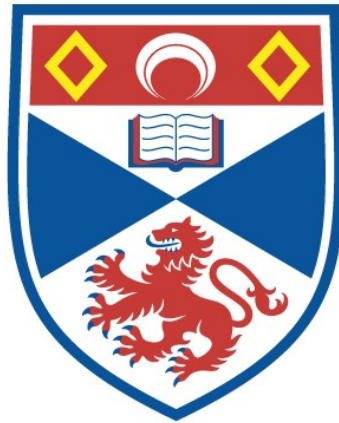


The howler

Ross Fitzpatrick

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Abstract

My thesis *The Howler* covers the first third of a planned novel centering around an amusement park in the American Midwest. Arlington McNamara works as a ticket booth operator at The Park, a major attraction in the small interstate town of Marcannen. A childhood tragedy is resurrected when filmmaker Lars Twittle pays a visit to The Park, hoping to involve Arlington in his latest documentary. When Arlington decides to participate, she must grapple with the consequences of local stardom and work to repair the strained relationship with her father Dean. At the same time, The Park's biggest ride The Howler has mysteriously gone offline, and although unaware, Arlington holds the secret to saving it.

Arlington McNamara has worked at The Park for the last seven years, an admittedly larger portion of her life than she expected moving to Marcannen. But much about Arlington's life has been unexpected.

She came as a surprise to her parents Dean and Claire. Dean McNamara was thoroughly unprepared for the birth of a daughter. He believed one received what they prepared for, so he prepared for a son. There were ways to know for sure, but he refused, and when the nurses and doctors asked Claire if she'd like to know the baby's sex Dean jumped in: "The Lord will deliver us what well he pleases, and hopefully what we have prayed for." It was a line that became familiar in the prenatal care department at Straitmont Hospital.

When the baby was born Dean walked out of the room. The naming was left to Claire. Dean's wife always felt her own name a burden in its simplicity, so she gave her daughter a name she thought would set the child apart. Arlington was Claire's birthplace, the place her mother and father were buried. It was somewhere Claire thought about often, somewhere far from the birthing bed in Linus, the city that her daughter would grow to despise.

When people ask Arlington about her childhood she riffles through her mental rolodex of vague and neutral platitudes: "Oh, it was normal." "Better than most." The most revealing response she offers, that only reveals to those already in the know: "It was decent, especially for Linus, especially for then."

People that are too young or too local, people whose curiosity ends past county lines, people who have always lived behind picket fences and manicured lawns, these people take Arlington's response as a joke they cannot understand, and smile or shrug or laugh it off.

People that know usually leave it there, or say how awful they've heard those days were, how afraid their great aunt or uncle was, how that was the first time anybody had to remember to lock their doors. These people are the same age as Arlington, living the same sort of vagrant life, running from monsters real and imagined. These are the people that Marcannen, and The Park in particular, attracts.

The town itself is a strange crack in the geography of Middle-America, a nearly-suburban wild west. It spreads out over miles of farmland and bunches of strip malls, stores with homemade names like *Rusty's Auto* and *Weiland Grocer* run by men and women making an hour commute.

At the center of this stretch is The Park, divided into four sections. No one has ever been able to forward a convincing argument related to a pattern in theming. Guests enter into Renaissance before finding themselves transitioning to Tokyo, sandwiched between Safari and The Lone Ranger.

Arlington is always the first to arrive at the ticket booths in the morning. She prefers to get there when The Park is waking up. She is there before the engineers and the maintenance personnel, unseen drones that tighten screws and check electronics.

She is there hours before the performers, most of whom show up minutes before their shifts with baggy eyes and yellowed nails. Arlington doesn't care much for them and she is glad to be stationed on the outside of The Park, the first point of contact for its many guests.

Arlington sits in her booth and drinks coffee out of a chipped yellow mug. The mug is old. It makes her coffee taste musty. It collects films of dust overnight, but it was her mother's. And after so many years, when she takes a sip Arlington imagines she can smell her mother's lilac perfume and taste the ruby-grapefruit chap stick she used so liberally.

Arlington's booth is a space where the unexpected rarely happens. It is all clean lines and right angles and each object is framed and set as the woman wants it. The booth is one of many of its kind, all stood in groups of three – like Cerberus in their design – defending the sanctity of The Park. The booths are compact, just big enough to fit the swiveling office chairs that the attendants sit in for long hours at a time, the blue felt and plastic seats differentiated only by the various sizes and shapes of the sweaty ass prints left behind. A small counter runs the length of the front wall behind a large glass pane with a tiny speaker and a flap for the exchange of tickets and cash. An electronic register and a small machine that prints orange admission slips completes each booth.

If Arlington reaches her arms out, which are by no means long and in fact by most measures rather stubby, her palms press up against the steel container so she poses like a rock climber at rest in a narrow crag. Moffit, the man in the booth next over, keeps his arms tucked in elbow to waist. No one knows his exact height but he is a man so tall measurement loses meaning and to quantify his stature would be to diminish it, to drag myth back to the mundane.

Arlington always greets Moffit when he arrives. He is not a man who gets much use out of his vocal cords. The first few sentences he speaks are part of a warm up, and words claw up out his throat and scratch their way past his teeth. Arlington suspects Moffit was a smoker. There are times during conversation when his arm twitches up towards his face with the pointer and middle fingers extended. Moffit has yet to arrive today.

It is Fall. Days are beginning to shrink, the dark extending its welcome past those nascent morning hours. Sometimes the sun does not show until half past eight. Arlington knows a fall sun is lethargic, it does not feel expected and so it takes its sweet time. For Arlington, Fall is a complicated season. She enjoys the slow rising sun. It means that most days when she arrives early she can watch it crest over the rides. It perches above The Park, using the attractions like pedestals. Arlington sometimes wonders whether it was The Park that put itself here or God that put the sun above it. She considers the possibility that decades ago, when this land was nothing more than

miles of tall grass and milkweed, the sun wandered around the sky, and it wasn't until a fitting monument such as this was constructed that the star found a comfortable place for its daily ascent.

This is the way Arlington tends to think. She finds it necessary to give meaning to places and people and things, to make sense of the world and what happens in it. She is not someone who can accept coincidence as random or violence as meaningless. She has tried. She has tried for many years. Today she watches the sun rise. It is overcast, so she cannot see the ball of flame but she does notice it staining the gray sky orange. Where the clouds lose hold of one another and drift apart shoots of light pierce through.

Although she does not feel their heat these beams remind Arlington of the times she and the neighbor boys would burn ants with a magnifying glass on their gravel drives. She had not expected it to work, but it did. Arlington would love to remember herself turning away horrified, disgusted that she participated in the torture of any of God's creations, even the lowly ant. But that is not what she remembers. She remembers begging Johnny Koenig for a turn. She remembers watching the insects shrivel up into little black dots like ink marks on a page. She smiled. She crouched closer. She wanted to watch them writhe and she laughed as Johnny learned he could aim the light at the bugs' little legs, frying them off one by one.

On the steps leading to her tidy booth, Arlington remembers. She feels her spine go rigid. Surely ants don't feel pain? Pain is an emotion. Pain is something that stays

with you and gnaws at your bones. Pain is a memory that you relive every moment of every day. The sun is risen. It rests for a moment. Today it chooses The Howler as its throne. The Park's most popular attraction: a steep grade 150 feet into the air and a sheer drop into moguls below, followed by a few winding turns back up to the platform.

Moffit arrives as Arlington swirls the grounds in the bottom of her chipped yellow mug. He nods as he approaches. "Enjoy your weekend?" Arlington asks.

"WrestleMania," is all Moffit says back. He sits on the grated steel stairs leading up to his booth and removes a greasy sandwich from a wax paper bag. Arlington thinks Moffit would make a good children's book character. There is something about his movement that would be well-represented in water color.

On most days this is the moment Arlington retreats to her booth to leave Moffit to enjoy his cheese sandwich. But there is something so lonely about this morning. It is a signal that she is giving herself. It is realizing that to spend another Halloween here will make it eight years total, and for some reason she finds that number terrifying in its even-ness – no more lucky number seven, a joke she cracks at all the new employees when they ask how long she's been around. It is the weight of all those nights spent alone that have been shrugged off, one after another, until she reached a certain threshold.

So Arlington sets her mother's mug on the metal counter and slides the blue swiveling chair onto the booth's small square porch. She sits half enveloped by the doorframe, poking out far enough to catch Moffit's abnormally long legs in her peripheral. She expects him to ask her what she is doing, to demand that she wheel back around and let him enjoy the intimate moment with his breakfast. But he does not. He chews softly. He rubs his heel in the dirt leaving a delicate arc behind. Arlington likes the sound.

"I've seen them men with the cameras again," Moffit says.

Arlington feels a heat start in her toes and rise through her body. The men with the cameras have been around. They have been calling Arlington at home, leaving voicemails asking if she'd be willing to sit down and talk about things. About her mother. About Linus. Moffit does not know these calls have been made. He has not asked about Arlington's childhood. "Hm. I don't like the way they hang around," she says.

"Me neither." Moffit finishes his sandwich. The Park is near opening. A small group of performers walks past the booths down to a sign marked STAFF, red letters above a blue door. They hold their costumes draped over their arms and in the crook of their elbows. They wear cowboy hats and spurs that clink as they trudge to meet the day to come. Moffit's legs recede from view. Arlington hears a soft click as he shuts the door and seals himself into the cubicle.

It is still morning when Arlington sees the camera crew approaching. Somehow, she did not expect this. Even hearing Moffit's words, even realizing what they meant and the unintentional warning hidden in them. The line leading to the booths is deserted. There are few visitors this early. The crew approaches without obstacle, although their heavy equipment bogs them down. One man stands at the front unburdened. Arlington imagines him reaching the booth, grinning wide to reveal rows and rows of jagged teeth protruding all around his gums and the roof of his mouth. "Let's talk," she hears him say.

Arlington will not wait for this to happen. She turns and twists the key in its lock. The booth's door opens and she forces her way up out of her seat. Arlington risks one last look over her shoulder. The crew reaches the set of arrows painted on the asphalt, directing them towards her sanctuary, the small metal box that is her world. She glances down at the chair. The impression her body leaves behind is unsatisfying. It is maybe the most permanent thing about her life.

She is out the door and down the steps now, walking towards the door labelled STAFF. Arlington convinces herself this is not running, it doesn't count. She hears a voice calling to her from inside The Park and she must follow it. She must find its source. Through the door is a dim dressing room, empty now that the performers are at their stations. As Arlington picks her way through rows of benches and lockers the

carpet pads her feet and each step makes a dull thump. Here is the voice, muffled through the walls.

I am the heart of this place. I am what brings them here, what feeds the rest of you. I am the silent thrill that dares you to let loose your animal screams. I am the lure.

Arlington pushes further, through another door, into the Park's boundary. The sky is bright now and she feels the sun's heat against the crisp fall air. The sun has moved since it rose above The Howler, but only just so. The ride reaches for the sun, It extends Its grasp. It speaks.

You hear nothing, but I sense everything. Your fierce grip on my metal bones that turns your flesh white. I feel your want to lash and kick, your feet pressed hard into my ribs. I make your blood swirl and rush.

Arlington follows the snaking path that leads to the monolith. The shouts of the meager sample of visitors, the padding of sneakers on pavement, the voice of The Howler all dissipate.

She remembers her mother with a stern face, telling her to listen. "Hear it Arlie." The field in front of the pair is overgrown. Weeds that need to be picked but never will scratch at her calves. It is summer and hot in the hungover way that comes after thunderstorms. The monarchs are back and Arlington delights at the pair of orange wings perched on her finger. Her mother holds her arm steady. She tries to turn to get a

look at her mother's face, to tell what kind of instruction this is. "Close your eyes," Claire says and Arlington obeys. "Listen Arlie." She listens. She has never thought of doing so as an action, as something that you participate in. Arlington hears the lightest fluttering of wings, a rhythmic rubbing of the insects' legs. She hears it whisper. She feels her mother kiss the crown of her head. She hopes they never leave.

I am the head. I am the heart. I am the Howler.

When Arlington returns to her booth, Moffit is standing on the steps next door. He nods. "Said you had off today." Arlington places her palm on Moffit's shoulder. The day passes, and the cameras do not return.

Arlington tends to keep much about her life a secret. This protects her from the endless amassing of days, the experiences that ought to shape and break us into little mounds, anthills excavated and blown over. It is a practice, the bundling of skeletons into well-organized spaces. Arlington does it without thought now, setting aside parts of herself that might cause unwanted trouble or attention.

So it is strange, she thinks, that Moffit now knows. Knows that she sees ghosts. "Spirits more so," she corrects herself. It is another Fall morning. The air is clear and the sky is bright, as if the world is convincing itself the cold is not coming, will never come. Arlington stands on her booth's porch and reaches down to touch her toes. She is

exercising again, in spare moments before and after work. Her joints ache less every day.

Moffit nods and eats. His lips smack, his saliva turns processed cheese into glue that threatens to latch his jaw shut. "And always dogs?" he asks over his mouthful.

"Not always," Arlington says.

"How many have you seen?"

"Well, two I'm certain of."

"And others you're not?" Moffit asks.

"That's right. It can be hard to tell."

"I thought they usually made it known."

"Not always. That's why I say spirits, more so than ghosts."

"What's the difference?"

"Ghosts have trouble staying unknown," Arlington says. "Once they're found out that's it, I mean. You have to seek them out, sure, in sanitoriums and houses where a baby's drowned and things like that. But when you find one you'll know, because a ghost can't help but let you know what it is. It floats through walls and rattles the bedframe. It'll scream and wail and tell you to get lost. That's just not how spirits operate."

Arlington realizes Moffit's chewing has stopped. He folds the sheaf of wax paper into a ball and juggles it between sinewy hands. Her cheeks grow red. "I'm babbling." Arlington turns to retreat into her booth and free Moffit from her tirade.

His gravelly voice reaches out to stop her. "How is it you know? About the differences between spirits and ghosts and what they like and don't and how and when they show up?" It is the longest sentence Arlington has heard Moffit speak. It stretches his voice so thin that it cracks into a high pitch as he finishes.

Arlington peeks her head back around the corner of the metal door frame. "Things you learn from experience, and that you can figure out if you look close enough and strike up conversations with the right kinds of people."

"You think I might've seen one and just never noticed?" Moffit asks.

"Could have. I think most people do some time or another. But it's hard to make things stick, the daily or the extraordinary."

"I know what you mean."

It is a Friday, busy at The Park, Halloween beginning to enter the minds of the staff and the visitors as Marcannen prepares for the annual festivities. Arlington's ticket machine malfunctions half way through the day, and she is forced to flip the sign on her window Closed and leave the column of patrons standing in her lane grumbling and malcontent.

Most of the time Moffit would make short work of the repairs. He has a way with machines, clumsy but somehow effective. There is no reasoning to his methods, no training. There is no veneer of technological literacy, only the patience of a tall solemn man who whispers to the ticket printer and begs it to work while applying a series of light taps all across its body.

But Moffit's line stretches even further than Arlington's, and she hates to add to the burdens of others. Despite the sun the day has turned cold and the booth's sheet metal walls cling to her palms as she works her way out of the swiveling office chair and down the steps to a patch of yellowed grass. She reaches a strip of pavement and walks toward the door marked STAFF. Inside is familiar dark carpeting, benches, lockers, and a handful of performers milling about in various states of undress, shedding or adding layers of costuming depending on the timing of their lunch breaks.

Arlington is conscious of glares directed her way. This is meant as a shared space but it is clear that operates in technicality and not in practice. There's a smaller room off to one side, a smaller door marked in smaller red font: maintenance. Hand painted, the letters are slanted and capitalized in strange places. Passing by it is easy to mistake for another language.

Arlington approaches and raps on the door. The performers who haven't already looked away do now. It is not worth the risk of drawing Sibley's attention. A short man opens the door, sidling out of the way to avoid pinning himself against the wall. He

wears a tuft of hair that is reluctant to still be attached, curling itself into a matted nest as if begging to be shaved off. Sibley's left eye droops lower than the right, product of a stroke he suffered on the job while replacing the switchboard on The Ganges, The Park's only water ride. Sibley was once the pride of The Park's engineers, "the littlest big man on campus." He still owns this nickname, but it has been sapped of its playful reverence. Now he is a walking odd job, retained but rather forgotten, his assignments exceedingly menial. Today, Sibley wears a painter's mask and the smell of formaldehyde clings to the musty air.

"Printer's gone haywire?" he asks, voice muffled behind the mask.

Arlington nods. "I can get Moffit if you're busy?"

"Nope, nope. No." Sibley raises his gloved hands. "Bones'll still be there. Point of preservation. Just one minute."

Sibley turns back to his office's interior and Arlington gets a better look at the long wooden desk covered in outdated newspapers. Some headlines stand out: Two-headed calf born in Derby; Flooding in River Bottoms displaces hundreds; Teenage boys uncover drug den, hear first-hand account. Beakers of murky liquids are spread out alongside a neat row of dirt-stained toothbrushes and scattered heaps of white bone.

Sibley notices Arlington staring. "Cyanocitta cristata," he says.

"Blue jay."

“That’s right.” Sibley gives an approving nod, shedding his gloves and moving the papers around the table.

“Beautiful song, if I remember.”

“Yessiree. Beautiful song for a mean ass bird. Found this one getting picked over by its pal on the side of the road.”

“They’ll do that?”

“Oh sure. Fall won’t last forever, and a bird’s just as desperate as anybody else.”

Arlington notices the sharp teeth attached to a beak ending at a razor’s point. An angry, utilitarian skull.

Sibley collects his tools, removes his mask, and shuts his little laboratory away.

“Alrighty, let’s take care of it shall we.” He fills the short walk with randomized bird

“facts” that all come out as sentence length anecdotes shared among the Marcannen

Ornithology Society. New species of peacock, living right here, pink and blue and

orange and as big as a truck. Decapitated robin that flew south for the winter and still

made it back. He continues even once they’ve entered the booth, the pair crammed and

crouching close to the ticket machine.

Sibley takes the smallest screw driver from the pouch on his tool belt and works on removing the back panel. It seems that in Arlington’s absence her cubicle aged.

Motes of dust float through sunbeams reflected across a myriad of metal surfaces. The

man continues to drone on. “A parrot once that only knew curses. Wasn’t meant to be

that way it's just all he ever picked up on." Arlington wonders for a moment if she should invest in a bird herself. One that will talk and take up empty spaces. But an echo of her own thoughts, her own words, that will not be enough. Or maybe it would be too much.

"Like the wiring just ties itself up or something," Sibley says. He lays the panel and its screws off to one side and wades through a thicket of wiring and rusted metal joints. The machine is still plugged into the wall, and although Arlington is no electrician, although she would be the first to recognize she was the one who sought out Sibley's help and not the other way around, the careless ferocity with which he pulls aside wiring and flicks around circuitry unnerves her.

"Are you sure we shouldn't—"

"Just a second think I've got it here."

There is great irony in this statement, in its content, in its irritated tone, in the way it runs over Arlington's words before any suggestion can even be made, most of all in the fact that the moment it is delivered Sibley drops his tool with a yelp and withdraws singed fingertips. The air buzzes. Arlington imagines herself as a game piece in Operation, some giant pair of tweezers reaching for her and brushing a corner. The wish bone, if she could choose, but she has a sinking feeling she's an Adam's apple.

It all happens in one multi-syllabled noise, bzzt-to-zap-to-crash as one of the fluorescent tubes lighting the booth bursts into pieces. Sibley, in his moment of panic,

reaches out to try and cover Arlington from the debris, but from his squat near the counter his arm ends up around her waist hanging limp, unsure whether it will be worse to withdraw or remain.

Sibley's fingers feel all bone, and Arlington's mind wanders to the dissection table on his desk, the white cartilage pried apart, a blue jay feasting on its dead mate. Arlington shuffles her way out of the booth, bits of plastic cast aside in her wake. She says something as she leaves, but no one hears it.

Arlington returns with a broom out of Sibley's office but the man himself is long gone. The ticket machine is unplugged, its cord dangling above the floor. Arlington takes her time with the mess. This day at The Park, like all others, will proceed without her. If she spots a few fragments that might be pieced back together she scoots them into a corner. It is like collecting shells, she thinks. It is like the summer at the beach when Dean carried her into the tide and raised her over the waves. 3, 2, 1, jump!

Arlington realizes she has yet to discard a single piece, only swept circles around the booth collecting mounds of over-poweringly white plastic. They could fit together if she tried. If she had enough time. If the world would for once refuse to move on. If it could just hold a moment instead of wringing it like a wet rag. But Arlington knows the world will not.

She is interrupted by a soft knocking. Moffit stands in the doorway. Stooping down to fit his face under the frame, he says, "Thought I heard spirits."

“Well exploding lightbulbs are more ghost territory.”

Moffit nods. “Right.”

“I’m just finishing up. But if you can work your magic with the machine when I’m done?”

“I can try,” Moffit says. “I can try.”

On Fall evenings The Park empties urgently. A sense of shortening days impels the visitors home before close. It hurries the staff along in their final duties, leads to the occasional oversight: a door left unlocked, spit wads stuck to walls and the undersides of tables, a switch unthrown and the power still running on one of the rides.

It is one such evening. A plastic basket skids along the pavement under the watch of Vinny Vaquero’s plaster eyes. The wind grows. It stretches its limbs and pads down abandoned walkways. It is nice, not having to share. Storm clouds congregate to the East beyond an open meadow turned gold. The grass is dying but not yet dead, and in the setting sun the sky melts into the Earth in a wash of oranges and yellows.

The Howler senses the wind rushing down its tracks, the weight of a coming storm and angry clouds. The other rides sit immobile, unconscious. The Howler longs for a spark, a change. How many storms has it seen? How many times has it felt exactly this?

I am the head. I am the heart.

The clouds bloom and turn The Park and the meadow and the whole world gray.

The rain begins to fall.

There are some places where the rain is hardly a sound, where it can go unnoticed outside of a soft chill and the sort of dampness only recognizable when one has settled down and committed to being warm. This is not that type of place, not that type of rain. Here, rain lashes. It is an event, it is a world-slowness force. Lightning follows, then the thunder.

The Howler waits for the storm to pass.

I stand, as always, in the eye.

