THE BOXER

By

CHRISTOPHER LUIS-JORGE

A thesis submitted to the
Graduate School-Camden
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Graduate Program in Creative Writing
Written under the direction of
Lauren Grodstein
And approved by

____________________________
Lauren Grodstein

Camden, New Jersey
January 2021
THESIS ABSTRACT

The Boxer

by CHRISTOPHER LUIS-JORGE

Thesis Director:
Lauren Grodstein

_The Boxer_ is a novella that pits metaphysics against New Age shallowness. It weaves together the surreal comedy of Flann O'Brien’s _The Third Policeman_ with Faulknerian stream of consciousness all set atop highly Westernized ‘60s mysticism in the style of Alan Watts.

While on the job, Heather, a Starbucks Barista, witnesses the aftermath of an accidental death and enters into a period of private mourning. As the spiritual bankruptcy of her current condition fails to offer her guidance, she experiences a psychological break and encounters her own subconscious, which torments her in the form of a seemingly meaningless green box. Her sanity dwindles, forcing her to reevaluate her relationships, goals, and sense of self.

The story is told in a close third-person point of view, granting access to Heather’s consciousness without relying upon the monologuing style common to texts such as _As I Lay Dying_. This, when paired with affectionate nods towards ‘60s nostalgia and New Age imagery, attempts to critique the modern American landscape as one of plastic spirituality without departing too far from the central character’s voice or sense of humor.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER 1

The baristas of the Starbucks on Alafaya found it in extremely poor taste when the police officers started placing orders—the body in the bathroom was neither cool nor out of the bathroom—but it did help diffuse some tension. The whole affair would, moving forward, be remembered as not murder first and in poor taste second, which was a sensible hierarchy. It was, after all, a fluke, a slip on a dry floor, and it could have happened to anybody.

The body belonged to a very old woman, which made the medicine go down a little easier for a crew whose median age was twenty-three. What’s more, the dead woman was demented and soiled enough that there was still hope that her next of kin, whomever they may be, might actually consider her end a great mercy.

“If we’re lucky,” added a uniformed member of Orlando PD to a Sharpie-armed employee before clarifying which of the letters in his name were silent.

It wasn’t fifteen minutes before the questions shifted away from what did you see? or when was this floor last mopped? to more immediate questions like how many pumps of caramel can you give me for free? It wasn’t an hour before Heather’s request to take the rest of the day off after having discovered the body was vetoed by Montana, her shift leader. So, there at the counter, Heather remained as the ratio of customers who knew what she knew slipped towards normality if you were an optimist or towards ignorance if you were Heather.

***
When Heather got home, her dad was asleep on the couch, baby swaddled in front of a TV drama; something about MS-13 if the Spanish was anything to go off. He was tucked into a colorful quilt saturated with geometric patterns with only his head and legs sticking out of the wrapped fabric. She saw her father’s pale legs and hairy feet propped upon the arm of the couch and left him be. If she could see his legs, then he must, beneath the quilt, have been wearing his napping shorts—his only pair of shorts—and therefore this nap was an intentional one. Better to let him rest for at least a few more minutes. Heather muted her keys in the thick of her palm and placed them on the counter alongside a liberated vanilla pump, borrowed indefinitely from work.

Retreated in her room, Heather cracked a window and burnt a stick of patchouli incense from a fresh, unopened box from her bookshelf. The smoke rose like a ghost ribbon and filled her room with a warm smoky musk that smelled like earth and sorcery and the summer of love all at once. Patchouli could be a passable name for a cat, or maybe Patchy for short, and Heather added it to a note on her phone titled *Cat Names, Good* before emptying her hands and her pockets onto her bedside table. She laid down into a nest of unmade sheets and closed her eyes in to contemplate within a reef of fragrant heaven-bound smoke.

As far as Heather could remember, she had never been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and statistically speaking would be unlikely to receive such a diagnosis for several more decades. Encouraging. Maybe, if our species survives that long, they’d even find a cure for it by then. She knew very little about the disease though she had seen *The Notebook* once. Heather wondered how accurate the film was, particularly whether those living with Alzheimer’s actually had fleeting moments of lucidity in which all the fog
that choked memories rolled back for a moment of tragic realization. This was a
Google-able question. But if it was the case, Google probably couldn’t tell what that
would feel like.

One time in high school Heather, ever overzealous, ate a generously dosed pot
brownie at a friend’s house, which she personally blessed chanting *these ain’t shit* and all
the other necessary incantations. As she threw up into a spinning toilet for what was
either twenty seconds or seven hours, she felt a window of sobriety that lasted just long
enough to think *you done fucked up, Heather. This is how you die.* She wondered if that’s
what it felt like to notice your own dementia. Then she Googled it and decided it
probably wasn’t.

***

Heather left her room to marinate in smoke and returned to the living room, which
wasn’t huge, but could certainly house at least one decoration if anyone could be
bothered to acquire it. And it was mostly organized which helped. The exception,
however, lived in the corner of the room between the TV and a patio window in which a
thrift store acoustic guitar sat on a floor stand adjacent to a thrift store classical guitar that
sat on a floor stand adjacent to a thrift store electric guitar and amplifier combo which
would probably be sitting next to some other guitar next time Heather’s dad went
thrifting. They were breeding.

Heather checked the oven clock. So long as her dad hadn’t fallen asleep the literal
second she walked in the door, then he’d probably gotten in at least one REM cycle by
now, if not more, and was free for waking. Heather crossed the room and approached her father’s feet as he snored in his little burrito nest across a television flashing an ad to invest in gold. His feet were pale and blue-veined like marble and his nails were unmanaged. Being careful not to scratch herself against a ragged toenail, Heather grabbed her father by a toe and pulled the toe towards her until the joint went \textit{pop}.

Her father roared into motion and consciousness filled his confused body from toe to head. But, even in his frenzy, he saw heather and his adrenaline began to recede. He cleared his throat with a few choice ‘fucks’ and stood up on pen and needle legs.

“Stop doing that,” he said as he shook a leg awake like a drying cat.

“Okay,” Heather lied. Her father narrowed an unbelieving gaze at her before the flashbulb of groggy remembrance seemed to occupy his thoughts with something more important.

“Before I forget,” he said waving Heather over toward the back of the couch. “I found another bat, so I put this one under the couch.”

He squatted down onto the balls of his pale feet and raised the couch’s skirt to reveal a short old baseball bat with an elementary school bumper sticker wrapped around it above the handle.

“Dad,” Heather said. “Do remember that bat?”

“No.”

“I won it in the fifth grade for memorizing \textit{Casey at the Bat}.”

“How about that. Sentimental?”

“No, old. And really light.”
“Yeah, but it’s free. I’m planning on getting another metal one for the couch. But until then?”

Heather said okay but shook her head when her father turned to roll the bat back under the couch.

“So if you’re ever in the den,” he said, rehearsed. “And there’s an intruder—”

“—The den’s baseball bat is under the couch,” Heather finished. “Heard.”

***

There had never been a break-in. Not once since Heather and her dad moved in had there been a break-in in the entire complex, as far as they were aware. But they’d never lived on a first floor before and the idea of it offended her Dad, who threatened to find a new apartment elsewhere when the complex offered them this one. He didn’t make good on this threat, but he did begin a campaign to furnish every room with a baseball bat.

The first room to receive a bat was Heather’s, which received a heavy aluminum thing that was so dented and gnarly that there wasn’t a single legible character on the entire surface. Then her dad’s room. Now the den. Once, as a joke, Heather left her baseball bat in the living room and left it in an obvious spot: the couch. It was returned within the day with a lecture attached to it. Heather considered doing the same thing with the wooden one, and updated a note in her phone titled Things To Do, Irritating.

***
That night, Heather’s dad filled his thermos with coffee, half-and-half, and stolen vanilla syrup before leaving for his shift as security at Home Depot. Heather didn’t mention the dead woman at Starbucks. It seemed as unnecessary as it seemed a downer. Tonight, like many nights, Heather was alone with the apartment and, if she was lucky, the cat who sometimes sits on the patio when her dad practices guitar. It was a Wednesday and most of her friends had classes at university the following morning so Heather bunker ed down in her room, now soaked in patchouli smoke, to watch something mindless on Netflix until she fell asleep and her day could reset with fewer corpses to show for it.

She put on a nature documentary but within minutes, her mind drifted from the droning narration and folded in on itself thinking only of the woman who lay unmoving in the bathroom earlier that day. The thoughts sat on her heart like a pile of rocks. It physically hurt to think. The discomfort was enough to bring her back to attention and she tried to listen to the narration. She counted her breaths, listened, and watched as beautiful ecosystems, likely now on the brink of collapse, flashed across her eyes. It was good, she thought, that they filmed these places when they did.

Heather watched until her watching became staring. As the show unraveled itself in front of Heather’s unblinking eyes, her attention again drifted, this time towards the sounds of displaced swamp things, who sewed their horny songs into the tapestry of the Floridian night just outside her window. She listened to the calls of all the insects, amphibians, and abandoned exotic pets whose voices meant home to so many. Instead of watching, she thought about her friend Marco, a self-identified swamp witch. He’d have
things to say about these critters. He’d probably have advice about the dead woman too, considering he was as dead as she was and who better to shed light on such mysteries than one who looked life in the eyes and said, “you can’t fire me, I quit.” Heather chastised herself for the joke. It was as insensitive as it was automatic.

Actually, there were a lot of names that crossed Heather’s mind as she lay on her thin, summer-proof sheets and actively ignored the show that flickered idly on her laptop’s screen. It’s just that they all seem so busy all the time. And what a burden it would be to get ambushed with a late-night text about dead women or what it would even feel like to die, if anything. No. Instead, Heather sent memes to each of them and felt the pain in her chest drift down into a pain in her stomach as she pictured her friends’ laughter when they found her message in the morning. Heather wondered if she was capable of making anyone, anyone at all, feel something other than mild amusement. Netflix asked if she was still watching and Heather took that to mean it was bedtime.