Arlington sits bundled in her booth reading through sheafs of forms. This is not part of her duties, but it is an essential component of her routine. It is how she remains tethered, how she reminds herself that she is not alone, that no one ever is. She recalls each of the visitors that passed through her turnstile with as much detail as she can. The shapes of their noses, the width of their foreheads, the sounds of their footsteps, their postures at the counter. Arlington tries to decipher hastily scribbled signatures in her stack of liability forms, to turn these squiggles into names, into lives, into the people she has seen.

The names. There are many that pass by without notice, an abundance of Smiths and Johnsons and the like, names old and suitable in their own way but nothing to get

excited over. But then there are the extraordinary. The ones that leap at you, the names that give Arlington a sense that anything is possible, that remind her how full of life the world is, how sometimes it's nice to feel small, to feel random, swimming in the same stream as everybody else.

"Romuald E. Mogdans," she sounds aloud. "Gildo Suffredini." She laughs. "Chom Reek." These are the type Arlington remembers. These are the people she hopes to see again. Today, however, one more name stands out. An ordinary name, more familiar to Arlington. Her mother's name, although the woman who signed it looks nothing like her. No, not her mother. And although Arlington believes in ghosts she knows they do not have signatures. A name is the first thing left behind.

Still, when the stranger pushed the clipboard forward and Arlington pulled it through the flap she could not help but pause and stare. There are no limits, she thought. There is nowhere grief cannot find you. As Arlington raises her eyes from the forms and looks out towards the parking lot, reflecting on the appearance of this familiar name, a familiar face approaches. A familiar set of faces. The Park has closed to guests for the day. No more tickets will be sold or forms signed. But Arlington knows that to these familiar faces it does not matter. They are faces she has seen in recent dreams, alongside the others. The camera crew is back and they troop forward in a crowd, the same man leading like before.

Arlington considers running again. Moffit has not left. She could ask him to cover. He would, without a skeptical look or a single question. But they will keep coming. They will keep calling. Arlington glances down at the pile of forms in front of her. Claire McNamara, in an ungainly cursive. It is more like her father's. In the third grade, Arlington was sent home with a note from Mrs. Swanson after the teacher mistook Dean's choppy handwriting for a child's forgery. From this day forward, Dean wrote only in private. He is the type of father who communicates through instruction or advice. Human moments, the random and meaningless, these are frivolous to him. What would he say now? Which line would he pull to repeat for the hundredth time?

The crew stops before the signs that direct patrons to the rows of booths. They form a huddle and lean their heads in. Arlington watches and when the largest one in the back looks over at her she scoots her chair to the side and locks eyes with him. Arlington wants them to know. I know you are here for me. I know you will not give in. But this is not surrender.

The big man with the camera ducks his head back into the circle, burying it like a bird in the sand. Arlington lets out the breath she's been holding. It carries a portion of her bravery with it. Her palms are slick against the metal counter. If she were to draw them away she would find grubby palm prints left behind. The huddle breaks apart and the leader approaches alone. The others wait in a loose line, the big man facing the other direction, fascinated by the hardly-filled parking lot.

The leader is a handsome man but only in the forgettable kind of way. A man you look at in the street and recognize as the decent looking sort, but if you were to reflect later, if you were to pore over the memory of every person you'd seen that day as Arlington does, his features would elude you and in reconstructing him you would come away with an empty face and a stick figure frame.

He walks with a certain pre-programmed assurance that Arlington imagines it has taken him years to master. She shrinks him down, a child version of the man approaching her, and pictures him pacing around his bedroom preparing this walk, longing to put it to use. This steadies her for the moment. He has not always been a threat. Once, he was just a lump of pink flesh. He was small and loving and all the neighborhood mothers must have adored him in his helplessness, must have looked at him and seen nothing but an innocent puppy dog gaze and a gapped smile.

He snakes his way through the line using the same nonchalant walk. He threads thumbs through belt loops and looks everywhere but Arlington's booth. A rumbling cough from the doorway startles her and her grip on the metal counter tightens. She turns to see Moffit and is surprised by the relief she feels. Is this strange silent man her only friend?

"I'll stay," he says.

"Not on my account."

"No. I just don't like it."

"It's all right, really," Arlington says. She does her best to give a nod communicating reassurance but Moffit doesn't look convinced. Although it's always hard to say what he looks. Arlington imagines the man sets his features in the mirror every morning and leaves them for the rest of the day, unchanged, conveying nothing other than Moffit-ness.

"Well all the same think I'll stick around." He turns and makes it from the booth's porch to the grass in one stride.

The leader is a few feet away now, and there is nowhere to look except straight through Arlington. The glass screen separates them, sets them worlds apart.

"Ms. McNamara?" he asks. "Arlington?"

"Ms. McNamara, yes." Up close everything about the man looks staged: the way one eyebrow raises when he asks a question, how he holds his arm at a perfect right angle, hand out and palm overturned, the white smile that gives Arlington the impression if she were to count all his teeth she would come up with a few more than should be there.

"I've been trying to reach you for some time you know," he says.

Arlington wishes she were standing, wishes it wouldn't be absurd to do so now, wishes she were in his gaze rather than under it. "Yes," she says. Leaning into the small microphone in front of her she can hear her voice echoing through the scratchy speaker on the other side of the glass.

"You've gotten our calls then?"

"I get them."

"Then you know why we're here? Who we are, I mean to say."

"I know what you're after."

"And what is it you think we're after Ms. McNamara?"

"My memory."

"We're after answers Ms. McNamara."

"There aren't any. That's apparent."

"Not now. But there could be. Maybe not the ones you need, but there could be."

"I need to be left alone is what I need."

"Ms. McNamara please. Truly and honestly we don't want to upset anyone."

"Then quit slinking around acting like I can't tell."

The man draws a leather wallet from his pocket, moving like a hunter trying not to startle a doe. With two fingers he fishes into its depths and removes a small pink rectangle. He places it on his side of the counter and slides it forward. Arlington doesn't reach through the flap for it but she reads the impact lettering printed on the front.

Lars Twittle

Over The Moon Productions

His phone number is stamped below the name of the company.

"I have your number," Arlington says.

“Funny. You never dial back.”

“Maybe that says enough.”

“Listen Arlington.” The smile that seemed smoothed onto Twittle’s face disappears, replaced by a thin line. Somehow Arlington hadn’t noticed before, his mouth is cracked and red. A pinprick of blood wells on his upper lip. It’s as if his eyes changed colors, Arlington thinks. They do not catch the light any longer. “It’s getting made,” he says, “with or without you. I’m here as a courtesy, to give you a chance to have your side of the story told. If you don’t want that so be it, but there aren’t many more chances.”

The man stares down at her and Arlington holds the microphone stand in her left hand, leaning in close and longing to think of something to say. Something devastating, something clever, something she can tell Moffit about if he asks how things went.

She is not looking at Lars but instead at the glass that separates them. It is stained in opaque streaks, remnants of last night’s rain and the dirt swirled up by the storm. She can make out her own reflection in the dirty pane, framed by the man’s dark shirt. This is me, she thinks. This is where I am. Arlington realizes she can hear her own soft breathing through the loud speaker. The rest of the world has gone quiet. It’s like that day. Like the day Claire disappeared.

Lars turns to leave but pauses after a few steps. He looks back and raises his voice. "It's helped others. To talk about it, I mean. They've said so." Then he's heading off to the rest of his crew, walking that walk, every step pre-arranged.

There are always two stages to the cold. The first creeps in and drags the temperature down over a number of weeks. It brings with it the changing of the leaves, the slimming of daylight hours, and the beginnings of some natural sadness, a thread still tied from the cold ground to the hearts of all living things that starts to tug, to hold people back from saying things they ought to say and doing the things they desperately need to.

The Howler is no exception. It knows the cold. It recognizes the sun straying from The Park, It feels the thread. But in this stage, before things have frozen over, before the world stops in its tracks, there are still those days that burst with life. Those days where we tug back, where we drag things forward in spite of it all. Today is one such day.

The sun is high. The Park is full. The Howler shuttles hundreds down its tracks. Each ride It attempts a subtle change: a second longer waiting at the top, a few feet further dangling off the edge, a faster push through the corners.

I am the head. I am the heart.

Here, in the middle of it all, The Howler still rules.

There are moments of the day that are only right for thinking. Sunrise is one of them. Arlington arrives at The Park earlier than normal to make sure she sees every shade. She sits in her truck and listens to the radio, scrubbing through stations without finding anything worth listening to. She settles on some unfilled channel that only hums with static and turns the volume down low. Enough sound to fill the gaps in her thoughts.

The cab of Arlington's truck is the only space she allows to be messy. There is something in a vehicle's transitory purpose that relieves her guilt over the candy bar wrappers that slide across the floor mats, or the heaps of straw wrappings that cut off access to one of the cupholders.

An ornament shaped like a fat orange cat with a raised paw hangs around Arlington's rear view mirror. It sticks out its tongue and winks. Arlington bought it during a trip to the City one summer, from a little stand right there on the side of the street. She remembers a blue felt table cloth and the army of bits and baubles spread across it, the smell of glazed duck turning on a spit in the storefront next door, funny shaped lettering on the signs with English in small print underneath. Dean tried haggling with the woman at the table. He was about to walk away before Arlington stepped in. Dinner that night was silent.

Arlington gives the ornament a little flick and watches it swing back and forth. The sound of static has ceased, although the radio is still on and tuned to the same channel. Arlington reaches for the dial and is ready to find some other source of white noise there's a crackle and a steady humming note. It reminds her of the way her mother used to sing happy birthday, stretching the last "you" until she used up every ounce of oxygen.

The note's pitch rises to a shriek and cuts off, leaving dead air. Arlington's hand is still on the dial when a soft voice begins to speak through the radio. "H-Hello?" it says. "Is there anybody out there?"

"I'm here," Arlington whispers.

"Thank goodness I'm not alone," the voice keeps speaking and the static returns, forcing Arlington to focus. "Thank goodness there's somebody else." Arlington stares at her radio.

"Who are you?" Arlington asks. She takes her hand off the dial but keeps it hovering there close by.

The static is ferocious now. It cuts through the voice's next few sentences. "Yes- right- accident- request- hours-" Arlington looks at the radio trying to remember what station she's tuned to but the screen is blank. The voice grows louder, more urgent, and Arlington's able to make out a bit more. "Fast as you- a child yes- cold- no can't feel- not

there- not there-“ Then the static vanishes and Arlington can hear its last words.

“Please. No please. Please don’t tell me you’re gone.”

“I’m still here,” Arlington says. “I didn’t go.”

The voice disappears and leaves Arlington alone in the cab with her hand still outstretched, reaching toward the dial. What was that? she thinks. Why did I hear it? What did they need to tell me? Someone was hurt. Someone needed my help. I could’ve done something. I didn’t go. They need to know that. They need to know I didn’t leave.

Her train of thought is derailed by an encroaching shadow and a knock at the passenger side window. Arlington’s back goes rigid against the cloth seat. When she turns all she can see is an ellipse of bald head framed by shaggy curls and one flabby arm, but this is enough. Arlington reaches across the cab to roll the window down.

“Hey there Arlington,” Sibley says. He places his hands on the window and pulls himself up so his chin creeps into frame.

“Mr. Sibley,” Arlington says. Her mind is elsewhere, still with the voice, still with the child it mentioned.

“Well uh good morning. I saw you sitting here I just wanted to say I’m real torn up about the other day and-“

He continues but Arlington stops listening. Reminders. They are everywhere all at once. A stranger’s voice on the radio, a butterfly crawling up and down her car’s antenna, the smell of citrus and the deep green of grass after a thunderstorm.

Arlington's focus returns to Sibley when the man removes himself from his perch on the window and begins to root through a leather satchel hanging across his body.

There's a rattling sound and the crinkling of loose papers. He finds whatever it is that prompted the search and returns to the window. He cups one hand over the other to hide his prize, but Arlington can see the knot of a leather cord poking out of a gap in his fingers.

"All that's to say, no hard feelings?" He removes the hand serving as a lid and reveals a leather necklace, a large amber gem dangling from the cord. Arlington smiles and reaches to take it. It is only when Sibley slides the gem into her hands that she realizes what she's staring at: the tiniest beginnings of a bird encased in resin, a petrified fetus as an ornament.

Knowing what she is holding, Arlington's initial reaction is revulsion. But there is something about the look of the animal that stifles this, that limits it to one quick gulp and saliva rushing to coat her tongue and the back of her throat. The bird spirals in upon itself, its head tucked into a small pink breast, sprouts of wings shooting out of the torso and cradling its head as if protecting it from the sun. Its eyes are nothing more than black dots made deeper and darker in contrast with the orange hue of its casing. A few tufts of downy white feathers have already begun to take shape on its small rubber-looking legs.

If only Arlington could separate this kernel of life from the man handing it to her. If it could have been something stumbled upon at Pearson's Thrift or buried under a pile of fallen leaves, camouflaged in fall colors but catching a glint when the sun hangs low. Instead, its mysterious allure is lost in images of its manufacturing. Sibley prying its still form out of a cracked shell with a pair of tongs, its black eye magnified behind the glass of a crusty beaker, tiny thing sinking into a resin mold, turned into some strange peace offering.

Arlington is not sure what to say so she relies on what is expected of her. "No hard feelings," she says.

Sibley smiles and nods. "Appreciate it Arlington." He takes his hands off the car and walks toward The Park's entrance, his satchel slapping against the side of his gut. Arlington slips the necklace into her one free cupholder. She surfs through radio stations hoping to find the voice again. She's met only by morning sports and an array of Christian programming.

"I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done."

Arlington tries her best to settle into the day. She sips coffee from her chipped yellow mug, although the dust returned with new fervor. She is overcome by the

sensation of drinking wet sawdust. Arlington takes a deep breath in but her mother's scents have evaporated. She looks out at the sun, far off today, shunning The Park and denying her warmth.

Moffit arrives on time and in line with the new custom he sits on his booth's steps to enjoy his breakfast. Arlington cannot bring herself to speak, although in a different, less overburdened, less pensive day, she knows she would be delighted to have so much to share. "Do you tell stories?" she asks.

"Not usually." Moffit shakes his head.

"Would you tell one now?"

Moffit stops chewing and sits so still Arlington considers the possibility the man is an android and this question has exceeded the scope of his programming. "Let me think of one."

This takes most of the day. In the afternoon when Arlington walks through the door marked STAFF, across the locker room's padded carpets and down a short but bright hallway to the table with the coffee machine, Moffit appears armed with his story. "When I was seven," he says, "my house flooded." Arlington moves to the side to give Moffit access to the half-filled pot. "We went back, waded back, Dad had to carry me on his shoulders. Everything was blitzed." Moffit pours, steam rising from the mug emblazoned with a roster of his favorite wrestlers: Pot Belly, Calaban the Imperious, Easy Bake. Each chooses a different menacing pose. "Except for the peonies my

neighbor brought us the day before. They were just buds when we left. But we found them full bloom in flood waters." He takes a sip. His lips cover the top of Pot Belly's shiny bald head.

"Thank you," Arlington says. Moffit nods and Arlington believes he is sending a message with this gesture. Perhaps it is the way he looks at her over the rim of his mug, locking eyes with an intent she's never seen in him before. Or the way the nod bobs into several smaller ones rather than ending all at once. Arlington believes this is the first time Moffit has shared this story. "I had a tough time too," she says. "Growing up."

They are alone in the hallway but Arlington can hear muffled shouts from the dressing room down the way. "A lot of us do," he says.

"Yes. Most of us."

Arlington spends the rest of her day moving Lars Twittle's business card around her booth's counter, trying to find somewhere out of sight but unable to throw the thing away. She stands it on its edge and flicks it into a corner, like the games of paper football she played with Dean at church on Sundays while Claire did the readings. Within five minutes she drags the card back into center frame. She reads the number again and again. The area code is not one Arlington has seen before. He belongs to someplace else.

The Park empties early again today and Arlington gets a head start on her end-of-day ritual. She has fewer names to sort through than normal. In the parking lot the

few cars left in the front rows bear memories of a morning frost, windshields slick with the melting ice, scattering the sun's reflection into blinding white rays. A few of the performers make their way out through the entrance. A woman with dark curls holds a bundle of long cloth, arms raised above her head to stop it from dragging along damp concrete.

Arlington likes to imagine stories for the names she encounters but today none come. Today her mind only has space for memory. Arlington packs her things into a plastic grocery bag and says goodbye to Moffit. She wishes him a happy weekend, and he tells her they're wrestling for the belt on Sunday.

In her truck Arlington turns on the heat and lets the engine run for a few minutes. She keeps the radio turned off. It's funny, she thinks, what parts of our past stay with us. How pivotal moments are condensed into a few small details, so that not even an outline remains but just a few random splotches of color. But even still when the colors return, when they are recalled from nothingness by an unexpected smell or a familiar pattern seen in reflection, they bring with them the weight of not just that moment from the past but of every one that followed; and time swallows you up in its enormous scale so that in the midst of memory you do not belong to then or to now. You feel the pressure of everything deferred, knowing that these moments live with you always – that they are you – but realizing all the same that they are a figment of the truth, a statue cast in wax and left out in the sun.

Arlington makes the drive home with the pink business card held between two fingers. Inside her apartment she dials the number. The phone rings once before Lars picks up.

In Marcannen Fall always seems to rush by. It is a season of unheeded warnings. The cold creeping in, green fading away, nature letting the rest of life in on the secret: winter comes soon. But no matter how many blizzards one has lived through, how many nights spent freezing with the power cut off, no matter how many collective hours spent scraping ice off windshields, the transition never seems expected.

This attitude affects The Park just like any place else. The Howler notes the changes but beyond recognition takes little interest.

As long as I still run, I am the head and I am the heart.

These changes are simple. They are reducible. They can be defined. These are the changes The Howler has seen untold times. The progression of the seasons, the march around the sun. The Howler sends the next train of carts down its steep slope. It lets out a scream. Of course, no one hears.

“The red light is on,” Arlington says while a young tattooed woman fiddles with the microphone attached to her lapel.

“Yes. It’ll stay on,” the woman says. “Lars likes to keep the camera rolling. Most people only have one good take in them, and sometimes it’s not even when they’re answering questions.”

Arlington nods but is not satisfied. She knows these moments will not show up anywhere, but that unnerves her all the more. She dislikes the idea of someone possessing a segment of her life, pooling together the excess bits of her story and keeping them as a trophy buried in a hard drive.

The woman backs up as much as the little free space in Arlington’s booth will allow, takes one final glance at the microphone, and then backpedals down the metal steps. Today is Sunday, which means The Park is closed. All the same, Arlington finds herself here. Of course, she thinks, this is where I am.

Lars likes to choose a familiar location for each of his interviewees. “It demonstrates character,” he told her over the phone. “Shows the Arlington-ness about you.” There was just the tiniest hint of praise in his voice, of understanding, and Arlington found herself acquiescing to his request to film at The Park before certain such a thing would be possible.

So here she sits, face full of makeup done up by a man named Miguel, back itching from the microphone cord running close to her spine, and beginning to be overcome by a mid-morning chill now that her jacket’s been removed. She rubs her arms with her hands and shoots one loud breath out through pursed lips.

“Ready Arlington?” The tattooed woman dons a headset and microphone and stands in a row alongside other crew members behind the camera. In order to frame this shot inside her booth the camera is attached to a long, funny-looking set of stilts.

“I’m ready,” Arlington says.

A different woman, this one’s skin un-inked and her hair tied into a bun tight enough to raise her scalp off her skull, steps forward holding a clipboard. Arlington knows she’s supposed to be looking at this woman but she cannot stop thinking about the dark eye of the camera lens. She points her head toward Lady with Clipboard, but this makes fleeting glances toward the camera all the more obvious.

“To start, Arlington, we’d just like you to tell us about your childhood.”

Arlington pauses. “Well, it was good really. Average.” Arlington waits for another question. The crew’s twelve pairs of eyes blink at her. Arlington cannot help but turn her head straight at the camera to escape their gaze. On its thin set of legs the thing reminds her of an insect, like the kind she used to burn up with the Koenig boys. Except this time it holds the magnifying glass, trained on her upper half, camera lens pinning her to the seat. The cold has lessened, as if a beam of heat does emanate towards her and she’s begun to bake in her little booth. “My parents were ordinary people,” she says. “And we had a nice ordinary life together.”

The woman with the clipboard sticks her head out of line to peer down towards the camera, where Lars sits in a director’s chair. He has not said a word to Arlington so

far this morning, and only took the seat once she was placed in her booth and the camera on. Lars gives the woman a nod. She looks down at the clipboard and makes a quick note.

“Tell us more about your parents Arlington,” the woman says. “What were they like? What did they do? What was your perception of their marriage?”

There are many questions there, and all so vague Arlington has no place to start but with a memory. “Well, when I was ten, that’s the first time Dad said he wanted a boy. He was trying to teach me to throw a football. He thought my hands were too small.”

The woman nods but doesn’t write anything.

“But I think probably that’s only ordinary,” Arlington continues. “And there were moments, especially growing up, where he really loved me.”

“And what about your mother?”

“My mother was- She was good, you know? She was just a good woman. Everybody always told me that, that she had nothing but good in her heart.”

The questions continue like this for some time. They are supposed to be the easy ones, Arlington realizes. They skirt around what they want from her. She feels sweat forming under her arms and a few drops trace the microphone cord as they run down her back. They’re waiting for the oven to preheat, she thinks. Arlington tells them about chicken and noodles every Christmas Eve and the time their dog Wilbur dug up a

family of rabbits in the backyard. She talks about Dean taking her to baseball games and Claire poking holes in the lids to mason jars to hold lightning bugs.

Arlington tries her best to hold fast in ignoring the camera, but anytime a reminiscing shake of the head moves it within her sight her answers trail off into half-finished, mumbling anecdotes. Still, the more questions she answers the more the oven metaphor she built up in her head feels silly. The itch and the sweat remain but they are a product of a camera shyness that wanes with each passing minute. The crew smiles when Arlington tries a joke, they touch hands to hearts and make pouting frowns at emotional details.

The questions narrow in scope and Arlington can tell she is approaching the precipice. She has passed the point of no return.

“And that Fall,” Lady with Clipboard says. “What were things like around town?”

Before Arlington can start with the non sequitur she’s planning to deliver, Lars leaps out of his chair and holds ten fingers in the air. “Quick break and then right back everyone. Good work so far.” The crew hesitates but disperses in random directions, like a school of fish hunted by sharks. Lady with Clipboard steps away and lights a cigarette, Tattooed Woman leans down to pick up a metal water bottle, revealing an image of a fox just above her ankle. Large Cameraman is out of sight before Arlington’s

eyes make it back to his perch on roll-away stairs. Unmanned, the camera looks like something living, the light blinking like a rodent's eye.

Lars approaches Arlington's booth and puts a leg up on the first metal stair. His arms rest across his forward thigh. "You're a natural," he says. "Like you've been in front of a camera all your life."

Arlington nods and her face flushes. She feels stupid. It's what he has to say. But still, she likes compliments, even though she's never known how to take one. "It's not so bad as I thought it would be," she says. "I was nervous at first."

"Could hardly tell." Lars shifts his foot and the step shudders and clangs. "You know I was thinking," he says. "I was thinking it might be nice to get some shots from inside." Lars points a thumb back towards The Park but keeps his eyes focused on Arlington.

"I don't know. I'm just not sure it would be allowed is all."

Lars frowns. "Nowhere off limits, just some b-roll of the attractions. Maybe a couple questions if you're comfortable."

Arlington squirms in her seat and hopes it isn't obvious.

"You're in control here Arlington," Lars says. "What you say goes. Just the parts inside you want to share."

Arlington nods. It couldn't hurt. "I'll get the keys. We can go in through that door down there. The one marked STAFF."

After the break the crew dismantles the camera's tripod and removes the lighting equipment from Arlington's booth. Large Cameraman's stairs are folded up and chucked into a dirt patch clearing space in The Park's lawn. The empty spot reminds Arlington of Sibley's balding scalp. She thinks about the necklace he gave her, tucked away in the bottom drawer of her bedside table, the drawer she assembled out of order so it only pulls out a quarter of the way.

While final preparations are being made with the equipment, Arlington turns a brass key hanging from a wide ring and opens the door marked STAFF. Lars stands behind her and peeks over her shoulder into the dark locker room. Arlington pads across the carpet to the light switch next to Sibley's office door. As the space is illuminated and Arlington sees it empty, a unique Sunday empty, she has the urge to slide off her shoes and socks and spread her toes to grip the soft purple fibers. Growing up she would never keep her feet covered, even long into Fall when cold concrete slapped hard against her heel bone and each step sent a shock running through her little legs. There was something freeing about leaving her shoes at the door, and excitement in the way the old people in the neighborhood looked down at her grubby toes disapprovingly. It was a choice. A choice she made.

Lars wanders through the hedges of lockers in the performers' little village. Somewhere there is a mechanical hum but there's no telling which of The Park's thousand machines produces it. Arlington hurries around him and pushes open the

door to the long hallway with the coffee maker. There is a thin film of day-old grounds lining the bottom of the pot and running up the sides.

“The locker room?” Lars re-uses the gesture from outside, thumb pointing back over his shoulder.

“You don’t want any of that,” Arlington says. “That isn’t my space.”

He nods and slips thumbs through belt loops. They walk through the hall past the table and a set of double doors on the right that lead to a smooth concrete storage room, filled with racks and racks of old and out-of-season costumes, props, and set pieces. Arlington has been inside once, out of curiosity’s sake. It had a smell to it, a sweet kind of smell that didn’t make sense in that dark, moldy old box. Arlington doesn’t like it when things don’t match up. She didn’t stay long.

At the end of the hall Arlington pushes the handle on yet one more door, marked *EXIT* in what looks like crayon. A seam of wind batters through the opening and swirls around the hall, desperate to touch every surface it can. In the open, the sun seems to be coming from all angles. For a moment Arlington feels trapped, as if it wasn’t her booth that was an oven but the whole world, and the mix between the cold wind that tosses her hair into her mouth and over her eyes and the tingling of sunlight on her nose and bare hands splits her down the middle and pries her apart.

This is Renaissance, The Park’s first layer. The spinning Heads of the Dragon looms to her right, frozen halfway through its cycle. A red metal skull stares down at

her and Lars. Don't worry, it's dead, Arlington thinks, and then scolds herself for needing that reassurance.

"Wonderful," Lars says. "Just perfect."

"Wait until Safari," Arlington says. She looks toward the center of The Park, past Arthur's grave behind a line of velvet rope, through the loop of the Royal Fool, and over a novelty stand stocked with plastic shields and foam swords.

I stand, as always, in the eye.

Lars wants a shot of the Spinning Heads and a look at The Park's map. Large Cameraman keeps his lens trained on Arlington "in case of strong emotion," according to the director. She finds herself posing, wary of being watched but wanting to make the most of her time in front of the camera.

Some mornings after Arlington's early exercise, once she's bent down to touch her toes and drawn twenty circles in the air with each arm, counting out each rep with a short breath, she likes to look at her reflection in the full-length mirror propped up against her bedroom wall. She is flawed, she knows. But who doesn't like to pretend, when they're able, to be something more.

The more time she spends out in the open under the camera's wide eye, the more she feels this sensation, the same one she feels in front of her mirror. I am real. I am here, and it is good to be where I am. I am trying my hardest. As she leads the crew down a set of walkways and over the invisible membrane that separates Renaissance

from Tokyo, she is struck by the vastness and variety of life. How many people walk these paths every day? What does the smell of candied almonds mean to them? Or the whir of an engine and the moments before freefall? It is always strange, she thinks, to be somewhere empty.

In Tokyo Lars makes sure to get footage of the artificial koi pond, the plastic fish still on metal rods embedded into tracks running under the water. Someone forgot to turn the fountain off. Water laps against the sides of orange and purple filigreed scales. Jets of recycled pond water arc over one another and make satisfying splashes. Arlington looks at her reflection in the brief moments when the water goes quiet. Soft waves distort her features but she is still here. Still trying her best.

They pass through the City Center, shrunken sky scrapers crammed along the paths. Their neon signs have been turned off and the whole attraction looks a startling kind of gray, like someone's taken The Park and overlaid an old-timey filter. Arlington looks into the buildings' miniature frosted windows and imagines tiny little families inside tiny high-rise apartments or sleepy offices half-full on Sunday, the phones ringing intermittently. And who's to say? Maybe they could be in there, every day of every week, so used to the clomping steps of the giants outside they don't even look up.

"Just wait," Arlington says. "Just wait until Safari."

The Howler has a sense of The Park's schedule. It could not list the days of the week in sequence but it has a general understanding of the spirit of each one. That is why today's guests are unexpected. It senses them even from outside, where they congregate around one of the little square guardhouses. It tracks them winding through The Park's lonesome streets and takes great interest when they choose to stop for a moment. The Howler knows their destination.

To me. To me.

Arlington was the one that suggested they finish the interview in front of The Howler. It was Lars' idea to ascend. Up here, from the ride's starting platform, all of Safari is visible, and even the fringes of the other sections.

There is a wildness about this area. From up high the scenery's artificiality feels removed. The concrete tigers posing under plastic palm fronds are quiet not because they're fake, but because they're on the hunt. The scattering of decommissioned Jeeps, perfect for a photo op, were abandoned out of necessity. The jungle can be a dangerous place. The outline of The Rattler, a perfect U-shape with fanged head and bulbous tail parallel to one another, might just be scanning the pathways looking for a morsel to swallow whole. But none of that can threaten Arlington here. Nothing even touches The Howler.

Lady with Clipboard asks Arlington something. She must carry that thing everywhere, Arlington thinks. She must cradle it at night, more tenderly than she does in public. That is who she is, just like I am my booth.

"Arlington?" the woman says.

"Yes sorry." Arlington blinks three times in the space of one. The light that makes it under The Howler's closed canopy leaves an arc just in front of her feet.

"I was asking do you remember what town was like that Fall? And remember to start your answer by repeating the question if you can."

Arlington nods. "That Fall, I can remember things feeling different." Arlington glances down at the little halo on the ground. It inches forward. "Like there was something not quite right." Arlington pauses. "Cruel, I guess, is the word that comes to mind."

"And cruel how?"

Arlington remembers the time she and the Koenig's graduated from frying ants. "Look Arlington, look at him," Johnny said. "You can see his guts." The frog dangled from the boy's hand by one webbed foot. Johnny had no delicacy about him, in the way children sometimes don't.

"Eww," Arlington said. But she peeked through the gap in her fingers. She'd never seen a dying thing. She didn't expect a frog would have the same sort of blood that she does. It was red, deep and rich, redder for the way it stood out against slimy

pale skin. The frog's little chest still heaved, and with each breath more blood leaked from its open stomach. Arlington closed the gap in her fingers. She shut her eyes and imagined locking them up that way. She turned away from Johnny. She dropped his little pocket knife and started to cry.

Arlington feels her hands resting on her thighs. I'm still here. Still in The Park. "Just that, people didn't seem to be acting the way they were supposed to. The way we were raised."

Lady with Clipboard is silent. She motions for Arlington to continue.

"Could we move on?" Arlington asks. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to answer that one."

"Talk about the last time you saw your mother. What was that like?"

Arlington closes her eyes and concentrates. "I know it was a Tuesday because I had band and she always picked me up." Arlington shifts in her seat, the director's chair Lars was using earlier. The cloth feels out of balance, like she could tip out of it.

"Did she say anything when she picked you up?"

Arlington opens her eyes. The light reaches the tips of her sneakers. "Yes. Yes she must have." Her knee bobs in place. "Of course she did."

"What did she say?"

"I think she must've asked me about my day. She would've definitely."

Lady with Clipboard raps a pen against the sheet of paper pinned in front of her. Arlington reaches back into the recesses of her memory. She sees a woman, but the woman has no face. "Sorry," she says. "I'm sorry."

Lars steps forward with his arms crossed over his chest. "Arlington," he says. "Are you going to be able to do this?"

Arlington looks down at her shoes. The ray of sunlight highlights their wear, makes the gray stand out. Even after being put through the wash there are traces of mud caked into the laces and the seams that hold them together.

"Can you give us what we need?" Lars asks.

The Howler does not have names for emotion. Things are always felt in translation, the physical reactions of its supplicants. It has no word for surprise, but that is what It experiences now. Of course, It knew the small crowd with their unwieldy apparatus would end up atop Its platform. It knew they were there for a purpose, a purpose connected to It. But the waiting, all the useless noise exchanged back and forth. Not a single ride. At least a test run, a few carts sent downhill at even a moderate pace. That is The Howler's purpose.

But no. Not today. This unnerves The Howler. It has never felt like background, like simple detail. *I am the head? And am I not the heart?*

Most of the little people carried themselves and their odd equipment out of The Park. It seems whatever they were after, they got it. But one of them remains, still standing on The Howler's platform, gripping the wrought iron railing and staring out across The Park. There is something about this one. There is a feeling there. A kind of . . . something. Something The Howler can recognize.

Stay, it thinks. Stay as long as you like.

It's been a while since Arlington told her story. Not just in relative terms, in the forty minutes or so that have passed since Lars and his crew packed up and called it a day. No. In the scope of Arlington's life, in the decades that have passed since her mother's death – and she will call it that now, unlike her father who clings to his own suffering and refuses to recognize the obvious – in all that time, she's spoken of things so little. That's why she needs the objects, to remind herself of the idea of permanence. The chipped yellow mug, the nightstand Bible, the bumble bee brooch.

She's spoken of things so little she's forgotten there were things to say; forgotten that her family, and the others, made national news. For a week at least. She can't remember what she told her second boyfriend about Claire, after she'd moved away, in those few years where Arlington and her father lost touch. And when it comes right down to it, no, she doesn't remember the last words her mother said to her, or the last

look she gave. When she thinks back, when she pours all her effort into remembering her mother, the image that comes most readily to mind is a blank face.

Sometimes she sees the blank face in a glass box, with a plaque underneath like you find at the museums in the City, telling you what kind of species is preserved before you: Claire McNamara, *Homo sapien*. It should say Mother, Arlington thinks. It should read Mama. But there should be no case. There should be no walls, no distance, no time between them. She should be here. For God's sake, why am *I* still here? Arlington thinks.

She looks up The Howler's tracks toward its peak. She imagines walking up them and standing at the very top. What landmarks could she make out? Are there any in this place, outside of The Park? Of course there are. Of course.

This Sunday they're fighting for the belt. Moffit spent most of the day preparing for tonight's festivities. He folded out the plastic table, the one that stays propped against the wall next to the painting of a bulldog headed down a waterslide. Moffit draped the red and white checkered tablecloth over its surface. He scratched at a few of the greasy stains and took only a moment debating before licking a sample of ancient crumbs off his thumb.

The table is laid out with chips and dips of all variety. Moffit himself is partial to the kind with ridges. He likes the way they dissolve unevenly. He eats them one at a

time, letting them stew in his saliva before a quick chomp and swallow. Sometimes it reminds Moffit of the summers he spent on the road with his ex-wife Valeria. Of the many sheets of acid they took together, locking eyes, holding hands, feeling the beginnings of a trip coming on. Of the many potato chip and slim jim dinners, when the money got short and the days stayed long. She taught him a little Spanish, because he asked her to. He's forgotten most of it but he remembers the sound of Valeria speaking it. It sounds like in a dream, when the noise from the outside world weaves its way in. He thinks about her often.

Potbelly and The Cockney Hen are trading insults in the ring before the match begins. "And tonight," Potbelly says, "I'm kicking your sorry little ass all the way back across the pond."

The Cockney Hen responds in his thick, almost certainly faked, English accent. Moffit rarely gets upset, at least upset enough to express it. But he doesn't like it when people point out that wrestling is a sham. Of course it is. The artifice is the magic. It's an elevation of violence to art. It's pageantry, loud and bold and unapologetic. Moffit respects these qualities because he does not possess them. He would like to perform.

"I'll pry that belt off your yankee corpse if I have to," says The Cockney Hen. God, Moffit hopes Potbelly wins.

Despite the elaborate spread, Moffit is not expecting visitors. The chips and dips are part of his own solitary ritual. Eat, be merry, watch Potbelly defend his title. This is

the extent of tonight's plans, which means at first Moffit convinces himself the knocking cannot possibly be coming from his door. It must be the neighbors. They're always having company, keeping the TV on full blast well into the night – they like the sexy channels – leaving pungent but recognizable smells behind them in the halls.

Even on the second round of knocking Moffit remains seated. The men have taken their corners. The ref stands in the middle of the ring.

“Moffit.”

Shit. He knows that voice. It's a voice that at every moment feels strained, but not in a bad way. In a way that suggests its owner understands how difficult things can get, how hard it is to speak up, a voice that exerts effort to stay upright and deliver its message. Arlington's voice. He mutes the television and strides to the door. She's waiting on the step with her arms crossed. She asks if she can come in and Moffit nods.

She stops at the threshold, observing the table full of junk food. “I'm sorry,” she says, “you have company?”

Moffit rubs his hand over his elbow. He feels absurd, now that a guest has arrived. “No,” he says. He points at the TV. “WrestleMania.” It's early in the match. Potbelly and the Cockney Hen circle each other, waiting to choose their spots.

“Oh,” Arlington says. A few too many moments pass. “Can I sit?”

Moffit says of course and offers Arlington a drink, which she refuses. He stays standing on the opposite side of the room. The blinds are drawn. The only light comes from the television's hazy picture.

Arlington apologizes for showing up, she just, there aren't many people she feels she can talk to. And that's what she needs now. Just somebody in the room.

Moffit says nothing, but he moves to take a seat next to Arlington. The cushions hardly shift as he lowers himself. He is so light, Arlington thinks. Moffit's lightness is a property of his character, not of his body. He sets himself gently wherever he goes. And that takes effort, unheralded effort, for a man like him.

Moffit links his fingers. His hands hang in front of him. "I can be that," he says. "Somebody in the room."

"I saw another one. Just now," she says. "A spirit I mean. In the middle of the road. I thought I hit something, I mean I heard a thump and the whole truck shook and I saw it, I saw a dog there right on the yellow line."

Moffit asks Arlington to slow down, to breathe deep. His hand twitches. He keeps it flat against his leg. She finishes explaining, about the dog she saw, the noise she heard, and the empty road she left behind after investigating.

"I think, I mean they always carry messages, but I think this one had something important," Arlington says. "Something I really needed to hear."

"What was it?" Moffit asks.

“That’s the thing with spirits. They never say it out loud.”

“Could it have been . . . something else?” The pause in the middle of the sentence is obvious, exaggerated by Moffit’s fumbling attempt to grip a phrase that will suggest, as politely as possible, that Arlington might be mistaken.

“No. I know this time Moffit. I know so certainly what I’ve seen, and maybe even why it was sent to me. But I can’t tell what direction it wants me to go in.”

The wrestling match progresses. Potbelly lines up for a top rope Hog Drop. He slaps his elbow and launches toward the Cockney Hen. The two men fall to the mat in a sweaty heap. The crowd roars.

“Do we ever know?” Moffit asks. “Spirits or no, life isn’t always A to B.”

“You don’t believe me.” Moffit is hurt when Arlington says this. It would have been impossible for him to account for this moment when he set his features this morning, she thinks. His face has no choice but to shrivel.

“I believe in you Arlington. But if there’s something you want to hear, I’m not sure I could tell it any better than your spirit did.”

Arlington rests her face in her hands and watches the TV through her fingers. Potbelly has the Cockney Hen pinned but the smaller wrestler twists and kicks out of the tremendous grip.

Arlington sighs. “I’m sorry Moffit. I don’t know why I came. I shouldn’t impose on you like this.”

Moffit wants to tell her to stay. He wants to say she's not a burden, not to him or anybody else, and that when he heard her voice through the doorframe he had all sorts of childish thoughts about why she might be there. Most of all he wants to look into her eyes and see past them, through them, and know the words she's begging him to say.

Potbelly is out of the ring now, looking worse for wear. He's been tossed by the Cockney Hen who showboats standing on the turnbuckle, flapping his faux-feathered wings.

"I think," Moffit says. "I think maybe it's reminding you that you have a choice, Arlington." He picks at a loose thread in the cushion beneath him.

Arlington stays staring at the TV. "Could you turn it up," she says.

Moffit fumbles for the remote. The commentator's voice surges.

"And here it is folks. I'm just not sure how much more of this Potbelly can withstand. It has been an absolute onslaught from both competitors here tonight and you just get the feeling this thing is getting settled sooner rather than later."

The Cockney Hen gives one last flurry of beating wings. He lets out a screech, a scream far too human and real for the circumstance. It is a deep yell that spawns from soul-deep, congealed hatred. He spreads his arms. Cameras flash and he's flying, floating, never coming down.

He's aimed right for Potbelly, who is stood now but wobbling and defenseless. Until the last possible second, when the larger man takes a simple deft step to the left

and the Cockney Hen hurtles head first into the scorer's table. It's not clear how serious things are.

"Oh! Oh! Oh my goodness ladies and gentlemen! What a turn of events. Potbelly lulls the Hen to sleep and pulls *that* out of his bag of tricks."

But Arlington knows. She can tell, even before the camera cuts away.

The announcer's voice goes quiet but the crowd still rages. "And wait just a minute here folks. I think the Hen is hurt. I think that fall really took something out of him."

Potbelly has climbed back in the ring. He pumps his fists.

"Arlington?" Moffit says.

The crowd quiets now, although the noise has not ceased, only been sucked into a smaller container.

The announcer is still talking. The scorer's table is cleaned off. From the wide camera angle Arlington sees a group of green-clad attendants wheeling in a stretcher. Moffit repeats Arlington's name. She cannot look away. She hears something like water rushing down a creek, and the cries of a wounded dog.

"It's fake," Moffit says. "You know it's all made up. For ratings." He gestures at the screen with the remote. "He's all right. He'll be ok."

Arlington keeps watching.

“This is truly tragic,” the announcer says. “A dark day for the sport we love so much. And there’s not much we can do now but say our prayers and keep the Hen in our thoughts.”

Moffit hits the power. He gets up off the couch and walks to the sink. Arlington stares at her own blank reflection in the black screen. There has to be something, Arlington thinks. Something that will save us.

The Howler never sleeps. It has no need for rest, so It can’t quite explain what It feels. But tired would be the closest word. In need of a slow day, a time to gather Its wits.

There was something satisfying about today, the lack of expectation. Yes, a ride or two might have been nice for a stretch, to be able to look at the day and feel like something got done. But The Howler asks now: *What happens to the ones that never come back?* The one-ride wonders, the people that climb Its steps, board Its carts, and then vanish.

Where did the woman go, on a night like tonight? And won’t she come back, so The Howler can cradle her a little longer?

As night descends and the stars populate the sky, The Howler does nothing but think. And in Its reflection It comes to a conclusion.

I am the head. I am the heart. But I could be more.

Ruby Slippers Trailer Lot sits in a circular clearing of unkempt grass. The trailers form a neighborly Panopticon, front facing windows all looking out into the shared supposed-to-be-green space. In Arlington's five years at Ruby Slippers most of the homes' occupants have remained consistent.

That's all except the Black Widow, the trailer that sits catty-corner to Arlington's on the back right side of the clearing. For many years the woods here were used as a dumpsite for local pulping plants and meat packing stations. Excess fluids or animal and plant remains were disposed of in ditches dug into Earthen valleys between the hills that dot the landscape, some of them tall enough to be called mountains in this part of the country, given their own names and histories. Those valleys were not as flat, or as far from human settlement, as hoped. Though it's unlikely anyone would have cared had they known, other than concern over the risk of liability and the cost of potential settlements.

The runoff seeped into the soil and spread through underground tributaries to the land outside the clearing now called Ruby Slippers. In fact, it was the condition of the polluted soil that allowed Ruby – birth name Redna – to purchase the plot for herself, clear it, and turn it into cheap housing. At first, the development circumvented the worst effects. Residents avoided drinking the tap water, and the few children that lived in the lot were directed West for playtime, told not to spend more than a minute

splashing in the creeks. But over time, the filth crept in silence until Dinnie Havlacz noticed she was walking up a slope, ever so slight, to reach her bathroom.

When she looked out into the patch of grass behind her trailer, the tulips that had sprouted in their plastic milk jug planters were brown and shriveled. And when she stood still Dinnie could hear the sounds of the mud swallowing her home. Ruby was adamant the issue could be resolved without outside involvement. "The Slippers is a community. We see to each other's needs. That's what separates us." So to stop Dinnie and her cats Chester, Pine Nut, and Fleece Teddy from drowning in a toxic sinkhole, Ruby erected a series of wooden stilts around the trailer, joining the exterior at odd angles and hammered deep into the ground. Eight legs in total.