She closed her laptop.

She sat in her relative silence, feeling as hollow as she felt shallow.

The night sounds outside her window were undercut by a muted thump from inside her room and closet. The sound was over in an instant, but the suddenness of it squeezed all the air out of her body from bottom to top like a tube of toothpaste. As adrenaline burnt the little remaining oxygen in her body, Heather’s hands found the baseball bat beneath her bed before her lungs found more air.

If the past is any predictor, that noise was “probably nothing.” Heather reasoned that if there was nothing in the closet, then there would be nothing to be embarrassed
about since nothing would see her brandishing her baseball bat. She opened the closet, fully prepared to give nothing a piece of her mind. Instead, there was nothing but a box she had never seen before lying on the floor of her closet, just in front of her work shoes.
CHAPTER 2

Though Heather lived the most trivial parts of her life on autopilot, she felt confident that she would have remembered moving an ineffable green box just to store her shoes. As she stared into her closet alternative explanations presented and dismissed themselves in rapid succession until there seemed only one remaining conclusion: one that seemed entirely unreasonable and perhaps even a bit hasty. Heather patted her cheeks to attention and looked more closely.

The box was wooden and old, flaked in green paint that chipped along the edges of each individual plank, and was fashioned closed with tarnished brass-colored hinges. It was small enough, a bit larger than a shoebox, but not so small as to be missed. Heather looked around her closet for an empty space where perhaps the box could have fit and fallen, but there was no such gap. And the box was placed right side up and front-facing in a way that seemed to be oddly deliberate. Heather poked the box with the end of her bat and was surprised to be surprised when the bat touched solid matter. It was weird and vaguely threatening so it was probably somehow her dad’s fault.

She folded the bat under her arm and placed her bare hands on either side of the box. It was rough but unsplintering, leaving only a light fairy dust of flaking green paint on her fingers as she disturbed it. She removed the box from its place in her closet, off of the nonslip work shoes she had worn only a handful of hours before. Yes, there was only one conclusion, reasonable or otherwise, given the current evidence: the box had neither fallen from on high or been sitting on the floor all day, but rather had materialized with a loud thump.
Heather felt nauseated at the metaphysical prospects of her own conclusion, but she chased the thought away when she labeled it a “tomorrow problem.” If the box was magic or mundane, blessed or cursed, cosmically placed or simply her dad’s badly communicated storage, it would still be all those things in the morning. So, she placed the box on her desk, her bat under her bed, and herself back into her sheets. Things tend to be less mystical in the daylight.

In bed, Heather tried—paradoxically—to sleep but found herself racing her own thoughts. It isn’t actually all that sensational, she wagered. The spookiness of it all was more influenced by set and setting than by the box itself. It’s like those videos where they startle their cats by sneaking cucumbers behind them. A cucumber out of context is always more threatening than a cucumber that has been anticipated. Is it surprising to find an unexpected box? Yes. Is it necessarily supernatural? Not necessarily.

With that settled, or at least delayed, Heather felt a great relief in her lungs and seized the moment to meditate on her breath and her breathing, bringing heightened mindfulness to a mind that wanted to streak under the moonlight. Soon, her thoughts stilled with the most pervasive ones being reduced to little more than observable wreckage floating by on her mind’s flotsam. There were, however, two free-floating thoughts that disturbed her in the unmoderated twilight before she settled herself. First, she wondered if mindfulness had grown so popular amongst millennials because the human species was approaching its end and in the absence of a guaranteed then requires greater emphasis upon the more sensible now. Second, she wondered if, in the morning,
she would find something distressing inside the box. These questions, she decided, were also tomorrow problems.

When she woke up, she found no additional insight into the nature of presence in the face of apocalypse, which was disappointing.

She also found no box on her desk, which was devastating.

***

All Heather could think about during her next shift was that fucking box. Not that the box was useful.

“Not useful.”

Heather repeated the phrase under her breath as she went through the mindless motions of everyday work, but with nothing else to occupy her mind where else could her thoughts turn but to the phenomenal? Not to the building storm clouds, which would make her walk back home a bitch-and-a-half. Not to her shift leader, Montana, who has the inner richness of a deep-fried turd. There was nothing, nothing at all, more captivating about her sociological station at this Starbucks in which a woman had recently died than the idea of death itself or a magic box.

The only thing out of the ordinary seemed to be the abundance of wet floor signs, which had been placed in greater numbers than usual with a sort of better safe than sorry attitude. This only made it harder to concentrate. But as her thoughts drifted from her tasks to loftier questions about the fabric of reality, she carefully nudged it back to center with a gentle “not useful”.
Heather brushed the wrinkles out of her uniform and unlocked the front door while Montana hummed to herself and prepared the ready-to-drinks, babying each beverage before placing them in their homes.

Outside the store windows, the earth began to steam as rainwater touched the sidewalks. The boiling rain steamed the windows and frosted the glass, filtering out the little sunlight that had begun to peak over the flat Floridian horizon. Maybe all those wet floor signs would be useful after all.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Montana said staring through the windows with her elbows propped on the counter. It wasn’t. It really wasn’t. It was rainy and hot and humid and awful. The rain had already driven the first palmetto bugs into their front of house. It was not a beautiful day and it was pretty fucking inconsiderate of Montana to suggest that it was.

“Gorgeous,” Heather said.

“I like the rain. I like it more than the sun.” Was this grown-up life? Listening to the Montanas of the world talk about the weather? “I don’t dislike the sun, though.”

“Oh good.”

“It’s just the sounds. I like the sounds rain makes, you know?”

Heather noticed a tension in her neck, which she released along with her shoulders, her jaw, and her brow. She wasn’t positive when it formed, but it reappeared when Montana seized the low hanging some Sunshine State, huh? joke, so Heather had a pretty good guess.

Another palmetto bug scurried across the house floor. Heather hardened her stomach for a coming blow from Montana, which she imagined might sound something
like oh, the best part about the rain are the bugs but Montana didn’t say a word. She was transfixed by the steaming windows and the sound of the rain.

Heather took a broom and swept the palmetto bug toward the back door. It zigged and it zagged, but its tiny legs weren’t quick enough for Heather’s mighty broom. As she scurried the bug into the rain, Heather saw a dinted Honda parked outback near the dumpster with a bumper-sticker that said ‘Do You Even Starbucks?’

Vile.

Heather closed the door and committed a private oath to never—never—give Montana the satisfaction of describing where she got the sticker or how much she paid for it or where the vinyl was sourced.

A man entered the store. Older, in his sixties, hair more salt than pepper, heavier set around his middle and with wrinkles about mouth and eyes that seemed at home when contorted into a smile. The man didn’t look a thing like Santa Claus, but Heather wondered if his order might seem more interesting to her if she allowed herself the association. As he walked towards the counter, his pockets seemed to jingle a bit in his stride just enough to mask his Grateful Dead shirt and flip-flops with a drop of misplaced Christmas curiosity.

Heather took his order.

Venti dark roast with room.

His name was Martin.

There was nothing, not a single thing, exceptional or phenomenal or gifted about Martin or his order.
Heather gave Martin twenty ounces of dark roast with a little room at the top for milk.

Martin left.

Another Martin entered.

Tall white chocolate peppermint mocha, no whipped cream.

Her name was Carleen or Carlene.

It didn’t matter.

Another Martin entered.

Tall nonfat macchiato

Her name was Moira.

Another Martin.

Macchiato, some size.

Derek.

Another Martin. And another. All of them ordering. None of them interesting. A woman died in this Starbucks yesterday. That’s interesting. But not useful.

Not useful at all.

Coffee’s useful.

When you wake up faster than your faculties, have a cup of coffee. If your sociological niche needs you somewhere earlier than your consciousness can follow, have a cup of coffee. Useful. Uninteresting.

Being alive is useful too, especially to one’s employer. But not being alive isn’t too much of a burden either, it would seem. If Heather slipped and cracked her head
today, in spite (or perhaps in protest) of all the wet floor signs, would she be mourned? And if so, for how long? Certainly, a few customers would have their morning ruined. But Starbucks would probably just call someone else in to cover what was previously her shift. Montana might even seize the opportunity to squeeze a promotion out of it, somehow. Perhaps through demonstrating her capacity to remain level-headed under pressure. That might look pretty good on a resume. If Heather died in this store, she was positive Montana would mention the event in every job interview from now until Montana’s own death.

Heather felt her face grow warm with a low simmering hatred. She looked over at Montana, who was foaming milk and nodding her head in rhythm to the music playing over the intercom. Heather returned her attention to the newest Martin, a trilogy of tall women carrying gym bags, and felt silly for being angry about a hypothetical thing a fictionalized version of Montana did to her in a daydream.

So, Heather nudged herself back to the present and stayed there until a new distraction swept her away to more fantastic places. On and on went Heather’s mind for hours, looking towards the end of her shift, feeling like she’d been living most of her life on airplane mode until, maybe, yesterday.

***

Her shift ended but it was another thirty minutes before the rain to let up enough to walk home. So Heather sat and caffeinated herself and watched the changing of the guard. Some new hire, a high schooler, took over her shift and their manager relieved
Montana, who drove off to be awful elsewhere. As his first order of business, he took a
tape measure to the bathroom doors and wrote down some notes about adding a keypad.
That way the next person to die in their bathrooms would be guaranteed to be a paying
customer.

As she approached her apartment door, Heather slowed her steps and muted her
keys into her palm in equal parts practice and lethargy, not intending on waking her
probably napping father. When she approached the door, however, she heard the faint
sounds of her father’s steel acoustic guitar strings vibrating from the subtle cracks in the
door’s seal. She repocketed her keys and listened for a moment. The melody was at first
weak, likely just as palm-muted as her own keychain, but with each passing measure
grew louder in Heather’s perception. She recognized the song, something by Simon
and/or Garfunkel, but couldn’t recall the name.