The effort couldn't stop the trailer from slanting, but it kept the Earth from digesting it in totality. Dinnie kept measurements and complained to Ruby, demanding reductions in rent for every quarter inch in subsequent sinkage. Those savings were offset by the gallons of filtered water Dinnie was forced to purchase to replace the supply cut off when her plumbing shut down. Her yard was soon filled with empty containers that stuck in the squelched ground. Dinnie had always been reclusive, but she grew even more so. She was never married and had no family that any of her neighbors knew of. And although the mud didn't take her home, it did take two of her cats.

Pine Nut was the first to go missing. Arlington was moving in the morning Dinnie realized. The older resident was wary about letting the cats out, but Pine Nut found a way. Arlington watched Dinnie poke her way through a field of plastic refuse and offered help. The offer was accepted, but they didn't speak much. "Pine Nut's a good boy." That's about all Dinnie said. The ground reeked, and Arlington tried to salvage that pair of sneakers but ended up tossing them.

A week later Alfie Cruts found the cat during a shift at the pulping mill. At first it wasn't clear the thing was Pine Nut. It was missing fur in tufts and had nicks of flesh taken out all across its body. "It's in a sorry state," he said. But Dinnie was adamant she had to see. She had to know what happened to her good boy. Pine Nut was buried in a plot North of the lot. Some of the other residents came. That was the first time Arlington met most of her neighbors. She said a few words at the ceremony.

"I wasn't fortunate enough to know Pine Nut. But I'm certain he was a good boy, because he was loved beyond belief. It's hard to say goodbye, but we have to trust he was taken for a reason. They say cats have nine lives, but I think really that's just a metaphor for the fullness of the way they live the one they're given, and the enrichment they pass on to those who are lucky enough to meet one as special as this cat was."

Dinnie appreciated that. She invited Arlington over for coffee on weekend mornings, and they prayed the rosary together, which Arlington hadn't done for some time. Dinnie's grief was apparent to the rest of Ruby Slippers, and most of all to her

only friend. She doted on Chester and Fleece Teddy more than ever. Over time, the light in her trailer went out earlier and earlier, and coffee mornings were pushed back later and later until they became coffee afternoons and only once every other week.

Arlington had experience in similar situations. For a while she lived by the 9 o'clock rule. She had to stay up that long. It ended the day quick, but it was long enough to count a full day expended, without bearing any extra guilt. Some days she counted down the minutes.

The other residents at Ruby Slippers began to call Dinnie and her trailer – because in her isolated condition there ceased to be a difference between the two – The Black Widow, in reference to the spindly wooden legs that kept her trailer upright, and in mockery of the loss of one of her three “cat grooms.” Losing Chester, and the nature of his discovery, proved too much for the poor woman.

Arlington was the only one Dinnie called upon to help search. By that point Dinnie and the rest of Ruby Slippers had been alienated one from the other. And for some, Dinnie’s refusal of their assistance was the final straw. “They well know what they’ve done,” she said when Arlington mentioned it might help expand their search radius. “It’s them what took him. Can’t have community after the fact.”

When efforts around the lot proved fruitless, the pair made their way to Pine Nut’s gravesite. There was a sense Chester might have gone looking for his old friend. The small patch of ground there was caved in. The field was damp. Dinnie was certain

someone from Ruby Slippers had dug him up, and that whoever had was also keeping Chester hostage.

“But the smell Dinnie,” Arlington said. “Well, don’t you recognize it too?”

She did, she admitted at last. “It smells like home.”

Arlington took Dinnie back after that, and set the older woman down in bed telling her to rest. “I’ll get Alfie. He can take me down to the plant. You just get some shut eye.”

Even then the fever was coming on. Dinnie had grown weaker each second of the drive back to Ruby Slippers, down the gravel drive to her trailer in the corner. She could hardly keep her chin above her chest. Dinnie held Arlington’s hand for a long while before she let her leave. “Yes Mags,” she said. “Yes that’ll be nice. Why don’t you bring me along? Daddy and I used to sail. The wind. Oh you’d love it Mags. The feeling of the wind. On your face. Flying Mags. It was like flying.”

Alfie resisted at first. “She didn’t want my help before. She can dig her own cat out of the damn mud.”

“She’s dying,” Arlington said.

It was as Arlington feared and expected. They found the two of them together. Chester was still a recognizable shape under the mound of sludge, although he bore marks similar to Pine Nut upon the original discovery. Worse, even, but Arlington chose not to dwell on it.

Pine Nut was, of course, far, far gone. "There are so many parts missing. Where do they go?"

"At least they're together," Alfie said. It was hard for either of them to speak after that. Although they did agree it wasn't worth taking the remains home. And thankfully, Dinnie was not sound enough to make the visit to identify Chester. She hung on for longer than anyone at Ruby Slippers thought she would. Arlington visited but was terrified of being there when it happened, and during those visits she couldn't help but think about a person being sucked underground. Swallowed. Digested. Spit up somewhere with half their features eroded. Arlington imagined how far that person might travel, how long it might take to find them, and how scared that person would be. The realization must come all at once.

Fleece Teddy was the one to notify Ruby Slippers when her owner succumbed, a week after Chester went missing. She scratched on Arlington's door and howled. That sound is often reserved for canines but not in the case of Fleece Teddy and her grief. She howled a long, screeching, mournful meow.

Dinnie did have someone who cared. They cared enough to pick up the body, and mourned so much as to hire a lawyer and a surveyor and take the mill to court. The battle is ongoing. Sometimes Arlington hears an update on the radio or glances at something in the paper. She has never met the woman named Margaret. Arlington would have liked to hear from her. She's always felt she owed Dinnie a final goodbye.

Arlington wakes before her alarm, set for 5:00. She is afraid of the night, but not the dark. Morning darkness means something different. It is less weighty. And for Arlington it inspires a different kind of reflection. She doesn't think about what might lurk in the shadows. She isn't burdened by the accumulation of another day's rituals.

Hope. That's what morning darkness means. Because the sun always comes, and the birds always sing. And looking out across the patchy lawn in front of Arlington's trailer, toward the woods and the little creek called Numbfoot, Arlington can imagine whatever she likes. She can face the dark, like she can face another day.

Arlington stretches in the mirror. She adds an extra ten reaches toward her toes and a few more arm circles. You'll need them, she thinks. It's a big day at The Park. Today, the Halloween season begins. The holiday is three weeks away, but in Marcannen things start early. After The Park closes to guests, the staff will stick around to help decorate. The performers will be awarded their roles. And the rides, well, they'll run like always.

She bathes, brushes her teeth, scrambles a few eggs and brews her morning coffee. While she eats, still in her bathrobe, she seeks through stations on her portable radio. She's hoping to find that voice asking for help, the one she heard in her truck.

"That's right goblins and ghouls spooky season is officially upon us," a feminine voice says. "It all kicks off at The Park and this year we've been promised bigger, badder, and bolder than ever before."

They say this every year. Usually it means a new character or some over-priced addition to the food stands: Franken Fries, Wolf's Blood Milkshake, The Mummy's Mac N' Cheese. Arlington lets herself try the new dish every year, even though she knows it's a scam. Sometimes you can buy in without selling out.

"You early birds have got a while to wait but keep your radios tuned right here to 93.7 WMCZ for the big time reveal later today."

Arlington turns the dial and listens to a few bars of some bubblegum pop song then switches the programming again.

"And why? Why is it we feel so comfortable asking? Asking God for help, for the answers to *all* our problems. Since when have we become so selfish that--"

Arlington moves on. And on. And on, until she's well into the static. Now the turn of the dial does nothing but reset the fuzzy hum.

When she arrives at The Park, the day both crawls along and passes in an instant. She greets Moffit and they share their morning on the steps of their respective booths. Little is spoken. Something hangs between them today. They are friendly as always but their interactions at the coffee pot are tinged with an awkward self-awareness.

They find themselves stuck in the hallway trying to work past one another. Moffit lets out many oops, and if he could just squeeze by, always happens like this doesn't it? Arlington gives the courtesy back and also nope not your fault, well great minds think alike.

So for a few moments they're trapped, so close to touching. It would be less uncomfortable if they weren't trying so hard to avoid it, to scrape through the day without incident. They find their way out of each other's orbit, and things stay unsaid.

Things are busy for a Monday, which Arlington appreciates. It gives her something to focus on, a distraction from the preparations advancing around her. Sibley wheels tubs of decorations all over The Park on a tiered metal cart.

"Here you are Arlington," he says, hauling a plastic container filled with wispy cotton cobwebs and cut out Jack-O-Lanterns. "Make it look nice for me huh?"

Arlington thanks him and turns back to her counter, reading through today's names. Sibley stays put on her metal steps.

"You are staying to decorate aren't you?" he asks.

Arlington stays facing forward out towards the parking lot. "Of course." Gildo made a return today. Arlington smiles.

"There's a surprise planned you know?" says Sibley.

Arlington tells him yes, she knows, it was on the radio.

"I think you'll like it. Got a special secret look this year setting things up for the announcement."

The announcement. Arlington laughs. "Oh I am just bursting with excitement Mr. Sibley."

“Oh, Sibley’s fine. No mister. Not the married kind at least.” Sibley forces a laugh and stays perched on the lowest step.

Arlington keeps riffling through her forms but has trouble concentrating on the names.

“Exceedingly single, old Sibley,” the man says. “So I’ll see you there then? The Howler, once The Park’s closed? Got a little stand set up, microphone and everything, all wired up nice.”

Arlington lets out a soft sound of affirmation.

“Good, good. You won’t want to miss it Arlington, really. *You’ll* want to see, promise.”

The Howler has an inkling of what is happening. Changes are being made. Tonight The Park will transform. The little people will pay homage to their steel gods. The Howler’s walkway and platform will be adorned with the symbols of its status. The season has come again.

And of course, like everything else here, it begins with The Howler. Already a crowd gathers at Its base jockeying for the best view. The Howler notes something else about the day. The woman returned. And what are the odds that she would be one of The Howler’s soldiers? A guardian to Its vast estate. It hardly noticed her before. But The Howler has no more time for wondering. The festivities begin.

Sibley spent the last five minutes digging around behind the lectern trying to get the microphones working. The Speaker, a man Arlington has never seen before and whose introduction was lost in a sharp screeching echo, stands to the side tapping his foot.

Arlington smiles at the absurdity of it all. Two easels stand next to the lectern, one on either side. They are draped in cloth, outlining the square shape of whatever promotional material hides underneath. Framing each one is a young woman – one blonde, the other brunette. They are both dressed in cartoonish versions of The Park uniform, the front tails of their yellow shirts looped through the neck hole, leaving their mid-riffs exposed, and the black pants sawed off near the upper thigh. They must be cold, Arlington thinks. She knows they don't work here.

Arlington stands in the middle of a small group of performers, having deferred Moffit's offer to walk to Safari together, saying she had a few last names to count off but she'd catch up. She knows where he stands, centered in the crowd, towering over those around him. He does not turn to look for her.

The local news forms a wall near the front of the mob, reporters, cameramen, and crew spilling out in a semi-circle that curls around the crowd. The performers next to Arlington, still dressed in their Lizardmen costumes, grumble and curse at Sibley. "Bad

enough they make us stay late, and that idiot had all day to set things up but still found a way to fuck it up.”

One of them, a shorter man in his late twenties, jumps to Sibley’s defense. “He’s trying though. Not like we’d know any better.”

“It’s not our *job*, kiss ass.”

Another few minutes pass and Speaker shoos Sibley from out under the lectern. Sibley’s face is beet red and the fall sun reflects off his slick baldspot. Speaker says something and the custodian lowers his head, walking off to the side and away from the crowd.

The unfamiliar man steps up to the lectern and coughs into a closed fist. Then he raises both arms with his palms outstretched. The shoulders of his brown suit jacket rise and threaten to engulf his small head.

He shouts, trying to quiet the anxious crowd without the aid of the microphone, which droops in its stand looking disappointed in itself. “Excuse me.” Arlington can just make out the words. “Excuse me!”

The performers next to Arlington continue griping but a hush falls over the rest of the audience. “Take your hood down,” one of them says. “I can’t see over.” The performers start to pinch their target and direct light kicks at the back of his knees until he undoes the elongated neck of his costume.

Speaker has begun his statement, and again Arlington missed the introduction. The performers, always noisy, always fighting, she thinks. But the Lizardmen have turned their attention to the lectern, and Arlington can hear.

“And our world here within The Park cannot be isolated from the tragedies that take place outside it, as badly as we wish that it might be so.”

An odd point to join the rest of the audience, Arlington thinks. She sends an undetectable angry glance toward the performers.

“There are times for frivolity and play, and there are times for solemnity and solidarity. It is no longer conscionable that we defer those tragic tales that exist within our gates, that have shaped the lives of so much of our staff.”

Arlington shifts her weight back and forth between her feet. Different this year. She tries to imagine what gimmick they could be going for, what food item would tie in with this grandstanding, but the mental effort yields no results.

Speaker pauses and coughs into his hand again, voice strained by the need for constant yelling. Arlington sees that some of the audience members have unsheathed camera phones from pockets, sensing the final imminent reveal.

“And so.” Speaker’s voice cracks as he continues. He coughs once more. “And so, bearing such a spirit in mind, it is The Park’s great honor to announce that this year, coinciding with the annual Halloween festivities, we will host the world premiere of the latest film from visionary director, playwright, and documentarian, Lars Twittle.”

A murmur rushes through the crowd. "Who?" one of the performers asks. "Quiet, he's still going," another says." And so he is, the Speaker still speaking, but Arlington doesn't need to hear another word. She knows what's waiting under those cloths beside the lectern.

Arlington feels gravity lessening, although her feet remain planted to the concrete. Her insides threaten to float up and away, leaving her empty shell behind to go through the motions. She focuses on her breathing but the pins in her guts distract her. She looks up over the Speaker and stares at The Howler's highest point. She can imagine herself standing there, peering down.

Speaker steps back from his stand. The young women lift the covers off the easels and the audience applauds. Arlington feels recognition come in waves. Murmurs ripple out from where she stands looking up at The Howler. She is the pebble dropped in still waters. The epicenter. The head. And the heart.

The performers elbow each other and attempt sly gestures, pointing at the easels and then back at Arlington. The crowd inverts, heads turning away from The Howler and towards the woman whose face adorns the posters.

Arlington still breathes, still in pain. This year, she is on the menu.

This is a development. A most unexpected one. The crowd gathered at The Howler's base winds its way toward the exit. More precisely, towards the woman, who backs away. She shrinks from their attention, which The Howler finds strange.

Is this jealousy? Or is it relief? An odd storm brews within The Howler as It tracks the mob's movements, the required words unknown, unsayable. It cries out but no one bats an eye. It's not sure whether this desperate act is a heroic attempt to save the hunted woman or a selfish plea for attention. The Howler settles on the former, because It does feel that *something* towards her, an affinity, an overlap.

The people swarm. Their march breaks apart as some of those closest to the back fight their way through. A buzzing grows. Pockets of subdued, polite violence open in the crowd. Bumping, "accidental" elbows. Some fall over and are stepped on. Others take stray knocks to the ribs or the temple but manage to stay upright.

Oh my. What fun is this. What a spectacle. Something to hold The Howler's attention.

But a second realization occurs, underneath the marching and reverberating cries. *I am the head. I am the heart. I could be next.*

Arlington does not stay to decorate. She weaves through the sparse layers of bystanders behind her and ignores their unapologetic stares. Most of them don't bother to whisper.

“That’s right. I’ve seen her up at the booths.”

“She comes in the locker room all the time looking for Sibley.”

“Poor thing. She’s about to cry.”

Arlington senses the stampede growing behind her but doesn’t look. She speeds to her truck and listens to the chaos unfold, feeling the pools of sweat under her arms expanding.

Most of the staff is courteous enough to stop their hustling at the first few rows of cars, gawking from afar and wondering what makes this average-seeming woman special enough to warrant the attention. The media members have no such shame.

Men and women scribble notes on pads of paper. They glance up and down desperate to steal every detail of Arlington’s life they can manage. *Rusted hub cap. Mud caked tires. Mower in bed: recently acquired? Cobalt paint job. Short: alligator arms. Sweat stains: half-moon patterning. Gray-white sneaker: laces untied.*

Arlington scrambles in and plants the key in the ignition. Horror movies are her father’s favorites, the old black and white classics that are goofy but effective on someone with an overactive imagination. The key never works on the first try, or the second. Not until the last moment when an undead arm punches through the window and prompts a blood curdling scream.

Watching those scenes, Arlington couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit sad for the horde. Those mindless, shambling, once-human creatures. She wondered if there was

something within them that knew they were monstrous, and couldn't help but be pulled along. A speck of revulsion, or of humanity, that stayed put. She feels no such sympathy now.

Luckily and unfortunately for her, this is not scripted. This is real life, Monday after work. The key turns and the engine starts. Arlington peels out of the lot and onto the freeway before anyone can reach her. The radio is on. Her foot presses flat against the pedal. The engine roars its hardest. All the noise sounds far off. But there are words there, coming from the radio programming, maybe, or coming from The Park.

"Of course we must ask. But the answer is always the same. Faith. Faith in me. Faith in humanity. Faith in the world that I have created and the creatures I have set upon it."

Arlington's eyes are set on the road but they work on their own, interpreting data for the rest of her body to act upon. Her hands on the wheel react and twitch without being directed. Her foot stays firm on the accelerator. Arlington has lived like this for months at a time, squarely in auto pilot. Consequential months, where decisions were made, friendships ended, opportunities lost. Months where she followed along behind herself watching, horrified.

"I see you. I see you there on the road. Even this far away, even as you flee, I watch. Take solace in this: that you are given the choice. You are not frozen in place."

The frantic flashing of massive brake lights rattles Arlington back into herself. She slams on the brake and veers across the road onto the shoulder. Her trucks' wheels kick up a spray of gravel that scatters down the low sloping hill of yellow grasses. The cab rattles and Arlington's arms vibrate long after she's come to a full stop. Her body aches but she's alive and thankful she's been stretching.

Cars whiz by as traffic eases up. Drivers glance in her direction but none stop. After a few minutes she pries her hands off the wheel, breathing feeling back into each finger one at a time. She sidles across the middle console and out through the passenger side. Her legs wobble but she finds firm footing on the hill, supporting herself against the side mirror. The truck is marred by the claws of stirred gravel, but the paint was already chipping. The back tire has blown and tiny wisps of rubber point out in all directions like fabric torn along the seam. The rim remains whole, scuffed, scarred, but intact. Inspecting under the sideboard Arlington can tell the axle has bent. It will take more than a fresh tire.

An officer arrives ten minutes later and asks Arlington the set of standard questions. She answers in as few words as possible, a strategy Dean ingrained in her, and accepts when he offers to call the towing company. The officer attempts to engage in small talk while they wait and Arlington indulges him only to the barest minimum of politeness.

“You work at the park then?” he asks. Arlington donned a blue windbreaker while waiting, but the trademark yellow shirt peeks up around the collar. That indicates enough. Her response is curt and monosyllabic.

The officer is young and eager. He is the type that’s always paired with the gruff, cynical, days-from-retirement detective in cop films, the other genre Arlington’s father loves. But he is here alone in his well-maintained uniform and this sort of small routine will make up the total extent of his life’s service.

“Do you know any of the performers?” he asks. “I know they switch but there was one lady, doing Guinevere, she really cried at Arthur’s Grave I think. It was amazing.” He goes on. He’s just had a son, named Steven. His wife’s able to get on the rides again. Arlington has no window to answer his initial question, although it doesn’t bother her. If someone can’t handle the silence, they should be the one to fill it.

“She loves it. All the rides. We’ll spend whole days there on the weekends open to close. Some of the operators they actually recognize her. They let us get one last go in the two of us before they shut them off. It’s that kind of place and we’re that sort of patron you know? Big fans. Oh yeah, big big ones.”

Arlington slips her hands in her jacket’s side pockets. She rolls a bit of loose change around her fingers. She keeps spare bits in most of her outerwear. A way to keep hands busy, and she likes the metallic smell that sticks to her pores.

“Got a sitter lined up already. Can’t miss Halloween. Never have never will. Not as long as we stay here. Hell I’d travel cross country if I had to. Special day for us.”

“You ever think about leaving?” Arlington asks. The coins in her pockets chime. Cars keep rushing by.

The officer, having for a moment forgotten conversation is reciprocal, asks Arlington to repeat herself. She does, and peeks at the small brass rectangle that bears his name etched lengthwise: RICHARDS. Yes, a name she is certain to have seen on her forms many times over, although there is no telling if this is the man who would have signed it. It is a name she passes over without second thought.

“Oh I don’t know,” Richards says. “Just thinking out loud. Sometimes she gets restless, especially lately with the baby. Her family’s south near Andover and it’s hard for the in-laws to make it up these days.”

Arlington nods. “That’s near where my father stays.”

“Well shoot whereabouts?”

Arlington explains he had a place near Dollar General with a little rock-rimmed koi pond, and he’d open the garden up in the summer time for people to come and take a look. “He’s moved now, so he could be looked after properly.”

Richards understands. “I’ve had thoughts of my own,” he says, “about moving on. I never thought I’d start a family here, right where I was raised.”

“Don’t break your neck looking backwards,” Arlington says. Something Dean used to tell her. “Young man like you, you’ve got plenty of time.”

Richards rubs a hand over his jaw. He has little patches of stubble that some day might connect to make a whole. “I just. Well sometimes it’s sort of like. Oh never mind.” He waves as if swatting his own thoughts away. Arlington looks at him. She’s not trying to communicate anything, other than surprise that Richards has come up short for words. But to the young man, her face says something. Something like go on and speak what you need spoken.

“I get scared sometimes.” Richards finds the words. “I just see these patterns in the way of things. And I get worried I’ll become a part of them. The older guys, they all have stories you know? Bad ones, some of them real, real not good.” He rubs his hand over his chin again, like the feeling of stubble will remind him he’s a man now, fully grown. “I see my son in those stories. On both sides, the one doing the hurt as often as the one receiving it.” He looks at Arlington, hoping to pry some unknown necessity out of her. “If he turns out wrong, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“You try your best,” Arlington says. “That’s all we can do, even when it’s not enough.”

“That’s right,” Richards says. “You have kids of your own?”

Arlington shakes her head no. "It's those stories. But I see myself in them."

Arlington remembers the ant hill, the magnifying glass, the gutted frog and the pocket knife. That is my side of things, she thinks. The one holding the instrument.

The tow truck comes and hauls Arlington's vehicle out of the gravel trap. She climbs into the vaulted passenger's seat with a hand from Richards and takes a glance at her truck's dysfunctional remains in the side mirror. Richards wishes her well. Says he'll look for her on Halloween. She smiles without teeth and waves down to him.

"Well pretty lucky all things considered," the mechanic says pulling herself out from under the lifted truck. "Needed the two and the axle needs replacing but most breaks do anyway, no matter how minor, with the risk of a weak weld just making more problems. Shouldn't be more than an hour though."

Arlington takes a seat in reception on a small plastic chair that reminds her of the kind they keep in classrooms. There's a TV in the corner, playing the night's news in hazy quality. Arlington knows it's inevitable they cover Lars' premier, so she asks the teenager working behind the desk if he can change the channel. He gets up without a word and heads through an opaque glass door on the far right side of the room.

Arlington hears some grumbling, one exclamatory fuck, and the vibrating clang of metal on metal.

A minute later he's back in the reception room holding a small step ladder under his arm and sucking on this thumbnail. He sets the small ladder up and ascends,

handling the TV by a corner and inspecting the buttons on the side. Arlington feels embarrassed, wishing there was even the sparsest of ornamentation on the walls to give her a reasonable excuse to be looking anywhere but at the boy.

Before he can hit the right button the news flashes back from commercial. There's a bright red banner, and an image of Lars' movie poster covers the right side of the frame. The boy goes cross eyed staring at the screen, then shoots a direct glance Arlington's way.

She stares back, determined not to look like that woman on the TV, hands folded, mouth curled mid-tremble. She will remind them she is not a prop, no matter how hard they try to turn her into one. And yet a desperate relief floods her when the picture does change and the boy climbs down from his perch. He does not look up again.

The next morning a nightmare compels Arlington to consciousness. Arlington is robbed of that transitional period between awake and asleep and thrust into the state of things. She is a celebrity now. She imagines the phone will begin ringing soon.

Arlington does not roll out of bed for some time, but while she sits and stares at the arched popcorn ceiling in her bedroom she stretches. She starts by wiggling her toes, feeling them come back online. Then she tenses her calves, focusing on each achilles tendon and drawing the line from heel to calf. She works all the way up her body, flexing each muscle, feeling every bit of connective tissue. She reconstructs

herself, tracing the strings that hold her together, both real and imagined. This is something she taught herself. An exercise she uses.

While she reminds her body it is capable of facing another day, part of Arlington grasps at straws trying to pick out details from the nightmare that vanished. She has always had trouble remembering the things she lives in her sleep. Maybe for the better. She has theories as to why. Arlington's grandmother Doreece was a prolific dreamer. She was also blind. And even in her sleep sight never came to her. She spent many nights nearly-conscious, shrouded in black listening to whatever the dreams would give her. She used to tell Arlington about them, probably because the rest of the family had long since written her off.

Dean's family was the practical type of religious. They had room for the bare essentials, for Mass on Sunday and each of the Seven Sacraments. But a blind woman's dreams meant little, especially when Grammy insisted on recounting every word verbatim. But Arlington had patience, and a love for all things otherworldly.

She often told Doreece how much she wished she could dream like her Grammy does.

"We each bear our own burdens, Arlie," Grammy would say. "Whatever gift you have, bless yourself it appears awake, and you might actually do some good with it."

Grammy got meaner as time passed. The dreams came less often, or at least Doreece wouldn't talk about what they said to her. "They don't want to disturb an old

woman anymore. They know I need my rest now.” But the circles under her eyes grew darker, and her body frailer, until the day came and Grammy had no more to share.

Stretching complete, Arlington pulls herself out of bed. Each step is imbued with purpose. Arlington traces her way across the trailer’s linoleum flooring, weaving a circuitous pattern across the cramped rooms. This way she will not get lost. She will remember that today and in the days to come, she has somewhere to come home to. Even if that place is here.

Arlington brews a pot of coffee and fries an egg, which she lays on toast with the last few slices of past-expired ham that barely pass the smell test. She takes big bites and forces herself to savor them. She doesn’t worry about crumbs or the gooey yolk that runs out of the back side of her sandwich and through gaps in her fingers. She will eat, she will sleep, she will stretch. She will go to work. Even if it kills her, she will live. That she has resolved. It is one of the few options left to her.

Arlington dresses, pulling a clean, yellow collared Park shirt from a hanger in the closet and gliding each leg into one of her many identical pairs of black pants. She looks at herself in the mirror and reads the messages stuck up around the border, written on sticky notes in her own handwriting. It’s always looked more like Dean’s, she thinks. If she hadn’t written them herself and committed them to memory, it might be difficult to make out the cramped script, the total lack of curvature blurring the space between words. But she knows the messages. They are words that belong to her.

After filling her thermos and packing her bag Arlington makes one quick run back to her bedroom. She reaches into the gap under her bed, grunting and bringing out a moth-eaten shoebox. It's marked with several labels written in Sharpie, each crossed out and replaced by the one beside or on top of it, the product of a string of hectic years consisting of several unplanned moves.

Arlington studies the contents. She withdraws a brass brooch shaped like a honeybee in mid-flight. Arlington knows she will be singled out today. Every guest that passes by, every performer that saunters in late, every eye in The Park will perceive her and make her into someone else: the woman from the poster. She will need something to remind herself that they do not make her. That no matter how compressed the story of her life becomes, she was here before and she will be here after. For that, the brooch will suffice.

The Howler senses that things have died down. For now. Even after all the commotion, The Park feels the same. Well, a few changes have been made, but those can be ignored from this high up. It's a good spot. A consistent one at least. But after so many years, after so many rides, wouldn't it be nice to perceive from somewhere else? That idiot, immobile Spinning Heads has prime real estate at the entrance. The Howler could be content there. And It would draw the crowd straight in, without having to

wait. It imagines the feeling of ten thousand soles on pavement, a rushing and anticipatory applause. Yes, it would be nice.

Is it a waste to be in the center of it all? So much orbits The Howler, but is Its gravity too strong? It attracts so much of the feeble flesh and blood. What does It repel? The Howler does not like how rapidly questions like these form. It was not built for reflection. It was built to inspire awe. And yet It finds more and more difficulty in doing Its duty. Perhaps a rest would do some good. For the day. So that tomorrow, It might find joy in the screams of Its patrons once more.

Arlington keeps the radio off on the drive in and sits in the front seat picking at her nails before she's able to get out. It was easy being brave in front of the mirror. Here, the eyes that stare back at Arlington are still her own, but ballooned to the size of fists and rippling on plastic banners hung between the ticket booths.

As soon as her feet touch pavement Arlington hears the clacking of heels and slithering sound of cables skating across the ground. The devil works hard, and local news even harder. Arlington closes and locks the door before turning. A tall woman stands with her long slim arm at a perfect forty-five-degree angle, microphone in hand.

"Few steps back Charlie," she says to the cameraman. His equipment doesn't seem as nice as Lars's setup, although Arlington doesn't know for sure. She's just

guessing based on the abundance of wires looping over his shoulder and between his legs. He scoots back a few paces, sneakers squeaking.

“Ms. McNamara,” the woman says. She keeps the microphone placed in front of her lips, even without the camera rolling. Lady with Clipboard. Woman with Microphone. Arlington and her Booth. People are so easy to reduce, Arlington thinks. Oh, the woman’s kept on talking.

“Sorry,” Arlington says. She waves a hand and starts toward The Park’s entrance.

“Just a few questions! Please Ms. McNamara.” The news team follows, the reporter keeping pace as Charlie falls further behind, slowed while navigating through cords like a dense jungle canopy.

“After work maybe. I’m just here to do my job today.”

“You don’t have anything you’d like to say?”

“It’s already on film.” The reporter walks parallel to Arlington, microphone locked in place.

“How was it working with Mr. Twittle? He’s legendary you know? He’s made subjects into stars. Do you think you could be the next?”

“I’m happy as is.” The booths are close now.

“Are you? What about your father?”

Arlington stops. The woman takes a few more steps before skidding to a halt.

Arlington knows she should stay quiet and keep walking. "What about him?" she asks.

"It can be hard when a parent reaches a certain age. How is he?"

"He's fine." The morning is cold even with the sun. Arlington wishes she had an extra layer.

The woman lowers her arm, although her grip on the mic never loosens. "I think you should give him a call."

Arlington's cheeks flush. Her toes go numb. "Can't you all just let me have some part of things to myself? I shared what I wanted to. You'll see it soon enough."

Arlington picks up her stride just as Charlie's catching up, the wires somehow even more tangled than before. A few have made their way up around his adam's apple.

"I think you ought to ring," the reporter calls after her. The pair don't follow any further.

Arlington locks herself inside her booth and lowers the shades. She sips her coffee and feels the outline of the bumblebee brooch. The stinger which once pricked Arlington when she snuck into her mother's closet to try it on has dulled. The clean ridges that separate sections of its abdomen are worn down, so the accessory feels like a piece of taffy left in a drawer and calcified. But it's not the shape that matters. It's the fact that it came from the shoebox under Arlington's bed, and that today she chose to wear it.

There's a knock at the flimsy door that makes it rattle in its frame. Arlington sighs. "Hours are on the window. Park's not open and I'm through with the interviews." She drinks from her mug and turns to look through the square-framed window set into the booth's back entrance. She sees the bottom half of a yellow collar and the swoop of a long neck where it joins wide skinny shoulders.

Moffit steps down the metal stairs as Arlington opens the door. She mumbles an incoherent apology and he replies with a shrug. His hands rest in his pockets. Arlington notices how his wrist bones stick out at funny angles. She realizes she's staring and decides to look away, but her eyes have nowhere to go but towards Moffit's. There is a silence. The long kind.

"I wanted to tell you," Moffit says. "The Hen's gonna be ok." He withdraws a hand from his pocket and scratches the crown of his head, so high up.

Arlington realizes what he's talking about midway through her vague reassuring response.

"It'll take some time," Moffit says, "but he'll walk again."

"Oh. So it was as serious as it looked then?"

"Well, spines are sensitive. But it could've been even worse. They had a doctor on the radio said so."

"I guess him alive, that's good news."

Moffit nods. Arlington smiles and begins to retreat back into her booth, shutting the door half way.

“Also I’m sorry.” Moffit shifts on the steps and they make a sound like sobbing.

Arlington cracks the door a hair more.

“Just for . . . about all this.” He points toward the banners with Arlington’s face.

They are still now that the breeze has gone.

Arlington thanks Moffit. “It’ll pass.” She shuts the door.

As the day goes on more and more eager spectators gather in The Park’s lot.

Charlie and Woman with Microphone hang around for a while and a few more news crews join them, some from stations that seem better funded. Their cameras are cordless, their clothes neat and pressed with iron-on labels bearing channel names from places further down the interstate.

The reporter from this morning must have spread her story about the encounter with Arlington, warning the rest of the media to steer clear for now or risk scaring their subject off. That, or they communicate through the subtle straightening of a blazer or practiced toothful smile. They’re still out there though, and sometimes a camera trains itself on her row of booths. Arlington strains to make out any blinking red lights.

She’s proud and a little surprised to have staved them off for this long, even if it cost her a tire, a decent night’s rest and a sizable chunk of her sanity. Arlington cannot, however, do a thing about The Park’s visitors. Her line dwarfs those at the other booths

and the whole of today's crowd seems to funnel into her winding black lane like the last bit of bath water being sucked down the drain. The day is busy but that doesn't help it go by any faster. It does mean she can ignore the performers who arrive for the afternoon shift and make no bones about directing their most jealous and uncomfortable stares her way. Their words still carry.

It's a strange feeling being observed. She knew she'd be the spectacle, but the attention is somehow diffuse. When families and couples point her out, standing right at the head of the line in Arlington's cone of vision, it's as if they're turning her see through. She thought today would make her feel her most visible, but it's only making her hollow.

She remembers her ninth birthday at Klutz's Kastle. A pizza spread in the private dining room – all cheese, her favorite. She's wearing a creased golden paper crown, the glitter falling onto her t shirt and sticking in her hair but she doesn't mind. Penelope Koehnig tells her she looks like a princess and she decides she thinks so too. She knights Johnny with a greasy slice, the last one from the box in front of her, and although she's careful not to touch him with the crust little orange dots of grease drip onto his shoulders. He hands her two fists full of long lines of arcade tickets, most of his winnings from the day's games. He's trying a silly deep voice and telling Princess Arlington about the dragon he found sleeping on this pile of riches and she's thinking this is her best best day.

That's when the curtain draws back and Arlington and all her friends look up at the small stage on the opposite side of the room. It's Klutz and the rest of his band. But they look so different in real life. She can see the bunny's metal hinges. The creaking they make drowns out the crackling music playing over the speakers. Klutz's head bobs back and forth and one of his two long ears is folded down halfway. His arm swings up and down but off center of the stringless guitar glued to his body. She asks Dean why Klutz is naked, why he's moving like that? Is there somebody inside there underneath all that fur that looks pee-colored? Dean assures her it's just a robot, an old, very old one. But Arlington is not convinced.

That's how she feels now. Like the woman inside the suit.

Today's patrons have much to say *at* her but few of them want a response. Even those that express condolences and explain how moved they have felt for her sign their forms quickly and move on to idle chatter. Marcannen's Double A team will play for a title. Now's the time for broccoli and carrots. The high school is putting on *Midsummer Night's Dream*, no Shakespeare's always been in the Fall and Senior's choice for Spring. As Arlington files away her forms and listens to the visitors, she hears her own joints creaking and feels the whirl of gears turning inside her. But that's silly, she thinks, and she needs to snap out of it. She reaches for the bee at her collar.

A young family steps forward and the amply-mustached father asks if he can get a picture. "We're not from around here," he says. The smooth shortness of his vowels

communicates this just as well as the words he speaks. "We were doing the ghost tour in town and we saw the flyers. We love this part of the country. You find the most interesting stories."

Arlington slides the clipboard through the flap in the glass.

"Something about these places," the man says. "Like they were made to be haunted."

Arlington runs a thumb over the bumblebee's abdomen. "Sign here."

"I mean we've been up and down and all over and I can tell you there is nowhere like Middle America. Gives me chills just thinking about some of those trips." He smiles wide and leans down to sign.

Arlington notices a glob of green phlegm burrowed in the bristles beneath his nose. She smiles back.

"Say, about that photo?" The man raises the digital camera hanging from a strap around his neck.

Arlington keeps her smile at its widest. "Try the zoo. Those animals can't talk back." She calls for the next in line and the man is tugged away by his wife, his eyebrows creased in confusion.

Arlington will crawl out of the suit. She will poke through its eyes and rip at the seams until her nails bleed if that's what it takes. She can scream louder than screeching rusty hinges and garbled tinny music. She will be seen, not spectacted.

The day winds down but the lines stay long. Arlington doesn't have time to take a proper break so she eats her leftovers cold straight out of the Tupperware. In between a few large bites of ziti and a muffled "Next!" she notices Sibley wobbling across the parking lot cradling his bucket of tools. His breath comes heavy, mouth forming a perfect O-shape as he pushes each one between his lips. His forehead is redder than usual, and his curly fringe of hair slicked and straightened from sweat.

A skinny ride operator wearing platform boots waits for him near the edge of the lot, standing in front of the row of booths to Arlington's left. He taps his foot and crosses and uncrosses his arms like he's not sure which stance will best convey impatience.

"Hustle up Sibley the line's only getting longer," he says.

"I'm hustling, I'm hustling." Sibley rushes past the other man and back into The Park.

One of the rides must be down. Arlington wonders which one. Her wondering ceases half an hour later when an announcement comes on over The Park's PA system. It plays on conical speakers mounted on a tall pole in between each set of ticket booths. The voice sounds tired.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, The Howler will be closing early for routine scheduled maintenance. We apologize for the inconvenience. The Howler will now be closing for routine, scheduled maintenance. Thank you for your patronage." The speakers die with

a loud click that echoes through The Park. The sound bounces off every tangible surface. A chain of grumbling lances through the line leading up to Arlington. People stroke their necks and crack their knuckles. A few let out curses full volume, and parents are too distracted to cover their children's ears. The mob shifts from foot to foot and looks up at the mechanical beast that lies at the center of The Park, in the center of their hearts.

Each person's anxiety amplifies the next. They seem to understand there is nothing routine about this. Arlington freezes with her clipboard to her chest. For a moment she fears things could get violent. Yes, she can see it. Men and women toppling over the black nylon ropes fixed between stanchions in line. Grappling, rolling, screaming.

Teeth. Somehow this is the detail she focuses on in her imagination. White brilliance. Yellow decay. Crimson blood. The terrible force of a bite. The mark it leaves behind. And she will have to join. She will have to submit her teeth to the fray.

"Just this line here?" The voice of the girl in front of her brings Arlington back. The crowd is quiet. No one bares their teeth. No one seems to have heard the message.

"And initial in the corner please." Arlington grips her brooch. The line keeps moving.

After her shift Arlington stays to count the names, committed to seeing the day through to the bitter end. Most of the news crews left sometime during the day, but

have returned now. Delaying the inevitable is part of the reason it takes Arlington so long to sort through her stacks of forms. That, and she's never had so many people pass through her gate.

Loda L. Oisteray. Jumbo Popp. Kern Flounder. New names today. Many new names. And no Deans. Arlington is surprised to have thought of her father without being prompted. Then she remembers the reporter's words from this morning, the urgency in her voice.

Moffit gives a rap at the door. He offers to walk with Arlington to her truck but she refuses. "It's all right," she says. "I can handle them."

"You know, there's another event this Sunday. I mean I know the last one wasn't all that it . . . well it didn't do the sport justice. And I don't know if you have plans arranged on Sundays but I figured time out of The Park, with a friend, right now, it might be nice for you. It would be nice for me at least." Moffit says all of this at a speed Arlington thought him incapable of.

She rubs the back of her neck. "I'll have to look at the calendar. Things have been hectic so I've been a little out of it. And well, well wrestling's not really my thing Moffit."

He nods and slips his hands into pockets. "No I understand. You do have my address on the off chance."

Arlington taps the few remaining waivers in front of her.

“And I meant it Arlington. When I said I’m sorry.”

Arlington can’t tell if she’s walking as slow as she thinks she is or if the world around her sped up. The second she emerges from her booth the news crews notice. And it doesn’t matter how long it takes for the rise and fall of each of her strides, because they’re coming towards her. They are professionals, here to do their job just as Arlington showed up this morning to do hers. So why does she feel so afraid?

She’s never gotten this far in her own self-interrogation. What is it about these people that scares her so much, that makes them seem like sharks smelling blood? Is it possible, maybe, that they’re not the monsters?

Arlington hears tires squealing from her right. She turns to see a long black town car heading her direction. It glides to a stop and a tinted window rolls down, one of the many in a long row.

“Need a ride?” Lars flashes a smile. The door’s already opening and before Arlington realizes it, she’s climbing in.

Ah. What a lovely rest. It’s nice not having to function. After all, there are so many days, even more rides. For a while The Howler liked to count. Those were early days. That was long ago. It was The Park at its height. The Howler in Its prime. What It

would do to go back. Of course, time is a funny thing for the ride. It has never slept before today. It didn't know It could.

The Howler knows It was missed. Or at least needed. There's a difference. The Howler strains against the metal roots that fasten It to the Earth. For once It would like to see from down low. It would like to move off the rails. These people have a choice. They don't always take the same paths, although they always end up at Its feet. Wouldn't that be nice. Are there other Parks out there? People tend to walk in pairs. *So why not me?*

There is no language for this type of loneliness in The Howler's consciousness. It is an urge and a pain. It is the paint chipping from the handrails, the holes in the cart's seats. It is the rust underneath the tracks and the never ending chunk-chunk-chunking of the winch dragging passengers toward the peak.

Can they not let me go? Will they always feel the need for repairs? Why must I be both the head and the heart?

This is a problem. The Howler is not ready to return.

"I'm sorry Arlington. I thought you'd be excited. I know it's a big deal around here, this time of year. I just want as many people as possible to hear your story. I think it could change things for them. I think you could inspire something real."

Arlington's thermos rolls off the seat and all the way down the aisle. It thuds to a stop against the plastic screen that separates her and Lars from the driver. "You should have told me first," she says.

"I see that. I was wrong. I'm not too proud to admit it. I never intended to hurt you. I want what's best for you, believe me."

"I want to see it. I want to watch it before the screening, the whole thing."

"Of course."

Arlington is surprised Lars gives in to this request but she refuses to let that show.

"I'm not some hack Arlington. And I'm not the Hollywood type everyone claims me to be. You know I grew up about two hundred miles from here, in one of those little towns right along the Lake? I lost the accent, sure, but I'm not the kind of man you think I am."

"How do you know what I think about you?"

Lars laughs. "Because I know people, Arlington. Especially our sort of people. It's hard to trust, I know that. But my Daddy raised me on the principle of faith. That's all I'm asking for, a little bit of faith."

Arlington's thermos slides under the side row of seats as the car makes a left turn. She and Lars are sitting across from each other, face to face. Their knees brush. "It's not that simple," Arlington says.

“It could be. I’m being straight with you here. Why do you think I showed up today? I’m trying to help you Arlington.”

“This isn’t charity. I know you need me to sell this thing. There’s a reason you have me on the posters.”

“You’re on the posters because it’s your story. And do I want the project to succeed, yes, of course. For all the hours that everybody poured into this, and for all the people I think it could help. So please, can you accept my apology?”

“Would you take me back to my truck please.”

Lars sighs. He offers to take Arlington home, he can arrange for a car to pick her up and take her to work, for as long as she needs and until she’s comfortable again and free of the vultures. But she likes the ride and it won’t help things pretending to be any more than she is.

“I know how to deal with pests,” she says.