She removed her bag from her back and silently slid down with her spine against
the door into a squat. She closed her eyes. She listened.

The guitar was warm and so was the melody. He’d gotten pretty good, which was
hard to believe, considering how rare it was that she ever saw her dad practice. Even
now, she realized, she couldn’t see him practice. As the melody grew louder in the
threshold of her hearing, she found his voice sitting under the guitar strings, rising and
dropping in both pitch and rhythm in response to the steel-string melody. There was a
word for this, but it seemed somehow inappropriate to even imagine the word “singing”
in relation to her father. She was sure he’d agree.
With her ears now tuned in to the melodic and rhythmic voice patterns one might call singing, lyrics began to manifest themselves though not a one of them was written by Paul Simon. In fact, the lyrics seemed to be created by her father as he played, though they contained only a single repeated word: “meow.”

Heather opened her eyes and her pupils contracted under the glare of the Floridian sun. There was, it would seem, another audience-of-one listening to her dad’s musicianship. She rose, leaving her bag at the front door, and on the balls of her nonslip feet, she circumnavigated her apartment building to peek around the corner to the back. There, undeniable, she saw a stray cat sitting in front of their apartment’s sliding glass doors listening as an angry little middle-aged man played guitar and meowed a song for its amusement.

She retreated back around the corner before either the musician or his audience noticed her. She took a deep breath and thought I don’t know the world anymore before sitting back down in front of her apartment to wait until the music ended.
CHAPTER 3

Heather sat into her afternoon routine but found it awkward and less automatic than she’d have liked, feeling like a tongue who was uncomfortable in its own mouth. On the TV, her dad was again watching a mindless drama about the drug cartel, though mindless felt a bit hypocritical. She’d never call her Attenborough documentaries mindless, even if she couldn’t recall a single detail from whatever she tried streaming the night before. At least her dad was invested and maybe even enjoying himself. She tried not to be jealous.

She brewed and then poured two cups of coffee and joined her dad on the couch.

How are you?
How was work?
That’s good.
Nothing much.
Yes.
No.
Great.

On they went, reading their scripts until Heather topped off what she’d come to call her ‘daily social minimum’. She poured herself a new cup and excused herself to her room feeling shallow.
Her room smelled like old smoke. The patchouli smell wasn’t stale per se, but it had let up just enough that the room’s natural smell—the smell of carpets and clothing and skin cells and wood—was starting to peek through. It smelled like the mundane.

She pulled some t-shirts and a damp towel from her laundry hamper and slid them into cracks in the bottom of the door frame. Heather lit more incense, filled her little room with yet more smoke, and blinked through the sting of over-saturated air.

Alone in her cloud of fumes, Heather sat on her bed and shivered an ill shiver before checking her phone. Her gut dropped. In the last day, the only contact she’d received were her friends’ half-assed responses to the memes she’d sent them the night before.

Her friend Carminda found the meme funny or at least sent three cry-laughing emojis. She didn’t say anything else, though. In fact, their recent correspondence stretching back for months now seemed to just be a game of tag. Heather would send a funny picture, and a few hours later, Carminda would say it was funny. Then, in a few days after that, Carminda would send a link to a funny video and Heather would respond with a similar affirmation. Ad infinitum.

High school was different.

Back when they had a schedule with premade socialization, it was so easy. They could talk during class or at lunch. They could hang out on weekends or work together on school nights. Everyone was so similar then. Now, not so much.

Heather was a barista and, she feared, not a whole lot else. She might take up another part-time, but that didn’t seem like it would solve the problem. Carminda was somebody, though. She graduated from high school with honors and then graduated with
a bachelor’s in communications just two years after that like some kind of academic terminator.

Then there was Bailey, who used to game with her and Marco whenever they had a minute to kill. But now, she was just another meme dump. And besides, Bailey was in the Caribbean now. She’d been there for a year with the Peace Corps promoting literacy in Grenada. Commendable, but now Heather had to text Bailey through an app and wait until she returned to wi-fi just to get a response. And that’s assuming Bailey wasn’t too tired to respond. Then there was also a timezone difference. Why even bother? Bailey looked like she was doing just fine. Sometimes she’d message their old group chat saying how she missed everyone, but her new Peace Corps friends could pick up that slack.

Heather closed the conversations. She looked at the barricade she’d built for herself between her door frame. It looked so lonely now, but even that obvious gesture towards leave me alone didn’t always have the same ring. In high school, which—God help her—was becoming the good old days, she and Marco would stuff clothes into door frames, burn incense, crack a window, and take rips from improvised bongs into obnoxious hours of the night feeling like badasses and delinquents. But that was then.

She still sent Marco memes too, just like the rest of the gang. Not Marco, exactly, his Facebook page, which was still up even since his death. A kind of memorial. It was eerie, but not so eerie that Heather could resist sending him memes along with the rest. He just never responded any more. No, their correspondence was now entirely one-sided. Just months of pictures, links, and the occasional “I miss you, bud.” None of them ever got opened. They just collected.

Not useful.
Heather set her phone aside and put on a different documentary, a Netflix original explaining the origins of piracy, which might have been thrilling if Heather bothered to watch it. Instead, she disregarded the noises and scrolled through endless news feeds on other platforms.

Waves of boredom settled in a tense nest between her eyebrows, drawing the tiny muscles in her face towards each other with painful indifference. She’d hoped this would make her feel something, but this didn’t feel like it counted. Heather rubbed her head and tried to manually unwrinkle her forehead, feeling betrayed that the physical sensation of boredom was, somehow, more sensational than anything else in her life at that moment.

The pirate episode ended and autoplayed something about disease control. Heather again managed to ignore it until that episode also ended. Netflix checked in to see if she was still watching. She admitted she wasn’t and closed the video.

***

That night, Heather lay in bed physically tired but neurologically thrilled by all the blue light she spent her evening devouring. Her body was heavy, her feet were sore, but she felt no closer to sleep now than she did hours earlier.

Maybe she should drink less coffee.

Maybe she should drink the same amount of coffee, but earlier in the day.

Maybe she should Google caffeine's half-life.
Maybe she should download a blue light filter on her phone so she can Google things about caffeine at any time of the night.

The thoughts scrolled infinitely by. Heather would have counted them like sheep if she could, but instead, each passing idea seemed to breathe new anxious life into her bedtime. At long last, after days or weeks or months of total numbness, a proper emotion began to rise somewhere in the cracks in her sternum. It wasn’t a full emotion yet, but it was coming. It appeared quietly at first but was building speed until it became unignorable: hatred.

Hatred for her stupid, scattered brain. Hatred for quitting school. Hatred for her job. Hatred for her life and her friend’s lives and her friends and herself. She used to feel things and want things and do things, really want to do things. Now, all she did was nothing and even that was too much some days. Most days. It was getting worse.

There was a thump.

Heather's eyes stood at attention and her mounting hatred slipped through the cracks in her focus. First, she turned her towards her bedroom door. It was still closed, locked, and blocked up in the seams. No one but her had been in her room since she’d settled in for the night. She left her sheets and slid the closet door open, not daring to hope or expect.

There, sitting atop her work shoes, was an old green box. A new feeling pushed through her chest’s recesses and drowned out the loathing: Fear.

Fear didn’t feel good, but it did feel and that felt good enough.
CHAPTER 4

There it was, right back on her grimy Starbucks shoes. It felt deliberate, its placement, but Heather snorted the thought away as soon as she noticed it. Yes, she was living the life of a hermit, but she wasn’t a crazy hermit. And she’d touched it last night—picked it up, in fact—and she hadn’t contracted anthrax. It was silly to be afraid when you think about it.

She pulled some dirty laundry out from under her door frame and used them like oven mitts. With her hands protected, Heather put it under her desk lamp and dusted the top with a crumpled concert tee.

She knocked on the box’s clean surface with her bare knuckle. She wasn’t all that sure what she was looking for, but that seemed like what people did in these kinds of situations. It sounded and felt like wood, which she supposed that was as good a start as any.

She dusted the remaining edges and picked it up from either side raising it to her ear for a good shake. Inside the box, she heard a rattle and felt as the box’s center of gravity jigged with some shifting contents. Whatever was inside didn’t weigh much. Maybe a couple of pounds.

Heather sniffed the box or at least tried. Her nostrils were crusted from hotboxing her room with incense. Inconclusive. Silly, in fact. Or worse: stalling.

She returned the box onto her desk.

She opened it.
Inside the box were two human hands with four or five inches of forearm still remaining at the stump. The hands faced opposite directions with either wrapped around the opposite’s wrist like a knot or an ouroboros or an infinity sign. They were dried and crusty at the stump, though the rest of the skin was lively and even pink at the knuckles. They weren’t shriveled or pickled or mummified, they were shapely and undamaged, preserved down to the hairs.

There, in the sharpness of oxygenated insight, Heather saw something so small it had to happen three times before it registered. A dull blue vein that ran from the hands left middle finger to below its thumb knuckle pumped under the skin.

Heather dove onto her bed. Keeping her eyes on the box, she fished under her bed until her fingertips grazed her room’s self-defense bat. She wielded it in both hands, putting it between her and her desk and pushed herself up her mattress with her feet until her spine was flush against her headboard.

She glanced at her desk clock. It was well past midnight and her dad was at work. She had no backup. With her bat in hand, Heather watched and waited, ready to strike. She raised the bat higher, putting a buffer between her and the box.

She could run. There was nothing between her and freedom save for a few wadded pieces of fabric. One hard tug on the door and her clothing would give. But she waited, not wanting to make the first move. Not wanting to make the wrong move. Total stillness.

But nothing moved.

But no moves were made.

A stalemate.
Heather caught her breath. She didn’t feel as flighty, but still just as fighty. She pushed her back against the headboard and slid herself upwards on planted feet until she could, from her bed, see in.

The hands remained, bound in their knot. Then the left’s vice grip loosened and its fingertips curled downward and dragged its fingernails along the skin around the right wrist over and over, scratching. Itchy?

Heather roared and charged her desk, raising her bat overhead. She swung the bat downward with every pound in her body cracking the bat into the box with a thump that caused the hands to release each other and writhe. She hit it again and again, splintering through the old wood and cracking the knuckles into crooked bloody twisted things. Then, with one more deep roar that shook her body and her room and the very firmament of heaven, she swept the bat horizontally and sent the pulp—hands, box, and all—through her window glass.

***

The police were the last to arrive. The next-door neighbor, an old man with a confederate general, heard the window break and opened his doors for Heather while she waited and called the police and her dad. English was his first language, but it was Panhandle English, a fact he explained after her tale left him insisting there must have been something he didn’t understand. Hands? No, there must have been a language barrier. He did, however, offer her tea and a fleece throw while she waited, for which she was grateful.
Her dad arrived as quickly as he was able, leaving his shift under the pretense of “family emergency.” Heather hugged him and recounted the story yet again.

“Hands?” her dad—a native speaker—asked. “Just hands?”

“What do you mean ‘moved’?” asked one of Orlando’s finest, twenty minutes after.

They went around in circles, from the closet to the desk to the window as best as Heather could articulate it, but everyone was stuck. Together, they combed through the grass looking for a broken box or some broken hands, but all they found was glass.

Investigating the interior of her room was not much more fruitful either, there was more glass scattered across her desk, there were dents in her bat, but that was about it. No blood. Nothing concrete.

“It could be exhaustion,” the officer said. “Or maybe a dream.” Heather was, after all, in bed when it all started, on the cusp of consciousness. Maybe she’s been sleeping badly recently, maybe that’s it? Maybe she’s been under a lot of stress, she should take better care of herself.

“It’s a threat,” dad said, who believed whole-heartedly about the hands but dismissed their movement as nerves—the ones in Heather’s head, not the ones in the hands. They should have never moved into a first-floor apartment. He knew this would happen, he just knew it. “Someone’s trying to threaten her, and you’re just gonna let them walk?”

The officer said she understood their frustration, but needed more if she was going to stop “them” from walking, whoever they may have been. But Heather had told them everything, as best as she could remember it, so everyone’s hands were tied.
The officer left with one last reminder to try and sleep before sitting in her squad car and sipping on a tall white Starbucks cup as she pulled out of the parking lot.

Try and sleep. The eternal paradox.

Heather assured her dad that under no conditions would she be sleeping tonight and that it was fine for him to return to the Home Depot for the remainder of his shift. She was feeling better, she said. No trauma, she said. Shaken, not stirred.

Heather paced the parking lot waiting for sunrise, her mind lost. The scene replayed restarting the moment it ended over and over again. On loop, endlessly scrolling. No insights, no recovered details, just an unending stage show of her imagination until a glimpse of her reflection in a puddle reminded her of the world outside her memory.

She reached for her phone to text her group chat about what happened but was given pause. Would they take her seriously? Would they find it funny? Would she be able to send the message in such a way that it didn’t sound like a joke? Was it a joke?

Heather grew cold at the thought of sitting alone with her thoughts for another day, or worse, spending another night alone in her room where the hands once sat.

She looked at her group chat. This didn’t seem like the right medium. This wasn’t what she needed. Out of everyone in the group.

Carminda was still in town, far as she knew. She wanted proximity. She wanted to text her, to be near someone, but their messages were so shallow lately, just memes after memes. Just popping low hanging jokes for a brief burst of affirmation. They’d talked in person when they were in school together, they had that kind of relationship at the time.
But little by little they’d slipped into… something. Something other than themselves, even if it looked an awful lot like friendship.

Heather was always funny or considered herself funny even if no one else did. Carminda was always high achieving. But to have messages that were only funny memes followed up with brief updates on Carminda’s latest successes just felt like a caricature. What if that was the lesson of adulthood? That we’re all quite a bit simpler than we pretend we are in high school. Maybe Heather really was just a funny barista and that was that.

But Marco was dead now and they’d never speak again. People die slipping on tiles in the Starbucks bathroom. Every day the climate swung closer to inferno and there were a pair of disembodied hands jack-in-the-boxing out of thin air.

Heather felt her usual doubts: she felt flattened and uninteresting and amusing at her own expense. But, just this one time, she also didn’t care. None of it mattered anymore.

She opened her chat.

She composed two messages.

One to Montana: Family emergency. Cover me tomorrow?

One to Carminda: Are you free tomorrow? I need your help. I think I’m losing my mind. I’m not trying to be funny or cute or whatever the fuck, I just really can’t be alone anymore. I’m sorry if this is a huge inconvenience and I understand if you can’t come over, but if you can it would mean the world to me. There was a break-in, kind of, it’s hard to explain, but basically a break-in and I can’t stop thinking. If you’re free, can you come over? I miss you.
In six minutes, the messages were opened.

In two minutes, Heather’s phone began to ring.

Carminda could be there in thirty.
Carminda arrived in a Volkswagen bug. It looked new. Good for Carminda. She looked tired, especially in the gloom. She charged across the parking lot and embraced Heather tight, drowning her in her ringlets. Heather sank into the hug and felt all the tension in her body, the tightness that kept her moving in spite of everything, shriveling until she was nothing but a trash bag full of pudding.

“Carminda,” Heather said. “I’m really, really sorry.”

Carminda tightened her hold and ran soothing fingernails along her shoulders. It tickled and burned and froze at every swipe. Heather refound herself under the sensation and rose back up on her own two feet. They eased their embrace enough to see one another clearly with eyes that had finally dilated under the Orlando night.

She looked different, as people you never see any more tend to be. Her face was soft and understanding but now had red rings under her eyes. Her hair was shorter, shoulder-length now, and more voluminous than it had even been when she’d one best hair in senior year of high school.

“You cut your hair,” Heather said.

“This?” Carminda said. Heather feared her observation was trivial, especially in light of the SOS that hailed Carminda to her apartment, but her friend just laughed and bobbed her chin left and right as her curls slung around her face. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“You look good.”

“Shh.” Carminda said. “You’re not allowed to say that. That’s what people say after breakups.” And it was.
Heather unlocked the apartment and ushered her friend inside with the promise of tea and whatever other snacks she could rustle up. Carminda’s first time in the new apartment. As they settled, they took inventory of the new space, comparing and contrasting the differences between this apartment and the one Heather grew up in on the other side of Orlando, back when her parents were still together.

As they talked idly, they searched the cupboards for some tea bags—a hard thing to find in a coffee house—and sat at the couch to talk while their water boiled. Heather braced herself and replayed the last few hours back to herself. It was bonkers, absolutely fucking bonkers.

Self-consciousness seized her. Carminda wouldn’t believe; she was a woman of science. She’d laugh and think she was a fool and, you know, maybe she was. Maybe Heather was a fool.

“I like your bug,” Heather said instead of a single substantial thing and pointed towards the parking lot. “It’s adorable, is it new?”

“New to me,” she said. “It was mom’s but she got a newer one. They don’t make new ones anymore, did you hear? They’re discontinued.”

“End of a dynasty.”

“An epoch, at least.”

“Long live the queen, then I guess,” Heather said and raised her mug for a toast. “May her power windows never fail.”

They clinked their glasses. They laughed.
“To be honest,” Heather started. “I thought it was new new, not just new to you. You drove up and I was all fuck, how much is her program paying her. Maybe I should go to grad school. It’s a bitch getting around in Orlando without your own car, you know?”

“Oh god, don’t do it. Don’t go to grad school.”

“What, why, what's wrong with it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, just don’t do it.”

Heather cocked her head like a hard-of-hearing dog. “What’s wrong with it, I thought you loved your program.”

“I do!” she said. “Mostly. I mean, I love the program. The program is great.”

“But just the program?”

“It’s silly, but kind of? Like, you know how undergrad was an absolute ball?”

“I mean, I dug the shit out of my one semester yeah.”

“Well, undergrad isn’t. It just isn’t,” Carminda said. She frowned and the bags under her eyes seemed to grow redder “I fucked up, Heather. I fucked up.”

“Yo, me too. Let’s compare notes.”

“Heather, if I tell you something I need you to promise not to tell the others about this, okay?”

“I literally only send them memes, I promise. What’s up?”

“UCF was the only school that accepted me,” she said and dropped her head towards her mug in absolute shame. “Like I spent an entire year of my busting my ass balancing undergraduate work and an entire campaign just to get into a half-decent
Masters program and for what? No one wanted me except the people who already know me. Do not ever, ever, ever go to grad school where you went to undergrad.”

“What, why?”

“It breaks the spell, you know? The undergrad spell. Like, undergrad is designed to be a god damned amusement park ride for those kids. But then you start grad school and get suckered into university politics. Just a little bit, maybe, but enough to ruin your happy memories.”

“Never meet your heroes,” Heather said and nodded.

“Never,” Carminda agreed. “Plus there’s employment, but I’d rather not think about that. Getting a second degree from the same university? It’s just so...so—I don’t know—”

“—Incestuous?” Heather offered.

“Yeah. Incestuous.” Carminda rubbed circles into her temples.

“Do you ever wish you’d just gone straight into the workforce? After high school, I mean.”

“All. The. Time,” Carminda said. “Do you ever wish you’d finished your bachelor’s?”

“Yeah. All the time.”