It’s quiet on their way back. The dogwoods that line the road are growing sparser but the leaves that remain are a brilliant red. Arlington remembers spending time reading under trees like that at Grammy’s house and how the leaves left red-rimmed shadows. She saw her first spirit sitting under a tree like that, a cardinal hidden in the foliage until it made a fuss flying away and came so close to Arlington’s face the breeze turned the page for her. Arlington wasn’t even the one who knew it had been something supernatural. Grammy did. “A bird always flies with a message,” she said.

As they pull back into the lot, Lars speaks. "When I was a kid, I was terrified of crayfish. And we used to find them all the time in the streams by our place, where all the neighborhood kids used to go and play. I mean I was just disgusted. It seems sort of silly now but if I think about it and I remember those first few times I ever saw one, I can still access that. That visceral feeling, the want to run away or scream or just let that energy out somehow. And it got so bad, and I was so afraid, I wouldn't go anywhere near the creeks. Middle of summer, no school, everybody I know is down splashing in the stream and I'm practically locking myself in my room because I can't handle those little beady eyes or the way their spiny legs move. But my father, well, he saw what was going on. And he asked me about it.

At first he thought it was the other kids, that I was having problems. I told him no, nothing like that. So he just kept asking 'What is it Lars? What is it? It's summertime, you should be out there, what's wrong?' So I admitted to him, I'm scared. Scared of the damn crayfish."

The car stops next to Arlington's truck. The door is locked, and Arlington's trying to figure out when that happened to begin with. The divider stays rolled up.

"The next day, and I haven't left the house in probably a week by now, Dad's home later than usual. He comes in holding a fresh water tank and wouldn't you know, inside there's a crayfish he poked straight up out of the stream bare handed. Now I'm screaming and hollering and telling him to get it out of the house, but he just walks

straight into my room without a word. Sets the tank down on my desk and he tells me, word for word, little guy's a part of the family now and he's my responsibility. I put up a big fight but well, Dad had a way of getting what he wanted. His word was the final one, certainly." Lars shifts in his seat. He coughs once to clear his throat before going on.

"And so that crayfish became my first pet. No dogs, no cats, crayfish. I named him Monster. A little on the nose, I know, but I was a kid and what do you expect? Now, about a week later, things are barely getting better. I'm feeding Monster, I'm doing as Dad told me, but still every time I look in that tank I shudder. I think about a hundred Monsters, crawling all over me, pinching and jabbing. I'm going down to the stream now but just because I know that's what Dad wants. Still won't go anywhere near the water and now the kids are really starting to get on my case about it. So I come home one day real upset, crying.

And so Dad, well, he realizes it's time for a change in tactics. He comes into my room and tells me to sit on the bed and watch. There's something he wants to show me, a lesson to be learned. So I do what I'm told. I sit there and I watch. I watch Dad pick Monster up out of the tank. His little legs are squirming trying to get free, like he knows what's about to happen before I do." Lars balls his hands into fists.

"Dad picks up Monster in two hands, and he just wrings him." Lars performs the motion, fists rotating in opposite directions. "Head pops straight off, Monster's torn in

two. Dad drops the bits into the tank and he tells me to clean up the mess. And I guess it works. At least, I wasn't scared of crayfish anymore."

Arlington sits in silence as Lars rolls the screen down. He says something to the driver and the car door pops unlocked. Lars reaches under his seat and pulls out Arlington's thermos. He hands it over. "I know that was long winded. I'm just saying, please don't make me into something I'm not. Things get difficult when that happens."

The drive home is uneventful and taken in silence. At home, Arlington flips on the TV and sets a pot to boil. She notices the light on the phone blinking but decides to ignore it. Probably just fan mail, or another request she has no time or patience for.

There's been a hurricane, a bad one, somewhere far away of course. A tropical storm would have to strain pretty far to reach here. In the first of Arlington's three semesters at university, she lived with a woman from Florida, an older lady coming back to school but staying on campus. They would swap disaster stories, tornadoes vs hurricanes.

Arlington has always found it curious that tornadoes don't get names. At least not human ones. She knows it probably has something to do with the science, like most things, but she wonders if they might be treated differently happening somewhere else. But likely it's because they form too fast, and anthropomorphizing a disaster after it's

happened seems ghoulish. Still, a name makes a thing stick, and sometimes we forget too fast.

When Arlington hits the power, she sees the phone's light blinking in the TV screen's reflection. While she eats, it's still flashing in the corner of her eye. Clearing the counter and rinsing the dishes she spies it in the window that looks out onto her small lot. And when the rest of the lights go out and she's dressed for bed, it lights up the whole of the trailer and leaves a spot in her retina.

So she sighs, and presses the damn button. Four new messages. The first is from the mechanic's, letting her know they've got great deals on new brake pads and they've remembered seeing some wear on hers the other day. The second is a station wondering about a short profile before the premiere, to expand her brand, and by the way the story has had such an immense impact on the staff. Third, someone from Over the Moon, letting her know they'll be sending some fabrics her way to select for the red carpet. Don't worry we have your measurements.

Fourth message, a number and a voice she already knows. "Arlington. Well I know this might not be the best of times but there's something I'd like to talk with you about, and I think it might be best in person. If you wouldn't mind coming down here." There's a pause. "And it's your Dad, Dean, by the way." The receiver clicks off. No new messages. Would she like to hear any of them again?

It takes Arlington three days to decide whether she's going home. In that time, more messages are left on her machine, none of them from Dean. He knows if his daughter's coming, she'll come. There have been messages like this left before.

In those three days Arlington heads to work each morning, completes a full shift, and returns home. She pins on her bumblebee brooch and uses it for comfort. When men and women like the father from The City request photos or autographs she refuses, and when children stare she stares back. But her body performs these acts of subtle defiance on its own. Arlington's mind is occupied by the message.

Most of the news teams show up after work, and although Lars does not step in himself Arlington notices the same pair of bald men appear at the end of her shifts and give cool, threatening stares to the media through dark lenses. The reporters try to flag Arlington down but their apprehension shows in the politeness of their advances.

In the three days, she and Moffit speak as coworkers, and as if there is someone else in the room keeping track of their conversations. Arlington keeps the door to her booth closed and locked until official Park hours and Moffit no longer knocks. Since her visit to his apartment the distance between them has widened. Each time the simple questions are deferred they become more difficult to ask. Arlington does feel some guilt about things but she has so much else on her plate. It's easier to let things slide back into place the way they used to be, two practically-strangers working in their identical metal cabinets.

It feels like failure but that's hard to name out loud. Arlington was seeking help that night, looking for answers, and things changed when she realized Moffit didn't have them. He's just a man. He's just like her. So it's hard to look at him now.

The most surprising thing to happen in those three days is something that doesn't happen at all. The Howler sends no tides. It's beginning to become obvious The Park has a problem, and although people still come to see the new Halloween theme take over or to ogle Arlington in her booth, there's a sense the crowds will not last.

Not without The Howler. It is the head. It is the heart.

The third day, Arlington counts more names than she ever has before. By the time she's through the rest of the ticket booths are empty. All the way down the line their lights are shut out, blinds drawn. As Arlington withdraws from her station she takes a look to either side. The booths go on and on. The Park could be its own universe, always expanding, adding force to the pull of its gravity, collecting more and more of the metal cubes and their porches. Arlington thinks if she were to start walking down the row, it could stretch for miles. It could take her years to find the end, but if she did she would find another version of herself. One from the past, or the future, beginning the same journey she just completed, taking the first steps.

She doesn't want to walk forever. Instead of turning left or right, or moving through the lot to her truck, she steps along the concrete path to the door marked *STAFF*. It's unlocked. The locker room is silent. The light in Sibley's office is on but

peeking through the frosted glass Arlington can tell no one's inside. He must be out working on The Howler.

The purple carpet looks so plush. Arlington pads up and down the room and decides why the hell not? She sits on one of the fake wood benches and unties her sneakers. Then she kicks them off. She leaves her socks on, who knows what the performers track in around here, but grips the fibers with her toes as best she can. Pushing off from the bench Arlington glides through the rows of storage, feeling friction where the soles of her feet rub against the carpet, the soft give of the loops of carpeting parting and the rough drag of her socks clinging to the fabric.

There's the snap of static electricity and light shocks along her feet but nothing to slow her down. Arlington skates around for a while until labored breaths come in bunches. Setting herself back down on one of the benches her hand reaches too far under and her fingers spark against the metal pole that fastens the seat to the ground. Arlington gnaws on the end of the effected hand. Her saliva is hot but soothing.

The door that leads into the hall opens and Sibley walks through. He's not alone. In one hand he holds his orange bucket of tools and the other pulls a small boy along. His hair is long and curly and he feigns a limp just like Sibley's.

"Oh hey there Arlington." Sibley smiles and sets down the bucket. "This is my grandson, Jude. Say hello now Jude." The boy waves but is too shy to speak. Sibley leans down and whispers something, then pats Jude on the head. His curls spring.

"Hi miss Arlington," the boy says. He has such a little voice. Sibley beams.

Arlington has no idea what to say. She is so shocked by the implication Sibley has a life outside The Park she can only start with clarifying questions.

"You have family?" She catches herself and adds, "around here, I mean?"

Sibley looks down at Jude, still smiling. "I wish the little rascal would be staying. But no, he and his Mama are visiting from out West."

Arlington says that's lovely and she hopes Jude has a wonderful time, he better be back when he's tall enough to ride all the rides. She's still stuck on the fact that this little boy will expand into a man roughly the shape of a Sibley. And that the caretaker himself has lived a whole life with people who depended on him and maybe missed or despised him, or both. Sibley hasn't always been balding, hasn't always had one eye that droops lower than the other. He hasn't always dragged that orange bucket around. He's been more than that.

"We'll get out of your hair now." Sibley walks to his office door and opens it to let Jude in ahead of him.

"Thank you," Arlington says. "Thanks, Sibley, for the necklace. It was thoughtful."

"Oh, it was nothing." He waves a hand to bat the compliment away. He's turning to his office again when Arlington follows up with a question.

"Do you know what's wrong with It?" She does not need to specify any further.

Sibley purses his lips. He waves his hand again. "It's all routine maintenance. Nothing to worry about."

"It's been three days Sibley."

"I'm trying, Arlington. Believe me, everything I can. Whatever I got in the wheel house."

"You have any theories? Anything at all?"

Sibley sighs. "Well, I'm not a man for conspiracy, I want that on the record." He grimaces and rubs his elbow. "It just doesn't seem like an issue of pure mechanics."

Arlington nods.

"I know it's funny, Old Sibley been here since creation and all that. Whatever people like to say about me. I don't pay it any attention. But I can tell you there's a reason they keep me around. I know how to do my job, I swear. And well I'm stumped. People want Sibley to come with the easy answers. But right now, well right now it seems like the damn thing doesn't want to be fixed."

"Have you tried talking to it?" Arlington asks.

Sibley laughs. "I'll add it to my list of options. Running short anyhow. You have a good night now Arlington. Whatever's going on, it'll clear itself up."

On the way home Arlington thinks about The Howler, and about Sibley, and of course about the message. Perhaps it's time to think about taking some of her own

advice. Maybe her issues aren't purely mechanical either. And maybe it's been too long since she's been home.

The trip to Dean's is about three hours. Arlington called in this morning to say she needs the next few days off. The voice on the other end of the line seemed understanding, and Arlington can only hope her message makes it up the right channels. She's only called off work once before, in her first couple months. That was one of those times when getting out of bed didn't seem possible.

It's an odd drive, every minute of it. There are moments when merging on to a highway or county road that Arlington is hit with specific and guilty bouts of déjà vu, where her past trips home converge with this one and she can trace the roads back to the places she's come visiting from before. In those instances she feels younger and more self-assured, which makes the flash back to the present all the more jarring. But Arlington knows those memories are a sham, because she's never made this drive all-the-way willingly. There's always an itch to turn around at the gaps in the barriers where the cops wait, or the stoplights that slow traffic running through small interstate towns.

On occasion she has to remind herself how fast she's going. And yes one twitch of the wheel would put her in a ditch and give her a great excuse not to visit, but it would come with other consequences too. Arlington would never do that. But it's scary

how easy the thoughts come, only raising alarm bells upon introspection. At some point the silence is too loud and she's got to turn the radio on. The stations are different out here. Arlington surfs through static, tuning to higher channels than normal.

"Did you know testosterone levels are lower than they've ever been? Did you know that? Did you? Explain that to me without using the words tap water and GMOs?" Arlington can hear spittle flying through the car's speakers. She changes the station.

"It's not a matter of if but when. Folks if you're too stupid to see through the lies they are force feeding you I don't know what to tell you. Wake up and take a big ol' sniff, alright, and tell me what you're smelling. Because my nostrils are full up on this crock of starts with an S, ends in a you know H-I-T." Dial.

"And we know the natural world is of our God, who is after all the Almighty Creator. So what we see in nature we see in ourselves, in our towns, and in our families. Who are we to cast judgment upon nature, and therefore upon our Lord?" Dial.

"Allegations of a disturbing nature brought forward nearly two years ago. With the release of his first album since the civil settlements, and the announcement of a new world tour, the artist had this to say to reporters outside the venue." Dial.

"Today wrestler Potbelly announced he will forfeit his monthly earnings and donate them to the Cockney Hen in order to cover the steep hospital bill. It's a move some have lauded with others labelling it a shallow PR stunt. We reached out to both

athletes but neither was available for comment." Arlington settles on a Spanish broadcast. She can't understand but the music is nice.

Arlington remembers making the drive on just one tank, but she has to skate into town in neutral to reach the pump. She watches the numbers get higher, doing the math on just how many hours she'll need to break even on this trip and thinking about the wages she's losing second by second.

The station is cleaner and bigger than it used to be, in the same spot but bearing the name of a regional chain this time, the same place Arlington stops at some days for a taquito and a syrupy Coke on the way home. But there is no way her brain can deceive her. This is not Marcannen. The air is different. There is a feeling of startling clarity to it. Not that it's cleaner, but Arlington can pick up the scents it carries clearer, she can sense the relative weight it carries into her lungs and she feels lighter as she exhales. There is a taste to it, like something burnt. She can feel it touch her, the same sensation she gets standing upright at the bottom of a pool. It has tangible pressure although Arlington moves through it like normal. This place is sharp. This place is still home.

Arlington walks into the station after her tank is filled. It's relatively populated. As a teenager she and her friends would often spend hours loitering here, going in every once and a while to buy a round of snacks and distract the attendant on duty while someone smuggled single tall boys out of the fridges in the back corner. Shanice

got a job there working evenings on weekdays and they had someone on the inside. For about a month, at least, until the manager Sammy did inventory and realized there were half a dozen bottles of liquor missing and unaccounted for, and about three times as many cartons of cigarettes.

Arlington stayed away from the drinking for the most part, but she loved to smoke. It was satisfying the way the burnt-down butts fit in the neck of a beer bottle, how ash piled at the bottom and you could see the stack growing through tinted glass. That was a big fight between her and Dean. He quit when Claire demanded it. Arlington started because she knew her mother would've hated it. She quit recently, doctor's orders, but she buys a pack for the hell of it.

Outside, a group of kids kick a skateboard back and forth in a wide circle, trying to hit each other's shins. One of them sees the packet of cigarettes and asks to bum one. Arlington doesn't mean to smoke them, more bought them to have a familiar weight in her hand, and she doesn't have a lighter, which she tells the boy wearing a cut-off t-shirt from some metal band whose name begins with HELL. The boy's pulling a lighter from the back pocket of baggy blue jeans when his friend rockets the skateboard into the back of his leg. He lets out a fuck and crumples to the ground. His friends laugh and when he tries to yell at them for being little shits his voice cracks. They laugh harder and imitate the high pitch.

Arlington feels the tear in the plastic where she started to undo the packaging. She hurries back to her truck and tosses the cigarettes onto the floor beside her. She stares at them for thirty seconds before starting the car and pulling out of the station. The kids are playing some kind of unhygienic version of tag now, spitting at each other and stopping dead if they get hit.

Arlington decides to take a detour before heading to Dean's. Even the last few times in town, she hasn't been to the old neighborhood, the house with the koi pond and the place she was raised. She finds the street easily enough: McIntosh, which turns into Leftwich half way down for no discernable reason. This created a healthy rivalry between neighbors. Each half held separate block parties, almost always scheduled the same week, sometimes the same day. Organizers on both sides would call the fire department to set up barricades in the middle of the street, and one truck would stay to put out the fires that started in a trash can or on the grill. Accidents, of course, that's what the other side always maintained.

Arlington watches the houses as she passes, looking for the familiar frame that will point out her old home. But she keeps driving, and the manicured lawns and white washed brick walls keep stretching behind her. Her vision starts to blur. She has to grip hard on the wheel and will her eyes to focus. This is the street. This is where it should be. But there's nothing to recognize. She tries to make out numbers but the homes are set too far back, hiding behind semi-circle drives. Arlington opens the window and

sticks her head half way out. She slows. The truck inches along as close to the curb as she can steer it. But she's run out of space. A stop sign stands glaring in front of her. There is no more forward. She's lost her home.

Arlington pulls a U-turn in a cul-de-sac a block over and makes another pass down Leftwich-into-McIntosh. The shapes start to mean more. She can separate houses from the one's bordering them, although deciphering how they fit into her past remains difficult. And, like the start of a dream, Arlington appears at the curb and stares down at the yellow double doors of her childhood home. The truck rocks from the force of the brakes. Arlington's neck whips forward.. A path snakes around past the garage to the backyard. It's been set with stones, made proper. Dean always planned to turn that mud into something more, but he never did. Arlington thought he liked complaining about the dirt she tracked in too much. And it made sneaking out all the more difficult. He caught her once by the tracks she left behind, footprints he was certain he hadn't seen the night before. Dean has always been observant, and never afraid to share those observations with the people around him. People often meant Arlington, and that in turn made life with a teenager difficult for all parties.

There are no cars in the driveway. Where the grass grows it does so in overgrown gold patches. The gutters Dean worked so hard to install – with Arlington's steady and bored hand holding the ladder for long stretches – are rusted away in places like moth-eaten fabric. A suspicious stain mars half the wall under the front windows

that look out from the kitchen. So, Dean was the last thing holding the place together. He has a strong sense of place, an affinity for home and the necessity to “make things work.” Arlington knows it was hard for him to leave this place behind, and it seems the house shares that sentiment.

Arlington sits with her truck running and scans every inch of the property. In college, when she knew she was going to break up with her first boyfriend Lucas – the boy she’d thought would be the start of her real family one day – she spent their last night together touching every bit of him so she’d never forget. She traced around his knuckles and circled the smattering of acne on his shoulders. She wanted to feel every lump and crease and remember how to string them together to make a person.

Arlington remembers that night, but she can’t recall his shape. That’s what she feels now, the intimate sort of distance when someone you loved appears as a stranger.

Arlington takes her foot off the brake and lets the truck roll forward. She spots a For Sale sign in the corner of the lawn, blown over by the wind or ripped up by whichever group of kids stays in the neighborhood these days. She might know some of their parents, they might have been her classmates or her gas station group. A rush of air past the window and the mechanical click of spokes on a wheel interrupts her focus. A few of those neighborhood kids have taken their bikes out for the day. They loop in and out of driveways and up and off the curb, threading between the cars parked in the street. Arlington slams her brake again, and lucky she does. A young girl’s handlebar

slams off the corner of Arlington's hood and she's barely able to right herself with a few sharp steers. Arlington stares in the side mirror. The girl's lucky she didn't end up under a tire. Arlington pulls halfway down the sloping drive, ready to follow, when she thinks better of it. She takes a left out onto the street. Might as well just get on with things.

Dean's "new" place is a little ways out of town, on the opposite end from the gas station. It's called The Village, one of those complexes half a step away from a retirement home. They still have bingo on Sundays and catered meals five nights a week, plus their own reception desk and a nighttime nurse, but residents are allowed to come and go as the please, so long as they're able. And they can leave their doors closed and locked, depending on their circumstances.

Dean has a furnished apartment all to himself: a little kitchen with a microwave and a mini-fridge – but no burners or oven, a living room with a small couch and a TV screwed to a stand. His bedroom is spacious enough. There's a guardrail fastened around the room meant to help him up out of bed. It runs to the bathroom, which has had the door taken out of its frame. The tile floors are covered in rubber mats that help with grip, although Dean complains they trap stray streams of piss. He has a tendency to bump his hip on the metal railing, and his neighbors are notified when it's happened by the loud cursing coming through the wall.

Arlington has visited The Village twice, at least since it rebranded. Years ago, when she was just a girl, it was known as the Billows Cooperative. Grammy spent a lot of time living and working among the artists that moved in and out. She took Arlington along sometimes, although Dean didn't seem to think it was a place appropriate for children. The people seemed to like Grammy. They were her only real friends in the end. A lot of them came back to see her buried. When Arlington cleaned out Grammy's things she found an envelope. It contained an article folded up on glossy magazine paper and a tape recorder dictating the words. It was from some sort of local area lit mag. A student wrote about the work of some of those writers that stayed at Billows, and about a mystery woman that seemed to appear over and over, off hand, in their work. But that was a long time ago, before space became so vital. That was when Claire was still here, and when home hadn't yet closed itself off.

Outside the doors to reception is a bronze plaque, inlaid with the names of many of the writers, painters, and musicians who spent time involved with Billows at one point or another. Grammy's name is not there, and most of those that are have been obscured by bird droppings. Still, Arlington rubs her fingers over a few of them before heading inside. The woman at the desk is young. She wears scrubs. It looks as if she might have been sitting there all night. Her eyes are puffy. A stack of paper coffee cups is crumpled to her right, and a slew of half-finished sudokus are spread across the wooden surface.

Arlington explains she's here to see her father. The woman slides a clipboard in her direction and tells her to sign and list the time. So this is what it feels like to be on the other side. Arlington does as asked, then takes a peel off nametag and jots hers down in Sharpie. The woman gives Arlington Dean's apartment number and directs her down the hall and through another set of sliding doors to The Pavilion, an open green space bordered by ground floor apartments. They all look the same, tan plaster walls with a pair of windows set into the front, the exact type of silhouette you draw in crayon as a child.

One foot must go in front of the other. Arlington feels her insides wobble although her step is smooth. She passes a series of apartments with their blinds up. A balding woman cuts her toenails in the living room and lets the detritus fall where it may. A hairy man in nothing but a towel sits in a chair a few inches from the wall staring straight ahead. Arlington comes to Dean's apartment. Number 19. His blinds are drawn.

She knocks and listens. Growing up she knew her father's living sounds so well. He had a heavy step, the kind that ought to shake the house but doesn't. He sighed at the top and the bottom of the stairs, every time. The key stayed in the lock a few seconds longer than it needed to before he'd open the door.

Some days Arlington woke to him singing. He has a good voice. Not the kind that would sell out stadiums, but nice all the same. His voice matches the rest of him so

well, it was hard not to be comforted by it then. It made Arlington feel like there might be some kind of order, to the little things at least. Dean never sang in front of anyone besides his daughter. At Mass he was tight lipped, there to stand then sit then stand then kneel then stand again. It seemed like God was always a chore for him, or at least a relationship that he'd rather keep private.

The door to Number 19 opens. Not much about Dean has changed since Arlington saw him last. He's shrunk maybe another inch, now around the same height as her. He's growing out a patchy white beard. But he's the same man he's always been. That quality is Dean's greatest strength, and his overwhelming weakness.

"In now, in," he says. He's afraid I'm going to run, Arlington thinks.

Dean offers her a seat on the gray couch in the front room. The place smells like lemon, but the artificial kind they make into urinal cakes. Even the air in The Pavilion has a sanitized quality. A means to mask the scents of aging.

Arlington's father scoops coffee grounds out of a battered tin and loads them into a drip machine on the counter. She scans around the apartment. There's little Dean-ness about the place. A few decorations hang on the wall but they are the cookie-cutter and saccharine type he would never put up on his own: cutesy sayings in cursive script, golden stalks of wheat sculpted from sheet metal,

"Place looks clean," Arlington says.

Dean grunts as he turns off the faucet and presses a button on the coffee maker.

It begins to hiss.

“I know you didn’t want me down here just to tell me you’re dying,” Arlington says.

The coffee drips. Dean laughs. “No, could’ve left that on the voicemail. My neighbor did kick it last week though. Well, they found him last week.”

Arlington makes a face reading disgust. “Jesus.”

“Happens, places like these. Didn’t have any family for visits. Used to just hear the volume on the TV cranked up all the way. Must have had tapes and tapes of *Jeopardy!* That’s all I ever heard. Big nuisance that man.”

“I’m sure there are people that say the same about you.”

The coffee runs in short streams now. Dean sets his back to the counter and folds his arms. “I’m sure that there are. But when I die, I’m gonna make sure I do it kicking and screaming. Make it known. I’m leaving no smell behind, and nobody’s prying me out of bed with the sheet stuck to my skin.”

“I don’t need the details.”

“It happens. Saw a story about a man fused to the couch.”

“Please, Dad. I know this is a guilt thing. But I’ll be there to collect you from the morgue no matter what condition you’re in, all right?”

"You say that now." Dean turns back to the coffee pot. It's on its last few drips.

"It'd be easier to believe if I saw you more than once every other."

"You can't pull that one after I tell you I'm seeing through it."

"There's nothing to see through, Arlington. It's the honest truth. You don't visit anymore."

"Well I'm busy. Too busy to be wasting my time on silly conversations like this one. I hope to God there's more sense to you calling me down here than complaining over coffee."

"There is, you'll be pleased to know." Dean takes the coffee pot from under the drip faucet. "I just wanted to start with some pleasantries and simple conversation with my daughter."

"How's things, then?" Arlington asks. She leans forward and her hands sink into the gray cushions.

"Fine, thank you for asking."

"My goodness." Arlington shakes her head.

Dean sighs. He's still holding the pot of hot coffee. "Why is it that every little thing I say is met with hostility?"

"Would you pour me a cup please."

Dean pulls out two mugs and pours them full.

"And cream please," Arlington says.

"You never took cream before."

"I never did living with you."

"You know black's better for your health."

"What story did you read that in all those years ago?"

"You know very well that was your Grammy's wisdom." Dean sets a mug down in front of Arlington, then returns to stand by the counter.

Arlington stares at the coffee-sans-cream. "Grammy said a lot of things."

"She did. If I recall, most of them you believed. Or was that only when we were around too?"

Arlington takes her mug in one hand. She pictures the plaque outside and apologizes to Grammy for bringing her into this. "She always had a lot to say about you," Arlington says.

Dean laughs a short laugh. "Most of it she felt comfortable saying to my face."

"Not all of it. Some things she just told me."

"A mother's entitled to keep things from her son." Dean takes a sip.

"What about the other way around?"

A violent coughing fit starts in the apartment next door. "That depends. Are we still talking about me and Grammy?" Dean asks.

"We're not talking about anything yet."

Dean pours the rest of his coffee down the drain. "Damn it Arlington." His voice is softer now, more like it used to be, but unlike himself. "What are they doing to you up there?"

"You know then."

"I know there have been a fleet of cameras up here every day for the past week hovering around outside. You know some of them hopped the fence, came right up to my door and started banging?"

"That has nothing to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you, and with the stupid choices you've made."

"I thought we were being civil."

"So did I. But if you're going to sit here in my-" Dean flounders for the right word. He won't say home. "If you're going to accept my invitation, and my coffee, you can sit there and listen."

Arlington recedes back to the body of her youth. Dean's wrinkles fade and his spine straightens. He's telling her about the path she's going down, how mistakes pile up and how things can never be undone. The boys don't really like her. Those girls are not her friends. They're going to stay here forever, and is that what she wants? Does she have to try so hard to live a life as small as possible? Does she ever stop to think what this is doing to him? What it would be doing to Claire?

The lines Arlington replies with her are old, perhaps tired for someone of her age. But she means them. She feels hatred, it scares her to admit. She has always been calm and reserved. She has always been like Dean. But now, nineteen years old and run out of patience she understands she has carried these words within her for some time. They are the only possible answer to the questions she asks at night, the prayers she offers up. This is the sort of moment that changes things. She knows that.

Arlington has made the decision. She is not going back to school. There is nothing for her there. But Dean is right too. She cannot stay at home any longer. There are infinite possibilities within the once choice left to her.

“I’m leaving.” Arlington is done screaming. The silence hurts. But she will bear it. She will let it swallow her.

“Then get.”

That was then, the last time Dean told her to sit down and listen. So Arlington knows before the words come out of Dean’s mouth, in the apartment that is his but is not his home, this is another one of those moments: the few in a person’s life that hold water.

“Why Arlington? I don’t understand,” Dean says. This is real, Arlington thinks. She wraps her mug in two hands. He wants an answer.

“Why what?”

He takes a few steps closer. "Why did you say yes to that man?"

She's never thought about it in full. Or rather, it's been a constant debate running in the back of her head. One that is unresolved. "People should hear," she says.

"They're going to steal her from us."

"They're going to know her."

"They're going to know you, Arlington." Dean turns back to the counter. "I hope they get their money's worth."

Arlington stands up off the couch. The coughing starts again, even louder. "What if we need this?"

"Don't ask that after the deed is done."

Arlington's grip on the mug tightens. "Do you even love her anymore?"

Dean does not respond.

"You've forgotten her, like everybody else. You're not upset because you think I'm selling her memory. You realized you forgot Mama all together."

There is a long silence. "Don't expect any more calls," Dean says.

Arlington sets her mug down on the table. She leaves Dean at the sink. When the time comes, he can have somebody else pick up the body.

Arlington has a full tank of gas to carry her back to Marcannen, and enough anger toward her father that she resolves not to look out the windows on her way out of

town. She locks her eyes on the asphalt, so that whatever other memories might be triggered by her surroundings remain inaccessible. This place, and all it once meant, is exhausted.

Late afternoon brings a chill, enough to prompt Arlington to turn on the heat. She dials the fan up high. After a while the sensation is uncomfortable and therefore feels appropriate for the situation. At the first stoplight Arlington removes her lightweight gray jacket and rolls up the ankles on her jeans. She doesn't turn the heat down. It makes her eyes water. The air blows against the grain of the hairs on her arms and makes them stand up or cross in swirling patterns. Arlington keeps driving. The roots her in the truck. There is no opportunity for reflection. She is here, moving forward, no glancing back or to the side.

The ride home is long and Arlington has another day to fill tomorrow. She thought she would stay around town somewhere, maybe go for lunch with Dean at one of their old haunts. Arlington was expecting the meal to be awkward, but awkward has long been a part of the status quo for the pair. Plus, although she joked about it, she expected Dean was calling her with morbid news. Unfortunately, her father seemed healthy and hale as ever.

She felt a strange excitement knocking on his door, that this would be the moment confronting Dean's mortality at last. Arlington was not at all sure how she'd feel about the news. Considering it now, having walked away from him for the last

time, she has an approximate sense of things. Relief, that is the biggest word. In some way it's nice to have gotten it out of the way. There doesn't have to be any mourning now, or aggrandizing. Dean is Dean. Not a hero, a man. The freshness of the moment will last. Arlington will not have to think any further back. She can let her father die now. That's what she tells herself.

Arlington turns the radio on loud. The heat makes her sweat. There's no fear of slipping away. She needs to cling to this feeling, and never allow herself to forget. This must be how she leaves things. The alternative opens up too many possibilities, too much room for guilt and regret. It's time to commit, she thinks. Damn the rest of them. All those people that believe they understand. She will let them try, and she will surprise them. Arlington McNamara can be a star.

She thinks about the story Lars told her, his father and the crayfish. He did teach her a lesson that day, more than one, not just the moral he thought he left her with. For all her life, Arlington thinks, she has been the crayfish. She has been Monster, allowing people to pluck her up from fresh waters and shrink her world down to the size of a fish bowl. The whole of her experience has been a teaching tool for others. Even before the crowds swelled at her booth, before she was known, those people pitied her. They looked at her and saw a life better off avoided. The visitors saw Woman with Booth, and they thanked themselves they weren't her. Arlington won't be that anymore. From now on, she is the one who plucks others from the tank and holds them in her hands.

Lars gives her an opportunity. She has the chance to wring that old version of herself by the neck. She will destroy fear and banish her grief. Arlington McNamara will make herself into something no one thought possible.

At home Arlington pulls Lars's pink business card from her wallet and dials the number. He picks up on the third ring. "I changed my mind," she says. "I'd like that car to pick me up at home tomorrow. It's time we start this press tour." She listens to Lars respond with praise. She pictures herself striding into The Park tomorrow through her own gate, past the gaping performers and Sibley's open door. The words come out before she can even think about them, cutting Lars off. "I am the head," Arlington says. "I am the heart."

In the five years since the death of Dinnie Havlacz, The Black Widow has had various occupants. None stay for longer than a month or two. It is understood upon agreement, that place is not a long term solution. The wooden stilts still hold it in place, although it continues to sink ever so slightly. Fleece Teddy has become a semi-feral community pet. She spends long periods away from Ruby Slippers, but she always comes back. Some residents are kinder than others. Fleece Teddy is grizzled now, she bears her own cuts and scrapes from brawls in the wilderness. Arlington is one of the few animals FT feels safe around.

But this morning, the woman has no time to play. She's just leaving when the cat approaches her doorstep. "Long time FT. What kind of trouble did you get into this time?"

The cat sits back on her haunches. "Mrow," she says."

"Alright then. We'll have a catch up later." Arlington bends to give the cat a pat but FT withdraws. She runs around the corner of Arlington's trailer. Arlington sighs. She apologizes.

The town car is waiting for her at the end of the gravel path. Lady with Clipboard sits in the backseat. Her hair is tied back. They greet each other and as soon as Arlington sits the car retreats to the county road in a spray of stone chips. The woman begins a rundown of the day's numerous interviews.

"And then a quick break and I know you told Lars you wanted some time in The Park so we've allotted two rides. If you could eat either directly before or after those depending on your stomach, and of course if one of them is a kiddie ride or something without too much spinning and thrashing we could probably even save some time and have you eat during." She follows her way down the agenda with a ball point pen and taps her nails against the back of the clipboard.

"Can I get your name?" Arlington asks. "I just like to know who I'm working with."

"I'm Morven. Lars didn't say? That's like him. But like I was saying if you know the two rides we can map out the best route and I can get someone to intercept us in the middle and you could maybe even do half before half after to help keep things down."

"What do you mean that's like him?" Arlington asks.

"Oh. Nothing. Just joking really. But sometimes he gets lost in the forest at the expense of the tress. That's not my line, he says that about himself you know. And it's true. He's a forest guy. You have to be once you get to a certain point in this business. That's why he hires people like me to handle tree duties."

"I'm not a tree."

"No, no, of course not. Honey people don't pay to talk to trees. They pay for the stars."

Moffit's mornings are far less active with Arlington gone. Even with the odd repelling magnetism that appears in their recent conversations, it feels unnatural to be eating his breakfast on the steps alone. It's hard to believe this was his routine for so long. He considers knocking on her door more than once but knows there would be no kind of answer. Still, maybe she is a kind of spirit in her own right, and Moffit could summon her in a time of great need such as this one. Replaying their conversations occupies much of his time these days. Moffit is amassing stories. He hopes there will be opportunities to share them.

Yesterday, the visitors had all sorts of questions about “the lady missing from her booth.” They wondered when she’d be back, with the premiere right around the corner. Moffit deflected. He told them they could ask Arlington themselves, and maybe they’d be lucky enough to have her entertain their pestering. He tries focus on his tasks. On the simple exchanges that make up ninety percent of his day. Take cash. Pass form. Accept signature. Hand ticket.

The machines in his booth are some form of company. He has always been good with them. Moffit never has the trouble that Arlington sometimes does. The tickets always print without jamming. The register slides open, no sticking. Moffit lets these devices operate on their own terms. Patience is a virtue.

Moffit is observant, although people may not think it. People of his stature live most of their life under a spotlight, an inconvenient one. There is something about being so universally perceived that grants him unique intuition. When people are doing the looking they let their guard down. They do not expect him to gaze back.

Moffit spots and recognizes the slender vehicle just as it turns into the parking lot. It is the one that carried Arlington away a few days prior. This is the first time he notices any kind of dirt or dust along the sideboard. It pulls up as close to The Park’s entrance as it can, a direct shot to Arlington’s booth.

The Park has been open for an hour and crowds amass early these days. The car idles before the doors open. Whoever is inside is well trained. They wait just long

enough for every neck in line to crane in their direction. A pair of legs in neutral toned pants and white heels appear as the door shrugs open. Their owner swivels out and stands. She adjusts her blazer and eyes each member of the crowd. Moffit's mother once told him there are some people who are "professional professionals." This woman appears to belong to that class.

"Next please," Moffit says into the microphone on his flat top counter. Nobody moves a muscle. The lady looks over the roof of the car as a second passenger climbs out from that side. Every set of eyes follows. Beware those types that work in twos. That was another thing Moffit's mother said. Deception is easier sold by pairs. Moffit does get the feeling he's being lied to when the second figure reveals itself.

Sometimes during those acid trips with Valeria, during the comedown when it had mostly worn off, Moffit started to worry. It was difficult when his brain began to reassert authority and his sense of self sidled back into frame. The emotional inertia made every bit of him strain to remember it's ok, this is temporary, you're on drugs. But Moffit heard stories of trips that never ended, of people that lived the rest of their lives with that feeling. And sometimes they might see shapes that weren't there or make up conversations that never happened.

For a moment Moffit is living that. Because this cannot be Arlington's face. Someone's features must be melting. His mind is working hard to put her silhouette in front of him. But then the crowd reacts and Moffit realizes his hallucinations cannot be

shared. She is meant to be off, in a safe place far from here. Arlington didn't tell him why she was taking the time off, but he had his guesses. She was going to make it out unscathed. Arlington smiles, looking at no one, and it hollows Moffit out. He stands without thinking and hits his head against the tin roof. The guest on the other side of the screen doesn't notice.

Moffit opens the back door and takes the steps in one stride. The procession passes. Arlington and the professional at the front are flanked by a pair of mammoth-armed human watchdogs. Moffit hears the crowd shuffling their feet to get an angle around the ticket booths. He strides forward onto the grass. He's not sure what he's doing but there are forces at play, that much he knows. There is a need to respond.

His steps meet concrete and one of the burly men puts out a hand. "Hold up there slim," he says. The other three continue onward. The woman points something out to Arlington on a clipboard. They don't look at the commotion behind them.

"I need to have a word with Arlington," Moffit says.

"You and everybody else in that line out there bud."

"No you don't understand. I-" he takes a step forward. "We're coworkers. She was supposed to be off today."

"She is. Ms. McNamara just happens to have more important work to do here today champ. I suggest you take her cue and huddle up back in that booth." He points over Moffit's shoulder.

The door marked *STAFF* opens and Arlington disappears inside. "Can you give her a message?" Moffit strafes to the left. He feels a hand press into his sternum. "Just that I'd like to speak with her."

"She'll be hearing all about you pal." The man gives a shove and Moffit steps back onto the grass. It feels springy under his loafers.

The guard walks away.

"Tell her Moffit wants a word that's all. She's supposed to be out today. It's not safe yet. Halloween's almost here."

Today is the first time Arlington has spent time in The Park since the announcement. Before, she tried her hardest not to look toward the rides or observe the aesthetic overhaul. It all felt too intimate. The first thing on the flyers is her face. But now, trodding through each of The Park's four zones, she is able to revel in it. This place is a part of her, more so than any other setting. It is a paradise constructed around her presence. This is the place where she will become something more.

Arlington will not stop at the stars. That language limits. It is what Lars and Morven want from her, but they can't feel the energy of The Park. They don't know that this is somewhere special. There's a reason they sought her out here. They've fallen under the spell like everyone else, without realizing it. But Arlington can Speak to this place. It called to her, all those weeks ago. It drew her to the center. But it was not

telling her to run. The voice told her to live, to embrace the fear and the pain and let it mold her. She can be more than the rest of them. Arlington can grip the world, because the world starts here.

She's forgotten what question the interviewer asked, but she can approximate. There are only so many they seem able to come up with. No matter how hard Arlington might try to "stay fresh" lines repeat themselves in her responses. "Well Lars is immensely talented. I think the fact they he sought out my story proves how dedicated he is to representing people like me."

"And how would you describe people like you?"

This particular interview takes place at a table near the frozen lemonade stand in Lone Ranger. The cowboys and girls that roam around have their faces painted like skeletons and there are fake bullet holes poked through leather vests and wool chaps. Every once in a while they pull plastic revolvers and point them at the guests.

There's no camera equipment around. This is for a print magazine, some semi-regional film quarterly. Arlington slurps up the last of the lemonade. It's too cold a day to enjoy it but it's something to do with her hands and gives her moments to think if she needs them. The straw makes the staccato sound straws do when they're running out of usefulness.

"People like me. We're, well we're failures." The interviewer prompts Arlington to follow that thought. "I've let these things from so long ago define me for my whole

life. Lars gave me a chance to overcome and outgrow that. I realized the attachments I made, the way that I think, that holds me back. And starting now I'm ready to make a change."

"How important would you say this experience has been to your healing process?" the interviewer asks.

Arlington passes the empty cup of lemonade back and forth in her hands. The outside is waxy and wet. It turns her hands numb in the breeze. The wind makes a slight whistle as it weaves through the diamond-shaped holes punched out in the table.

"It's really been the process full stop," Arlington says. "And getting this support from the community. That's something I don't feel like I ever had before."

The questions continue. "It's not so much I didn't want to share, more so that nobody ever asked. Not the real questions I mean." Arlington nods her head as if this is something she's always thought but never had the language to express.

"What would be your dream outcome? If anything were to happen after the premiere, if something could change, what would that look like to you?" The interviewer appears as a floating head now. This person, this whole setup, is a prop.

Arlington thinks about it. "I just want people to take me seriously."

The interview wraps up and Morven rushes over. "Great job Arlington. Love how you played into the therapeutic aspect there. Noting that, so keep it coming." She jots something on her clipboard. Her pinky nails are bitten down to fleshy stumps. The

rest are well manicured. A nice baby blue tone. She goes on. Now the next activity wasn't on the itinerary but they've got a few minutes before a scheduled appearance down at The Sifter. "Number one rule of PR, Arlington, use what you already have. Fan engagement is a great way to get these people invested and start building a brand they'll recognize."

"I have a brand?" Arlington asks.

"You are the brand." Morven slides into the seat across from Arlington. "I can see it in you. I know why you made the call after all this back and forth and playing mysterious. You're in, and I'm talking all the way. No half measures, that's not how people like us do things. This is real Arlington. This is your chance to get people on board not just for today, not just for the premiere. For life. People dream of this kind of stuff. Being swept up from nothing and turned into somebody's everything. And that's the kind of potential you have here."

"This is the place that really matters," Arlington says. "What happens here, it could change everything."

"Of course it can. Of course. And let me tell you, you are exactly right. Here's something. Lars says stories are nice when you want to demonstrate a point. You know Jack and the Beanstalk? Well celebrity is a lot like a bean. It starts out small, and with enough care, with enough effort, sure it'll grow." Morven spreads her fingers out wide. "But you know what Jack's beans had? You know what made those special? They were

magic." She makes air quotes around 'magic.' "Now in the real world we don't have magic. What we do have, Arlington, is marketing. You understand what I'm saying. This premiere is your bean." Morven cups her hands together. "And it is in good soil, prime soil. It's being watered by the best there is. But the magic, the magic has got to come right now, in all these little steps. The magic is the brand, and the brand is you."

The guests are eager for a bit of Arlington. They crowd the walkways and stop her for autographs and photos. They were not expecting her today and did not come to The Park prepared for the fanfare. Once it is evident Arlington is obliging requests for signatures, people scramble to find instruments for writing and objects to be signed. Some are able to convince the teenagers behind food counters to borrow a cheap ballpoint with the promise of a healthy donation to the TIP jar. Others rush to gift stores to buy novelty pens with paper figures that slide back and forth in liquid when you tip them up and down. Men and women tug their collars forward begging for Arlington to sign. Many thrust limbs in her direction or hold children over the crowd. Blank spaces on Park maps, empty yogurt tins, backsides of grocery lists and receipts, tiny orange tickets ripped at the corners with the letters reading ADMIT ONE rubbed away. All that and more, Arlington signs.