Carminda nodded and then fished into her tote. “Hey, I’m really sorry. You called me out here because you needed me and all I’ve done is talk about myself.” She reached into the bottom of her bag and pulled out a single, badly rolled joint. “Can we reset?”

“Yeah,” Heather said. “We absolutely can.”

They cracked some windows.
They burned some incense.

They reset.

***

Heather explained it all. The box, her job, the dead woman at work. She hadn’t been sleeping. Her thoughts have been out of control. Was she even a reliable or objective person any more? Fuck maybe, maybe not, but this seemed like a lot. This would take psychosis, not insomnia right? This is more than anxiety and depression, right? To see a box that just appears in thin air that’s also full of live hands. It was crazy.

It was absolutely crazy.

“Wow,” Carminda said.

“Don’t give me ‘wow’, tell me if I’m crazy.”

They went back and forth, weighing the evidence and settled upon two agreements. First, neither of them were qualified to call Heather ‘crazy.’ Second, that they wished Marco were here right now. This was his area of expertise. They missed that sweet little hermit.

They poured their teas and sat around looking for conversation while the stray paced outside the sliding glass door and looked into the room. Probably looking for Heather’s dad.

They settled in. The warmth of their teas, the comfort of an old friend lulled Heather in a way a bed time never seemed to be able and she felt her body and her eyes
grow heavy. For the first time in a while, Heather felt safe. She felt safe in a way baseball bats didn’t seem to cover.

Carminda may do all the right things, but at least she wasn’t exactly happy. Does that make Heather a bad friend for feeling that? Maybe Heather’s selfish. Fuck, maybe she’s insane. Insanity is an easier pill to swallow than the alternative—that if her experience wasn’t psychotic, then the hands must have been… unnatural. Marco’s expertise was in the occult. He would have had the home field advantage.

Heather had an idea but it was a little icky. It was a little gimmicky. It was a little bit insensitive. She pushed the thought deep down, but it popped back up again and again until Heather could no longer stop the thought. But Carminda was here to comfort her, after all. If ever she had a pass for an inappropriate idea, it was now.

“Carminda,” she started. “I have an idea, but I’m afraid you’ll hate it.”

“Shoot. If I hate it, I’ll tell you.”

“What if we had a séance.”

“A séance? For the hands?”

“For Marco.”

Carminda frowned the kind of frown only reserved for those with a Bachelor of Science or above, the kind that said: “ask me what this BS stands for”.

“Heather…” she said.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Heather said. “You’re going to tell me this is a bad idea—that this is crazy disrespectful or at least just crazy—that I haven’t been sleeping well and have been under a lot of stress and that I’m not thinking straight, but that’s not it at all, you’ve got to understand. Yes, I concede that this is not my usual
approach to stress, but my usual approaches haven’t been working and I’ve run out of anything to watch on Netflix so it’s really between this and doing nothing.”

Carminda rose and shook her head, replaying the wall of language that just got thrown her way. “Heather, that isn’t what I was going to say, but you’ve projected some really strong points against this kind of woo-woo bullshit.”

“Ah, see? There is it. ‘Woo-woo.’ What’s woo-woo if not placebo, right? How do you think séances work, Carminda?”

“They don’t.”

“Well, obviously, yeah. But how precisely don’t they work?”

“I guess you prime yourself,” she said and leaned back into the sofa. “To look for patterns in random stimuli. It makes you assign meaning to random noise.”

“Okay, perfect. So we both agree it isn’t supernatural. See how much we have in common right now?” Heather stole a glance at Carminda, who was nodding politely if only to say where is this going? “So if it’s not coming from outside us, if it isn’t magic, then it has to be internal, right? Like—if this is all in my head, let’s get in my head.”

“Heather, I really don’t know about this. Fuck, maybe it has some therapeutic value if you approach it like you’re saying, but it just seems irresponsible—”

“—please, just be irresponsible with me for twenty minutes.”

Carminda closed her eyes and tilted her head back in a fit of what Heather assumed was moral calculus. Her nostrils flared at each inhale and on each exhale her features softened. Was this surrender?

“You swear,” Carminda said. “That you don’t believe we’re going to be talking to Marco?”
“I swear,” Heather said and she was pretty sure it was the truth.

***

Both had seen enough movies to know the basics, but that only got them as far as clearing a kitchen table to place some tea candles and yet more incense. The rest required some Googling. It seemed occultists have agreed to disagree if the first three web results were to be believed, except for maybe one thing: it’s all about intention. Intention matters more than ritual.

What was their intention? To call forth Marco Pérez from the dead.

What was their purpose for contacting Marco? To gain additional perspective on the ineffable happenings in Heather’s life.

Why must it be Marco? Who else? Heather reassured Carminda. It’s gotta be Marco. He was into this, now he’s gone. If he were here, he’d know what to say, since he’s not I guess I just want to get into his world a little bit. I just want to know what he’d think like.

The answers were satisfactory to the Internet’s questionnaire and to Carminda’s reservations.

They lit the candles.

They lit the incense.

They held hands.
Before the first syllable escaped anyone’s lips, the room began to take on the weight of their intentions. Above them, Heather’s upstairs neighbor took a step that bent the floor and echoed a low groan into rooms below. Already it sounded otherworldly. She got it now, Heather really got it now. That creak was nothing and already it sounded like the dead. The mind is an awful, awful thing.

Heather squeezed her friend’s hand and turned her gaze towards her upturned phone, which had a script loaded in her web browser.

A prayer, which they skipped.

A call for permission to speak to the departed, which Heather did not skip.

Then the séance.

“Is there,” Heather said, feeling self-conscious. “Anyone here who wishes to speak with us?”

She quieted her breath and listened into the room for anything that could sound like an answer. The air conditioner was humming. There was another step on the floor above. She could hear Carminda’s breath.

“Is Marco Pérez with us?”

The air conditioner pushed a gentle current around the room, one that Heather could feel against her skin. It felt cool. Air conditioner or ghost, the modern stick or snake. Probably the air conditioner. Her palms were beginning to sweat against Carminda’s. Surely nothing. The mind is an awful thing.

Next, tell the spirits how to communicate.

“Spirits, as we ask you questions, knock once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no’.”
The wall beside the table settled in a single, deep, creek. Carminda sat upright and tightened her grip. Good. Heather felt validated.

“Is Marco with us?”

There was a tap. Then another. A series of hollow taps from just over their shoulders. Waves of electricity fired up and down Heather’s spine. It wasn’t the sound of a neighbor. It wasn’t the sound of the air conditioning. It probably wasn’t the sound of the apartment settling. But the sound of a ghost?

Slowly—the instructions warned against sudden movements—they turned in her chairs to see over their shoulders. Heather controlled her movements with her breath, keeping steady and stable, not wanting to spook the—well… She followed the sound to the sliding glass door beside her dad’s guitars and heard a second sound: a meow.

Through the glass, she saw the stray, a scrawny little fella with shiny gray fur and a head a tad too big for his body with a single paw pressed against the glass. Heather sighed. Relief or disappointment? She wasn’t sure.

“Fuck,” Carminda said, releasing pounds of pressure from her vice grip on Heather’s hand. “Fuck, is that cat yours?”

“No, I think it’s Marco.”

Carminda frowned.

“I’m kidding, no that’s just a stray. It likes my dad. Let’s let it inside.”

“A stray? Isn’t that unhygienic?”

“Probably, but your twenty irresponsible minutes aren’t up yet.”
Heather broke the circle with an our communication is here finished and released Carminda’s hand. She slid the door a crack and, before she could offer a welcoming *pstpstpst*, the cat was already pushing its pink nose into the apartment.

“This,” Heather said. “Is what I was looking for.”

“What, a cat?”

“A distraction? A familiar? Fuck, I don’t know, but it’s better than thinking.”

She opened the door a crack and the cat slipped inside, making itself immediately known with a loud meow and a hearty rub against every available shin. Heather opened the note on her phone titled *Cat names, Good.*

“Hey, Carminda?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think it’s more of a ‘Patchouli’ or a ‘Galaga’?”

“I’m not getting ‘Galaga’ vibes from this one.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Heather said. “Patchouli then. Patchy, for short.”

Heather held out her hands and made a scritch-scritch gesture for Patchy. Patchy sniffed her fingers before deeming them worthy and pulled his chin up and over her fingernails, purring louder than any of the séance’s so-called signs.

They chatted and played with Patchy until it grew tired of them and pawed at the door to leave. Exhausted, a little high, and now drained of séance adrenaline, they settled down to sleep. It would be fine. The apartment smelled way more like incense than weed and the box wouldn’t be back until the following night. It would be fine.
Heather lay in bed and waited for her mind to settle enough to sleep.

It was starting to make sense now, or at least more sense than the leading explanation: good ol’ Floridian brujería. If what Carminda was saying was true, and it probably was because a dead friend returning as a stray cat is a tough pill to swallow, then whatever “meaning” the hands possess could be deciphered right then right there. If it came from Heather then Heather had everything she needed to roll up her sleeves and solve a mystery Scooby-Doo style.

Heather opened a new note on her phone titled Box Theories and considered the data. Two hands: severed at the forearm, spooky, interlocked, mobile, Caucasian. One box: antiqued green, old, dusty, hinged, self-manifesting, punctual. Simple. Easily described.

Maybe the hands are Marco’s traveling through death to communicate.

Maybe the box is Heather’s subconscious; superconscious.

Maybe the hands represent a past trauma. Repressed? As a child did Heather accidentally hold hands with the wrong adult in a busy mall or something?

Maybe the hands are an allusion to M. C. Escher.

Maybe the box is Heather’s hatred for Starbucks. Green, yes, but Starbucks green?

Maybe the hands are an allusion to Super Smash Bros. Marco was pretty good at that game; featured hands pretty prominently.