She hasn't had much practice. At least not for a situation like this. Her name has never been sought after, treated like a commodity to itself. It's always been something to leave only when necessary. But Arlington sees so many names every day, recounts

and remembers them. There are details in the ways other leave their identities behind that she admires. Today she's learning to write all over again. She picks the characters that stand out in her memory and collects them. The way Mary Sue Trellitz arcs her cursive Ls higher than any Arlington's seen. Amys Medeiro's strong A, all angles, demanding attention and starting out on strong footing. The O that slants to the right and spreads across the page in Gio Loothuscen.

Arlington sorts through the forms in her mind. She lets memory take over and her hands do the rest, sometimes changing grip on the utensil mid-signage. She tries many different combinations, puts many different versions of herself to paper. Most fans will go home with something unique. When they compare their prizes later, they note the distinctions. They wonder who this woman is.

The swarm passes. Arlington completes the rest of her interviews. She rides her two rides. This is the first day in many days that she can say time passes consistently. On those days in between where things were about getting up, getting to The Park, getting home, hours seemed to drag until the last one waned and Arlington realized that the whole thing had flitted by in one slow, laborious blink. It's as if in those minutes before bed, Arlington looked through a telescope at a version of herself living on another planet, time dilating and elapsed hours turning to seconds. But today, mercifully, things are not relative.

Although, this consistent flow prevents Arlington from making direct observations. The interviews skirt around Safari and no one wants to be reminded of The Park's consistent failure. The Howler is still not functioning. It's been five days. Outside help has been called in but the exact nature of The Park's efforts are unknown. Sibley remains adamant. "It's just not ready yet."

And he's right. This is not a simple slumber. This is a choice that It is making. And even with no riders, The Howler still feels. It can direct Its focus elsewhere now, no longer beholden to an audience. The myriad metal legs that tether It to the concrete shiver as the rides nearby run through their rituals. The vibrations wind up the screws and through the lattice work that keeps The Howler's arch standing skyward. It has spaces to reach now. The Park hums. The people generate their own electricity, and The Howler draws it in.

As the days pass fewer guests come for a look. Some are still curious. Some have been working, trying to prod It back online. But The Howler is not some lumbering beast. Pokes, prods, zaps and tweaks will not apply enough force. This is a contest of will. Perhaps a call for help.

It knows they have ways of communicating, those animals out there. The sounds they make shake the air. The cacophony buzzes up and down The Howler's spine and rattles in the stationary carts.

Sound is the only constant here, The Howler's primary touchstone with Its subjects. Over the year It has developed ways of knowing. There are pieces of the code that are decipherable. So much uncertainty in the noises now. The vibrations alter in voracity, some soft some bone-shuddering. They cannot pick a decibel. For all this time The Howler has only paid mind to the screams, the sounds forcibly extracted and pulled into the clouds. It is beginning to understand the power of a whisper.

The people that walk along Its tracks, that strap strange bits to Its joints and run longing hands across Its controls, they do not scream. But they are afraid. Their silence reveals it.

Somewhere out there is a familiar set of vibrations in the air. They float through The Park and The Howler can pick them out over distance. This is the one. These are the sounds of the woman. The Howler shuts out the other noise. Its roots only go so deep, but It sends out a signal. Something returns, the barest hints of what It could call a thought. The woman speaks.

I am beyond you.

I know fear and now so will you.

There is no mold that can suffocate me.

I will demand your tears but you will not pity me.

You will understand, for the first time, what you have made me.

The Howler closes Itself off. The message is wrong. There must be something lost in translation. This is not the heart of the woman who cared for the broken thing. Rest. That is what It needs. More time to consider. What is out there? What could The Howler discover? Most of all, does It want to know?

Moffit stays late. The crowds do not leave before close today. They migrate to the parking lot with hopes of catching another glimpse of Arlington. Word is she has been active today. Moffit craves a cigarette. He thought himself past that stage of things. Sometimes he still dreams about them. Dreams where nothing else happens but sitting on a bench, long inhales and exhales, and he wakes with the smell in his nostrils. But in those dreams he puts each one out on his skin, and the pain is as real as the head rush.

The thought occurs to him sometimes. He could always go for one, but that's sort of the nature of the beast. But he doesn't crave them, not in the way he used to. There are wants, there are needs, there is survival. Moffit feels like he might not make it without one. He waits outside by the door marked *STAFF* tapping his foot. His patience is as thin as the rest of him. Moffit raises two fingers to his lips and blows through them. Then he rattles the handle and enters the locker room.

Inside it's abuzz with activity. Most of the performers have been released for the day. They put more pride into their displays during Halloween, and as a result end up sticking around for longer. The benches all have at least a couple of occupants.

“Can you believe these people?” A man kicks off scaled flippers and peels molded green gills from his neck. “Huge mistake they’ve made, telling you that now.” He folds the sticky prosthetics into a ball and tosses them underhand toward a trashcan near the entrance. He misses wide and the debris thumps against Moffit’s thigh. “Biggest moment of the year and they’re wasting it on some nobody.”

The other performers in the aisle have their backs turned to the Lake Monster and rummage through their lockers. Moffit guesses this is not the first speech like this the man has given. “Have you seen her?” Moffit asks.

The performer removes a sea-green bald cap so the only remains of his costume are a pair of wide, webbed rubber ears and the bit of face paint he missed scrubbing in the sink. “Can’t you slip jockeys mind your own damn business? You see we’re having a conversation here right?”

“I saw her in Tokyo a little bit ago, with that lady.” A woman dressed in black nylon with red stripes down the sides and a snarling wooden Oni mask on the top of her head speaks up.

“You don’t have to indulge him you know,” Lake Monster says as Moffit steps over a line of gym bags on his way to the exit.

The sun has sunk halfway already, like a balloon that’s lost a portion of its helium and hangs at someone’s chest. The light makes the fog spewing from machines beside walkways more obvious. In some sections new arching tunnels herd guests

along. Some have glass cutouts with bloody hand prints or stickers of snakes and spiders crawling around the frames. An occasional scream plays over the loud speakers, the kind of recycled soundbite Moffit has heard in a hundred different films.

The black silhouette of a witch on a broomstick glides back and forth along a series of cables zig-zagging between concession stands, gift shops, and ride entries. Cobwebs are tied up in every corner. A few statues of growling hell hounds are laid out around King Arthur's grave and a skeletal hand punctures the dirt. At the entrance to Lone Ranger a bony horse with fake flames around its hooves and eye sockets rears back, and its rider – a mannequin with a pumpkin for a head – holds a machete aloft. The weapon reflects the sun and Moffit shades his eyes. He's not sure plastic would glint like that.

In Safari, an emergency triage has taken shape around The Howler. A rough scaffolding of blue tarps and metal poles encircles the ride and cuts off access. Moffit slows as he walks by. A breeze lifts the tarps and he makes out a huddle of rubber boots, a pair of open-toed sandals, and two sets of loafers. It has the look of a tent city. Moffit knows how structures like these tend to stretch their relevance, more often than not becoming a permanent feature in someone's landscape.

Above my paygrade, he thinks. But it feels like problems often are, and yet people like him are always the first to be affected by them. The curtains that hide The Park's crown jewel are the scariest part of Moffit's brief tour of The Haunt. And like the

movies, when the curious lead makes their way across creaking floorboards to the half-cracked door, towards the blood that creeps down water-stained drywall and pools at the baseboard, while the audience grits their teeth and flutters their eyelids and begs the hero not to do it, to turn away like any sane, self-preserving person would do, Moffit's fear draws him in. He must see this through.

Moffit has a big heart, big organs in general. It's necessary to pump blood to his skull and his toes, spaced so far apart from one another. It has a tendency to beat fast, especially in situations of great duress or excitement. Valeria liked to listen to it in the moments leading up to and immediately following sex. He told her it only beat that way for her. But it also did when he thought about the things that turned up in the flood, those things he met before the peonies that he told Arlington about. And it beat that way when he would sneak out of bed and smoke out the window with one foot hanging through the opening just to feel the breeze, wondering if one day had to come directly after another, and if everybody else felt that – not that he'd ever do anything to hurt himself or anybody else – but that being not alive would be so much easier than the status quo.

It beats that way now.

He moves down the perimeter, keeping his shadow from giving himself away. Leaning forward, he spies the shoes through a tear in the plastic. There is a set of voices coming from the other side of the tarps, one for each group of footwear.

"It might be time for a shift in strategy." Loafers.

"You think that moron's actually onto something." That's certainly Boots, given the squeaking stomp Moffit hears along with the voice.

"I think we're out of fucking ideas."

"You want to hire some pinko witch doctor? For God's sake you might as well just put the thing out of commission."

"Absolutely not." That's a third voice. It must be Sandals. Sounds more feminine.

"What would we even say. There's nothing wrong with it. That's straight out of your mouth."

"It hasn't ran a cart all week. I'd say that qualifies as wrong," says Boots.

"We're running out of time."

"With all due respect, it's one attraction. You're acting like this is life or death."

This response is met with silence.

Sandals speaks. "The Howler is The Park. No, I'm stopping you right there. The Howler runs. Always."

"We need this fucking thing fixed," says Loafers.

Boots is not having it. "Go ahead. Put your machine through therapy or whatever else cock brained scheme you've got in mind. I'm telling you. There's no hope for it. If I were you I'd start tearing the thing down. It'll be a whole lot cheaper and miles easier."

“Are you even listening?” Sandals piles on. “Do you see those people out there? Every second this thing stays down they get angrier. And after Halloween where do you think that anger’s getting directed? This is the draw.” Moffit can hear her struggling for the next words. “It’s the head, and the heart, do you understand that?”

“Lady maybe the machine’s not the only thing that needs help.”

“We are at the nuclear option,” Loafers says. “God damn it we are past it.”

Loafers and Sandals are right. There is a net spreading over The Park. For now the decorations distract from the ligatures tightening around this place, but the disquiet is palpable. At first the guests grumbled. They were disappointed their favorite ride had been taken out of commission. Sighs spread. People turned to their companions offering condolences. We’ll have to come back again next week. There’ll be other chances. Shame but there’s more to see.

Moffit finds that time can sometimes numb and other times exaggerate. This situation is a case of the latter. They’ve begun to ask Moffit at his booth. When will things be back to normal? When can we put this all behind us? He doesn’t have an answer, and the more he thinks about it, the more he wonders what normal means, and if the bridge isn’t already burnt. Because the way these guests react when Moffit explains he doesn’t know any more than they do, that does not seem normal.

He knows how to read anger. Expressions are not always easy for him to translate, depending. It’s less that there are some emotions he can’t recognize and more

that he has poured so much of his attention into dissecting the few that have appeared to him with the most consistency. Everything he observes is a means to try and understand what is it that could make someone so hateful?

People talk about the eyes. Angry eyes. Creased at the edges. Downcast. Heavy brows that deepen the sockets. That's a place to start, but there are other cues to look for, that say more for less. Of course knowing the person helps. Most people wouldn't expect laughing to correlate. But Moffit's father was not a man who laughed. He was straight laced, so neutral in expression he never looked anything more than bored. The first time Moffit heard his father laugh, he stood in the middle of the kitchen, scared at first. Then he laughed along, not knowing at what, doubled over, until his father taught him that in their home laughter was not something to be shared.

So there are always exceptions. Moffit knows that. But as a rule it's better to be prepared with the signs and misjudge them than to be sat there laughing without them. In Moffit's experience people most often reveal anger in the holding back. It's not steam coming out of the ears. It's the physical toll of remaining human, gritting teeth and beating it. The spine stretches, a nail digs into the palm. One heavy breath is played off as a sigh. The beginnings of an incoherent insult cuts off before it can be registered and lips raise at one corner revealing only the incisor. Things are going beyond disappointment.

Moffit leans back against a bit of chain link fence, part of the fortress surrounding The Howler. It makes a sound like the strum of an instrument. The voices stop. Moffit stands straight and the fence rattles again. A hand attached to an arm to a torso and all the way down to a pair of white sandaled feet lifts the tarp.

In a horror film this is where the bulbous bloodshot eye of a fanged monster turns away from the corpse being devoured at its feet and registers the lead in the doorway, breathless, out of options, and the audience thinks I told you so, I told you not to go through that door.

“What’s your excuse?” Sandals asks.

Moffit doesn’t know what to do. “The Howler,” he says. He lifts a finger and points to Its slope.

“What about it?” Loafers looks under the tarp now too. They both squint. They both look so small.

“I’m good with machines,” Moffit says. Loafers has it. That kernel of hatred.

“I’m sure you are. Buzz off. This is Park business.”

“I work for The Park.” Moffit should leave. He has thoughts like this, that appear readily but are not actionable. Moffit has never liked authority, or at least the way people wield it around to make others feel unimportant.

“Then you also work for us. Which means get lost just became an official order from Corporate.”

Moffit does not buzz off. He does not get lost. Today he has had enough of being told where he can and cannot stand, who he can and cannot speak with. At some point, life is about choosing battles.

"I'm just standing. Right here," Moffit says.

Sandals gets tired of holding up the tarp. She takes a step back and it falls, obscuring part of Loafers' face. He makes a brief show and calls over his companion in matching shoes to pin the plastic up. Able to stand at full height, Loafers is tall. Almost as tall as Moffit, or at least as almost tall as people seem to come. Moffit prepares for some great conflagration. He readies himself to weather a storm of curses, bulging veins, and reddening skin. Moffit begins to think of his response, the slow and careful way in which he will deliver it to let Loafers know he is above this but today he has made time.

"What's your name?" Loafers puts a hand on the chain link.

Moffit tells Loafers. He no longer tries to hide his shadow. He lets the sun cast it over the people on the other side of the fence.

"Moffit, you're fired."

Arlington spies Fleece Teddy waiting on the stoop when she makes it back home. The town car pulls all the way down the gravel drive, despite Arlington's quiet protests that it's not necessary. Some of her neighbors come out to watch as she scoots her way

out of the backseat. Morven and Arlington have decided she should take her truck in tomorrow. "It's identifiable," Morven says. "It tells your audience you're just like them."

"The brand!" Arlington says back, with the strategic use of jazz hands for emphasis. She laughs but she understands. And tomorrow she will drive her truck, and make sure to give the cameras a good broadside angle when she pulls in.

Morven gives Arlington one last job well done. There are some words Arlington says by instinct. They're an emotion, a simplification of the immensity that boils within her. It's easy for them to slip out because they are never conscious. "I love you," Arlington says. The door closes. The car reverses. Hold on a second. It was loud enough to hear, and the order of Arlington's action is clear in her mind. She scoots, she stands, she speaks, she shuts. But she didn't mean it. Arlington takes a step forward. She considers running down the car, tapping on the window.

"I'm sorry," she could say. "That didn't mean to come out." Of course it did come out whether it meant to or not, and when Arlington thinks about it maybe it absolutely meant to come out, maybe the words wouldn't have it any other way. After all they didn't crawl up her throat and pry open her jaw. They slipped straight through. It's like when Arlington took her boyfriend Luke skating on the little frozen lake by the woods back home, and she fell over all at once just to make him feel better, landed on her backside and slid along the ice so they could both share a laugh and no one would

have to feel embarrassed. That's how the words fell, straight onto her tongue, sliding off the tip without a second thought.

Why were they so easy? Arlington thinks about this all the way to the door of her trailer. What's Morven thinking? She knows she heard right. She's certain I said what she thought I said, thinks Arlington. Prolonged awkwardness is the worst kind.

Arlington tells herself they'll have forgotten about it next time they see each other, who knows for sure when that could be? It would be nice to see her tomorrow though, and make a joke of it. Maybe Morven could even initiate and say in a swooning voice with her hands clasped over her heart, "I love you too." And maybe she could say it at the end of their interaction which will be short, not long enough to draw things out, but she could bring it up it almost as an afterthought like "And oh Arlington," and then say it in the swooning way with the hands clasped.

Then they could both laugh and they'd be laughing just as much at the other's laughter about the whole situation, and Arlington might even need to rub a tear from her eye and make some self-deprecating little remark that would clear the air and allow them to seamlessly transition into the next portion of their day.

"Mrow," says Fleece Teddy.

Arlington looks at her and smiles and decides to give things a trial run. "Oh Fleece Teddy I love you too," she says in a swooning voice with her back foot lifted off the ground and her hands clasped over her heart. It doesn't feel right. She scans the

neighboring trailers to see if anybody's seen this interaction. They have, so she unlocks the door and waves the cat inside.

"Mrow," Fleece Teddy says again.

"I hear you." Arlington bends down to retrieve a can of cat food from her store under the sink. "Keep that between you and me alright." She knows, somewhere, why the words came out. Arlington strains to open the tin. She grunts. They are an expression of the quiet exhilaration that has been building within her throughout the day. There was nothing romantic about them. "Don't go spreading rumors about what I said. Nobody else has to know." She has been looking for a person she felt cared. She hoped that might be Dean. It's always been hard for the two of them to go there. She could not admit it to herself now, but during her visit a part of her had hoped that Dean would say it: that he was proud of her, for making a choice, for shining a light. She hoped they might be able to love each other again, in a way they hadn't been able to for a long time. They were words Arlington has been longing to say, and in front of her there was an outlet.

The top of the tin rips off and some of the liquid splatters against the kitchen window and the pale white curtains. Fleece Teddy jumps onto the counter and begins licking the juice off the glass. "No place like home," Arlington says.

Fleece Teddy stays well into the night. Arlington keeps the door propped open, not because she's hinting at the cat, she just likes FT to know there's a choice. Arlington

doesn't want to impose. She knows the cat has other households to call upon. And it's nice to confirm FT's around because she wants to be, although maybe the bribes of food and pats cheapen things. Still, she's an animal, and they require inducements.

Arlington turns on the TV. Fleece Teddy curls up on the cushion behind her. The cat's paws hang down on Arlington's shoulders, a little living shawl. Arlington asks what FT would like to watch.

"Mrow," she says back.

Ok then. "You're very easy to please." Arlington reaches back and scratches the top of FT's head. She flips through the channels. The signal sometimes wavers this far out. She's still got a dish. There's college football on, the most local of universities which is still about an hour and a half East of Marcannen. Dean used to take Arlington to games there. She wanted to stay for the halftime show, which she called the parade. Then she'd get tired, and Dean would take them back home. They stopped for ice cream and steak burgers on the way, doubles with everything but Dean let Arlington eat his pickles. Arlington only likes the kind that are cut into long quarter-wedges. It wasn't until she moved she realized how many types there are.

No, no thinking about Dean. If she could help it. If there were a way to cast out all experience and live life fresh without the image of him huddled over the kitchen sink, in that place she knows he detests. Arlington adjusts her neck on the cushion.

Fleece Teddy does not move but she mrows. "Oh stop, fussy," Arlington says. FT raises her head and licks a paw.

The home team, "Arlington's team" if she were to have one, is losing and losing in such a way that the outcome is no longer in doubt. The parade has already passed, and it is hardly ever televised besides. She flips the channel. It's some sort of cooking program but the picture is fuzzy. Arlington can tell this is one of those homey types of shows though, with a special intro that lists each member of the family including the dogs and cats of which there are certainly multiple, at least one of each, and maybe even a horse or a potbelly pig, all with names that are far too human. She presses the remote again.

Fleece Teddy raises her head and looks at the screen. "Mrow."

"I thought you didn't care what we watch?"

FT is quiet but keeps her head up and her eyes forward. This time it's the news, which never seems to have any trouble with picture quality. Arlington can't quite admit to herself how much she fantasized about this moment during the day and going to sleep last night. It was a conscious effort to keep the anticipation suppressed. She realizes now how much she wants to see herself on the screen, leaning in.

Arlington can feel FT shift behind her. For a second claws dig into Arlington's shoulder as the cat adjusts. She flinches but her eyes don't leave the screen. Fleece Teddy climbs down from the cushion and sits on her haunches.

“Exclusive interview with the subject of all the buzz around town in anticipation of the upcoming premiere, coming up next. Plus more Park news as the latest statement on the progress of The Howler’s repair was released this evening. We’ll have it all, after the break.”

A logo flashes across the screen, a rotating mass of numbers, letters, and curved shapes, resembling a description of some Old Testament angel. Fleece Teddy turns. She stands on her back paws looking into the kitchen. The lights are off. The phone rings before Arlington can ask what’s wrong.

She sighs and pushes off the couch. FT’s tail swishes back and forth. Arlington glances back at the TV while picking up the receiver. “Arlington speaking,” she says. It’s an ad for weight loss pills. A list of side effects runs across a ticker at the bottom of the screen in tiny print.

“Arlington, it’s Moffit.” She knew. She knew it would be him.

Arlington rests a hand on the counter. She waves for Fleece Teddy to get down and mind her own business. Something like hello comes out between her lips.

“I’m sorry it’s just I didn’t think anybody else would pick up,” Moffit says. “I’ve maybe done something stupid.”

There is a request coming. Why does Moffit have to be like everyone else? Can’t he just let her live and get through whatever it is on his own?

“What is it?” she says. The next ad plays. It’s for a DVD box set of an old black and white sit-com, available for only six payments of \$29.99. The show’s youngest daughter is shrugging and delivering her catchphrase. Every family member has at least one. Arlington remembers most of them

Moffit pauses midway through the explanation he’s giving. The silence goes on too long. “You still there?” he asks.

“Mhm,” Arlington says. She’s trying to remember the name of the older brother. They were all F names, but too boilerplate to stand out. His catchphrase was “And that’s a fact!” Arlington’s friend Jordan had a crush on him growing up.

Moffit continues. She can hear him swallow on the other end of the line. An ad for the latest workout fad has already passed and now it’s a local pizza place. There is a handsome man on the screen who Arlington knows for a fact is not the owner, as he is claiming to be. Fleece Teddy crawls all the way up onto the cushion. Her back is arched and her tail moves faster.

“Can I call you back, Moffit,” Arlington says. The story is airing. Arlington looks at her own face on the screen. She’s smiling and answering questions as she should. They’re coming to The Park to see her, to hear her speak.

Part of Arlington’s mind, that part that is still thinking about Dean and quartered pickles and how she wanted to play in the parade when she was grown, that part remembers something he told her once. It was before she left, but not long before. ‘In

life there are cliffs, some we fall down because we can't see until the second too late, and some we leap from whooping and hollering all the way down. Either way you end up rock bottom.'

"Oh, well, I suppose," she hears Moffit say.

"I have a lot going on right now," Arlington says. "I'll ring you later." She hangs up.

Fleece Teddy looks at the TV and then to Arlington. She jumps from the couch and disappears out the door, into the chill Fall night. There are no more calls made.