Maybe the box is a vehicle driven by the hands.
Maybe the hands are a circular depiction of death and rebirth brought to the forefront of Heather’s mind by an unexpected death. Marco’s or the Starbucks woman’s. Either/or.

Maybe the hands are an Addams Family allusion.

Maybe the duo is a god. God?

Maybe the duo are an impossibly vague stimulus what forces introspection. Like tarot. Séances. That the search for meaning proves that Heather’s psyche has been too language-y for too long and that after years of seeing the world in words, the pattern-seeking parts of her primate mind have gone bat shit bananas just to find meaning in random noise.

Maybe Heather was unqualified to make such sweeping psychological conclusions.

Maybe Heather should see a psychiatrist. Maybe she should major in psychology.

Maybe Heather should read Freud.

Jung?

Leary?

Maybe it’s hopeless.
CHAPTER 6

They awoke in the living room at the crack of noon to the sounds of hammering. Grating, perhaps, but Heather was feeling something similar to refreshed. Sure, nothing was different, but it was morning now and things are never so scary in the day. They followed the sounds out and around the side of the apartment. Dad was covering the broken bedroom window with a board. As he worked, Patchouli watched from the nearby hedges—close enough to observe, not so close as to shatter an eardrum.

His work was unbelievably shoddy, at least so far as Heather could tell. She’d be the first to admit that she wasn’t exactly home improvement savvy, but neither was her dad. Fuck, you’d think he’d absorbed something working at a Home Depot, but if the dinted wood and muttered curses were any indication, he hadn’t gained a goddamn thing. Not even an employee discount. He perked when he saw his daughter and Carminda standing and turned his attention toward them.

“Good morning, y’all,” he said, placing his hammer in the grass beside some spray cans. “Carminda, good to see you. I hope I didn’t wake you.” They both fibbed and said he didn’t. Heather looked at the handy work and spray cans.

“Dad,” she said. “Why are you doing this?”

“So no one can slip back in. We live on the ground floor, Heather, it’s dangerous.”

“No, I remember. But why are you doing this. This is an apartment, this is their responsibility, right?”
“You’d think,” he said. “But they can’t get their maintenance guy out here until fucking tomorrow. It’s not safe. That’s just not safe.”

“Tomorrow’s not that long, dad. I really don’t think it’s worth losing your security deposit over.”

“Better the security deposit than our lives,” he said, which was hard to argue with, even if he seemed to be skipping a few steps. Heather looked up and around the other apartments for an angry neighbor to leverage as a reason to stop, but there were none. No one gave a shit.

He took a step back towards the bushes to consider his work with museum-like distance. It wasn’t pretty. It wasn’t straight. There were tons of crooked nails just poking out at random angles but it was at least attached. He nodded at the window and swatted at Patchy who interpreted the quiet as a chance to rub on his jeans.

“Mongrel,” he said.

“His name’s Patchy. He’s really sweet, I’m not sure he’s even a stray, he’s so chill around people.”

“Oh he’s a stray alright,” he said. “Look at him. He’s got testicles the size of coconuts. Definitely a stray. We should get him fixed before there’s more of him eating all the birds.”

Heather cringed but had to look. Patchy did, in fact, have some balls on him, though to call them ‘coconuts’ seemed a bit much. The cat, unphased by the swats, continued moving from the bushes and walked with blinking eyes fixed upon her father’s legs stepping over the cans of black and red and yellow spray paint that sat in the grass beside her father’s foot.
“What are those for?” Carminda asked, pointing to the paint cans.

He smiled a smug little tough-guy smile and picked up a can to rattle.

“I’m gonna leave whoever tried to break in a message. In case they get any more ideas.”

“Dad, no one tried to break-in.”

“Just because the window broke when the fucker—”

“—the hands?”

“—tried to escape doesn’t mean he didn’t have to break in to the house first. This is thug repellent.”

Heather and Carminda stole a nervous glance toward one another.

“What are you thinking of writing?” Carminda asked.

“I’m not writing shit,” he said puffing up his chest. “I’m gonna spray on a big-ass coral snake. What’s that old rhyme? Red on yellow is the poison one, right? Heather Google it.”

“Yeah,” Carminda said. “Red on yellow is venomous.”

“Dad. Please, please don’t don’t-tread-on-me my window.”

“Oh, that’s good,” he said. “I forgot about that. You think I should put that there too?”

“No!”

“Well, I already bought the paint,” he said and he kicked the cans towards Heather. “We’re putting something on there. If you don’t like my coral snake, then you do it. You have until I leave for work today, else it’s gonna be a snake.”
“Fine, fine,” she said as she and Carminda stooped to take the cans far from the madman. “We’ll handle it.”

“Good,” he said. “Can’t draw a good snake anyway.” He shielded his eyes to get one last look at his lopsided masterpiece. He nodded a satisfied nod towards a job adequately done and bent over to retrieve his tools. As he lowered himself, he—on autopilot—pat Patchouli once on his head before picking up his spare nails and hammer. He pocketed the nails and tapped the hammer into the palm of his hands and headed back inside. As he turned the apartment’s corner, he recited a rhyme under his breath: red on yellow kills a fellow. Red on black, something something Jack.”

***

Carminda had a few hours left before the normal patterns of her day-to-day required her to leave her friend, but that was okay. That was enough time to get into something spicy. And, after all, Heather was feeling much better. Sleeping in had done her a world of good and the metaphysical prospects from the day before ceased to seem quite as potent under the current circumstances. What they would do next, however, was unclear entirely. Coffee seemed like the obvious answer, but coffee for coffee’s sake tasted a little too much like Starbucks today so that was out.

They settled on lunch. There would be a high likelihood of coffee there but it wouldn’t be the principal focus. Plenty of other foods around to indicate that this was a restaurant and not a prison camp. They piled into Carminda’s VW Beetle, which smelled like evergreen and new leather and went to a strip mall along the side of the road. There,
they stopped for Vietnamese food, a place called VietNomz which shared a parking lot with a dinky recording studio and a perfectly adequate Tex-Mex restaurant.

They ordered pho and Vietnamese coffees. They took two seats at the restaurant’s only table, which was very long and ran through the center of the alley-like restaurant beside a young couple who were both dressed in wool beanies despite the heat and across from a woman pouring over her anatomy textbook. The food was good, probably, Heather wasn’t an aficionado in Vietnamese food but the price was good and there were a handful of Asian customers currently eating and that seemed like a good sign.

Beside her, Carminda stirred her soup waterboarding a piece of floating cilantro up and down in the broth repeatedly with a spoon staring deeply into the swirling oils and micro-bubbles that sat on the surface of her bowl. Heather took the empty mason jars they’d been handed with their meals and filled them with water from a pitcher on the table. The sound of the dripping beside her head snapped reality back across Carminda’s face and the spell was broken.

“You okay?” Heather asked as she replaced the water jar on the table beside her friend.

“Yeah, just lost in thought, you know?”

“Yeah,” Heather said. “I know.”

Heather returned to her bowl, piling a handful of jalapeños into her broth and dropping a squeezed lime in after it. The lime went in with a suctiony thwump that splashed the table around her. She apologized and patted down the table with a napkin, but beside her, Carminda was—again—transfixed by the soup swirling in front of her
with a thousand yard stare into the brisket that had floated up to the top of her bowl.

Heather put a hand on her shoulder and—again—the spell was broken.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”


“What genre of weird?”

“Like, I don’t know, I feel like my head’s being pressed on all sides. It doesn’t hurt. It just—I don’t know—it just feels.”

“I get that,” Heather said. Constantly. She stopped for a moment and felt into her own head and face. She found tension in her brow and her jaw, which she released as she wondered when it got there. ”Something on your mind?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if we need to get into it right now.”

“Don’t hold back on my account. I’m feeling a lot better since last night.” Heather topped off their waters in a gesture she hoped would be undeniable proof of her okay-ness. Carminda wasn’t looking.

“It was kind of weird,” Carminda said. “Calling on Marco during our séance. At least for me.”

“Oh shit, I’m really sorry if that crossed the line.”

“No,” Carminda said. “It’s not that. It’s just, I guess I hadn’t really fully processed it. It was surprising, is all, that when it came time to finally sit down and think about it—really think about it—it was during a…”

“A séance,” Heather finished.

“…a séance. Yeah.”
Carminda started fidgeting again. First with her soup again, then she rolled a plastic chopstick between her palm and the table before settling on occupying her hand with her coffee, which she drank mindlessly. A pity since it was pretty good coffee. There was tension again between Heather’s eyebrows and in her jaw. When does that form? You’d think you’d notice when you start squeezing your entire face together.

“This is going to sound awful,” Carminda said. “Do you promise not to judge me?”

“Yeah, man I promise. What’s up?”

“Marco died,” Carminda said. “Or killed himself—fuck I don’t know what the ‘correct’ term is.”

“No, don’t worry about that. What are you thinking?”

“It’s just that he died at the least convenient possible time in my life and I know how that sounds and I’m not trying to sound selfish when I say it, but that’s how I feel and every time I think about it—about how inconvenient his death was—it makes me nauseated and feel like a shitty friend. Am I shitty?

“No,” Heather said. “I don’t think so. I know what you mean and it’s true. It blind-sided us.”

“It’s just that I was in one of the last semesters of undergrad and I was juggling that with my grad school applications and studying for the GRE and just getting into a half-decent grad program is starting a political campaign—never mind maintaining my grads and still, you know, actually learning something in class. And then he died. He killed himself. And I just didn’t have time. There were deadlines to keep and I didn’t
have time to feel anything. I just kept going. By the time I had the space to think about it everyone else seemed to have moved on or moved out.”

Carminda picked up a glass and swirled it aimlessly. “Fuck” she added to nothing in particular. She sipped her coffee again and then turned towards Heather with eyes wide as galaxies. Heather felt like she had to say something.

“First, you’re not a shitty friend,” Heather said. “I mean, I don’t think you are, but I’m not an authority on this so fuck if I know. But I get what you mean. Like, he’s already dead. It’s not like my crying over it is gonna make him, what, less dead?”

Heather winced at her own ham-fisted attempt at soothing but as she scanned Carminda’s face there was nothing there that betrayed anything suggesting offense or that the wrong words had been presented. Heather took a deep breath and continued.

“At Starbucks, the other day, an old woman died in the bathroom.”

Carminda flinched and leaned in closer with her head cocked to the side.

“What? How?”

“It was a freak thing, I think. The bathroom floor was a little wet and she must have just slipped. I think she was demented or homeless or something, I don’t know, but it was so weird. She just walked in to the bathroom and then got dragged out by the police.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“No, what’s fucked up is that everyone’s just acting like it didn’t happen. We ordered number locks for the bathrooms, but that’s it. We just swept her up and went on with our shifts. But, I can’t say shit. This is the first time I’ve talked about it since it happened so it’s not like I have the moral high ground just because I feel about it.”
“Do you want to talk about it?” Carminda offered?

“Fuck, I don’t know. I just don’t know. Maybe? Maybe not? I’ve been trying not to think about it for the last couple of days and that’s been working as well as you can imagine.”

“I’m really sorry, Heather—”

“—Don’t be. She’s dead and that’s not changing. The point is people die—everyone dies—and sometimes people die at shitty times and you just keep pushing. There’s no time.”

They sat in silence for minutes and interacted only with their soup and their coffees. Heather finished her meal but Carminda claimed she wasn’t hungry. They packed up their leftovers and Carminda drove Heather back to her apartment while a Spotify playlist played tone-deaf acoustic music in the background. As Carminda drove, Heather replayed their lunch in her mind. Somewhere in her gut, she found that she felt better. It kind of felt good that Carminda was also miserable. Did that make her a shitty friend? Maybe it did. But at least she was a shitty friend in good company.

They parked.

They hugged.

They agreed not to wait this long to see one another again.

Then an odd thought occurred to Heather. She tasted the thought and tried to decide if it would be rude or insensitive to mention at the moment, but figured they were past the point of no return already.

“The first time I ever had Pho,” she said. “It was with Marco.”

“Yeah,” Carminda agreed. “Me too, actually.”
Heather stood before her boarded up window with three cans of spray paint in her arms. It was easy to say absolutely not to her dad’s don’t tread on me coral snake but a much harder thing to think of an alternative. She felt paralyzed by the infinite vastness the canvas offered, the impossible number of options she could take. She felt paralyzed by her own lack of painting skills. She even felt paralyzed by her limited color pallet—red, black, and yellow—at the same time as being paralyzed by the paradox of choice, which was an impressive new low. Too limited and too unlimited and too unskilled all at the same time.

She set her paint down.

She took a deep breath.

She made a list.

If the goal was to keep an intruder—physical or metaphysical—out of her room, whatever she painted needed to have some degree of menace.

A frowny face with angry eyebrows? Not great, but at least there was an option to beat. Too mild for the offense, though.

A pentacle? Better. Positives: It’s already a symbol of protection. Already has supernatural value. She had red paint. Super easy to draw. Negatives: drawing a circle with a star in it in the bible belt. Maybe she could get by with it in central Florida—may
be—but if the goal was to ward off conflict, drawing something that could be mistaken for a pentagram seemed confrontational.

An ouroboros? Good. Positives: Already reminded her a bit of those hands, metaphysically significant, dad would love it (could color it like a coral snake). Negatives: Her dad would love it and a snake is probably too hard for her to paint.

Fuck, Heather really liked the ouroboros idea. But it just seemed too clever and kinda indirect. Yes, it would mean something to her but would it mean anything to anyone else? Would it matter? And more importantly, Heather didn’t feel like the idea was really her. It seemed forced like she was trying too hard to play the witchy role here. If it came down to it, if embracing the occult ever became the only way forward, she guessed she’d be down to take on the challenge. But having a séance in the privacy of your own home is one thing. Putting a big-ass ouroboros on your window seemed like a pretty serious commitment.

No, whatever she put on the window needed to be from the heart.

No, whatever she put on the window needed to be simple.

It needed to be stern.

Heather got an idea. She picked up the red paint and listened to the rattling marble inside the can. It made her scalp tingle. She felt emboldened. With the can in hand, she tilted her face away from the fumes and sprayed a message in her best possible handwriting. Just four words and she was done.

Keep The Fuck Out
Yes. Good. Her neighbors probably wouldn’t love it, but it wasn’t blasphemy so they could deal with it until maintenance fixed her window. But it was still missing something. She underlined ‘The Fuck’ in black.

This was it. This was perfection. Final answer. Heather smiled at her work and sent a picture to Carminda. Somehow, she felt lighter. Maybe it was the fumes.
CHAPTER 7

It was 1:37pm and Heather was alone in her home with neither her dad nor her friend to distract her. This, obviously, was no good. Too lonely; too quiet. Fixable, perhaps. She went into the pantry and opened a can of tuna fish and dumped it onto a saucer. With her free hand, she slid the glass door, careful not to spill the pink fish slime down the front of her t-shirt, and sat down outside. She pstpsted and tsksked and wafted the fish fumes in hopes that it would summon Patchy but all it attracted were flies. Sweat drained down a clump of hairs and plopped onto the saucer. As if the tuna needed to be more appetizing. She ran the numbers, weighing how long was too long to wait outside for a feral in the middle of the Orlando heat. Once more, she scanned around the bushes looking for the slightest hint of interest but only saw a neighbor she never spoke to filling a blue kiddy pool with a hose. She cut her losses.

The apartment was empty and quiet enough for her thoughts to echo off the walls. Thoughts of Marco, her career, her friendships, her schooling. Thoughts about coffee, thoughts about her mortality, thoughts about what a shit that cat was being, thoughts about thoughts upon thoughts about thoughts.

She turned on the TV.

The talking heads on Fox cut through the noise. Is MS-13 in your neighborhood? Are immigrants spreading disease in the US? It was revolting what her dad consumed but nothing offended her so much as when the talking stopped and a commercial for gold coins filled the room. TV is dead. It’s gone the way of the dodo or the harpsichord. And Heather couldn’t even remember the last time she’d watched TV on a TV. All those
fucking commercials, it’d take you all day. TV could stay dead. No, she’d continue with her Netflix and Disney+—which she heard was doing great in Orlando—and Hulu, though come to think of it she hadn’t paid the extra cash to remove commercials from Hulu. But at least those were tailored ad experiences. An advertisement for an unpronounceable medication filled the screen and encouraged Heather to ask her doctor if it was right for her. Perhaps, for Fox, this was a tailored ad experience and she was just trespassing.

Heather caught her thoughts. What a waste of a perfectly good mind. All her elementary school teachers used to tell her she was very smart and mature for her age. She tested gifted when she was in the third grade. She’d passed a lot of her AP exams. This was no way for a former child prodigy to live. She turned off the TV.

Something else to distract her, anything else. On the coffee table in front of her was a saucer of room temperature tuna fish. Thrilling, yes, but still not as fun as playing with a cat. If the fish wasn’t enough to seduce Patchy, maybe the guitar would work better. Worked for dad. She crossed the living room and went over to the guitar stands that held a thrifty Takamine. It smelled really good, like a cedar chest or clothes after a bonfire. She picked it up, sniffed it again and felt silly for appreciating the smell more than the sound. But it did smell good. Regardless, she turned it so the strings faced away from her torso. She glanced out the window. No patchy. Not yet. That’s fine. She would play him the song of his people and then he’d surely appear.

Heather sat onto the couch, drew a breath, adjusted the guitar, and raked her index nail across a single string. It vibrated. Didn’t sound too bad. She placed a finger on a fret and pressed. It hurt a little, pressing uncalloused fingers onto a metal string, but it was
tolerable. She played that note. Not bad, not bad. She played that note and an open string at the same time.

Fuck it sounded terrible.

Fuck it sounded like ass.

Heather replaced the guitar on its stand and apologized to it or maybe god. She checked her phone. 1:54. That’s fucking impossible. No way it’s only 1:54. Is this what life is like? What if Heather lived another fifty years? Is time going to move like this all the time? God, life is too long to be short. As the thoughts came pouring back, she turned back on the TV, pulled up a YouTube video on her phone, and paced the room. She cranked the volume up on everything with a speaker. This was better. Yes, this was much quieter. A much better use of time.

Then the video ended and she loaded another.

Then the video ended and she loaded another.

Then the video ended and she loaded some more, watched them, checked her phone, and saw it was 6:00pm. Good. This was sustainable. She could probably run down fifty more years at that rate. Shit, maybe even sixty. She’d look up from her video and one day be as old as that woman from Starbucks. She pushed the woman out of her mind.

Her stomach growled and dread fell over her as she noticed the uneaten tuna on the coffee table. A wasteful dilemma. She loaded a video, turned up the volume on the TV, and ate the tuna. She could barely even taste it under all the media. Barely even taste it at all. But what else was there to do but eat the tuna? She was bored and hungry.
As night set over The City Beautiful, the world grew stiller. Fewer cars on the joining road. The calls of insects replaced the local chatter. Even the heat dissipated towards a cool, disturbing drop though the humidity remained intact. It was, in a word, peaceful; that was devastating. She checked her phone for texts and found none, she shared memes on Instagram for likes that never came, she *tsktsk-pstpped* once more to the door for a cat who never answered the call. The peace was maddening.

It was bedtime and there was nothing to do. Heather completed her nighttime ritual, climbed on top of her bed with her laptop, and watched Netflix while her phone streamed music from her desk. With her window boarded up, her room was darker than usual. Better for sleep under different conditions. Totally unstimulating. Unacceptable. She turned on her overhead light, she turned on her desk lamp, she plugged in the string lights over her bed and she nestled into her cocoon of sound and distraction. Better. Perhaps even tolerable.

From her nest, she pretended to watch a true crime mini-series. It was about a bank heist that promised to be pretty intricate. It probably was a very impressive bank heist with very colorful characters and the few moments where Heather could be bothered to focus on her screen were always filled with exhilarating images of exploded bodies and criminal masterminds teetering on the verge of insanity. But Heather gave up on following the plot line before the opening credits were finished. But it was loud. It was bombastic. It was fine enough.

The hours marched on and it was well past bedtime and Heather found her attention always flowing back toward her closet. Waiting for a sound. Heather burned added incense to the mix, the scent didn’t matter. But every sound of the apartment
settling was electric and the added fragrance was not loud enough to cut through the noise. She got Oreos from the pantry—already brushed teeth be damned—and stroked a rough throw pillow. She paired a hefty Bluetooth headset to her computer and funneled her documentary straight into her ears and then she turned up the volume so loud she could feel the sounds on her eardrum with greater clarity than she could make out the language. It might cause permanent damage one day, but that was a problem for the future. She needed to get through tonight. And at least this was working. The pain in her ears mingled with mild suffocation from continuous incense smoke. It was distracting and it was beautiful. This was true peace.

There was a thump in her closet.

The fuzz on Heather’s skin grew cold and a pain distended in the bottom of her gut. She tightened her vice grip on the throw pillow and cursed to herself. She should have just slept on the couch, she should have just turned up the volume, she should have called Carminda.

Heather pulled herself together. No she hadn’t done those things. But the initial shock was over. The box had dropped and the worst of it was over. God, was she getting used to living like this? Didn’t matter. Didn’t matter. The box had dropped and it was over; the band-aid was off. She released all the tension in her limbs and surrendered back into her cacophony.

There was a second thump in her closet.

Heather sat upright and took off her headphones. Impossible.

Curiosity began to take her thoughts, the morbid kind reserved for admiring a good car crash. Were there two boxes in her closet? Had the same box dropped twice?
She squashed the thoughts as she noticed them. No, that didn’t matter. What still mattered was just getting through the night. She rose from her bed and reached under the bed frame for a place to grab. She leaned back and pulled the bed with all her weight. It at first caught on the carpet but soon gave way and she dragged it out of the crater her bed posts had pressed for themselves until the bed was directly in front of the closet door.

A third thump came out from behind her bed barricade. She backed up and slid her back against the wall opposite the closet and sat onto the floor in waiting. This was absurd. Absolutely foolish. Terrorized by a box of hands? And she hadn’t done a damn thing about it. She hadn’t done anything.

There was a thump.

All she’d done is think about it. Distress over it. She’d broken a window about it. Wrote a few mean words about it.

There was a thump.

There had to be more to life than this, than losing sleep—losing sanity—over this. Didn’t there? This isn’t how others live their lives, was it?

There was a thump.

She was an adult, right? She had agency, didn’t she? She could do something. Actually do something. She could call a Ghost Buster. Or a priest. She could call Carminda.

There was a thump.

This had to end. Heather had to stop wasting time. She had to find out what it all meant. She had to do something for once in her miserable little life of being escorted from media to media, show to show, without ever stopping to breathe. This had to end.
So Heather picked up her phone and left two voice messages:

First, she called Carminda. Without turning down the volume or moving rooms or letting her eyes leave the closet, she left a message:

*Hey Carminda, It’s Heather. It’s late and I know you’re probably asleep right now but I really need your help. I can’t sleep, like at all, and it’s back. The box. It’s a fucking lot to explain. Look, it’s fine, I’m fine. I’m good to get through the night. But I’ve had this moment of—I don’t know what to call it—‘lucidity’? I need your help. Tomorrow night, I need you to come over and see this. Should have done that from the start. Doesn’t matter. Look, I’ll buy you dinner, we’ll make an evening of it, whatever. I know you have shit to do but this is important. It’s an emergency. Can you help me? Call me back. I love you. Bye.*

Second, she called Montana. She left a message:

*I quit.*

There was a thump.

***

Heather awoke the next morning feeling as though a hedgehog had formed somewhere between the inside of her skull and the outside of her brain. If she’d been blazing it the night before she might have called it brain fog, but she hadn’t so she settled
for exhaustion. Her world slowly faded back into existence wrapped in a thick haze. She
drew in a breath and found the air was shallow, like the bottom half of her lungs had been
scooped out like a pumpkin. Slowly, she rose from her crumpled position against the wall
and found cricks throughout her spine and neck as she climbed to her feet. By impulse,
she checked her phone first thing, but it had died playing music throughout the night. So
had her laptop and her headphones. Fine. She plugged them all in, sliding the bed a little
bit from an outlet that it didn’t usually cover when it wasn’t being used as a barricade.
With her devices charging she left her room, scratching eye poop out from her face and
pinching crust from her eyelashes as she brewed a pot of coffee.

There, with caffeine in her body, she found her mind began to wake up again. Not
quickly. Not gently. But it was waking up. Lucidity found her, at least enough of it to
take inventory of her night. She felt like ass. More like ass than she expected to feel.
She’d pulled all nighters before, sometimes on purpose, sometimes on caffeine, but she
felt more than just sleepless. She felt almost hungover. Like she’d nearly overdosed on
media. Was that possible? Was there a fatal dose of Netflix. She drank her coffee and
tasted the term “binge watch” with some discomfort. That’d be just like her, wouldn’t it?
To OD on television.

She refilled her cup and emptied it again until the pot was vanquished. The coffee
hit her empty stomach and sent vibrations throughout her limbs and fingers. Maybe she
should take it easy today. She reached for her pocket to Google ‘coffee overdose fatal’
but found her pocket empty. That felt gross, almost naked. People really used to just walk
out of their houses without cell phones in their pockets confident they wouldn’t get lost
or abducted or need to research something really really important, didn’t they?
Her phone had charged a bit, enough to be turned back on, and as she held the power button and her boot screen appeared behind the slight spiderweb crack on the glass, she was surprised to feel so stressed by it. But there really were only two times she ever saw her phone’s boot screens: the first time she powered on a brand new phone and after her phone had died by accident. Do people turn off their phones? Did everyone have this kind of Pavlovian hate for turning their phone back on? As she mused over the big questions, her phone came to life and bombarded her with updates. Three apps needed to be updated, including the NFL app she tried to uninstall but couldn’t; she was connected to their wifi but be warned, Heather, the connection was only just okay; she had voice mail. One from Carminda, several from Montana.

Carminda was in. She didn’t open the other messages.

Heather smiled to herself and went to delete the voice messages. Her fingers, jittering from her liquid breakfast, missed the trash icon on her first try. Junky’s guilt set on her for a moment but she ignored it. After all, she was going to bust a fucking ghost. That’s a far more productive day than she’d had in—she couldn’t remember how long.

Carminda knocked at the door with a backpack slung over her shoulder and the sight was, as far as Heather was concerned, exactly what the doctor ordered. The after school Carminda, the sleepover Carminda, the Carminda of childhood. It was perfection and so was she. Heather opened the door and embraced her friend around the bulbous backpack that mounded on Carminda’s back like a turtle shell and squeezed her tight. Carminda hugged back but with decidedly inadequate oomph. So Heather tightened her hug and kept retightening until finally Carminda coughed out a laugh through constricted
lungs and squeezed Heather back, though at disadvantage provided the backpack/Heather combo afforded her. Heather released her grip. This was good.

“Thanks for popping back by,” Heather said and ushered Carminda inside “Twice in one week, huh. Is that greedy?”

“No way. This is better than anything I’d be doing on my own.”

“What would you be doing? Like, what does a day for you look like?”

“Hmm, on weekdays, I probably wouldn’t get back home until after seven. Then I’d reheat dinner if I meal prepped on Sunday—”

“Do you meal prep?”

“No,” Carminda admitted. “Well sometimes. Like, it’s my new year's resolution to eat out less and I read that making tangible game plans with schedules increases the odds of seeing your resolution through to the end. So I put a recurring meal prep event in my calendar to cook a big meal on Sundays and then eat that throughout the week. But, I don’t know, I’m hit or miss.”

Then something awful, something unspeakable appeared in the back of Heather’s mind. Something distracting. Something that made her want to browse her own calendar while Carminda spoke. “What kinds of things do you cook?”

“Like in general, or for meal prep?”

“Oh, um, meal prep I guess. Like, when you’re good about it.”

“Well, I try and have a carbohydrate, a vegetable, and a protein in most of my meals. It’s not really the tastiest or the most creative system, but its easy especially when I come back from school completely drained, you know, like I don’t even want to think
about my food. Last time I actually cooked something, I made rice, black beans, and
spinach and that lasted me a week.”

The tension reappeared in Heather’s mind, the desire to turn on the TV. The need
to stand up and pace. That awful, unspeakable something. It had a name. Heather tried
not to think the name because to think it would make it real, but as Carminda continued
talking about her dinner and her beans and as Heather actively tried to ignore the name,
the clearer it all came into focus: she was bored. Carminda was boring or at least being
boring.

But no, that’s not possible. Carminda isn’t boring, she’s wonderful and fun. They
were such tight friends in high school, her, Carminda, and Marco. This was unthinkable.
And wasn’t it kind of Heather’s fault? Asking follow up questions about meal prepping
when she knew she didn’t care? No, what was probably just happening was that base
awkwardness inherent to when you first run into someone with whom you were once
close after a long break. That’s always really weird at first, especially if you’re impatient
and Heather knew she was, at times, a little tiny bit impatient. Isn’t that how it goes,
though? Heather remembered childhood frustrations she felt after a summer of bonding
with her cousins in New Jersey and the close kinship they seemed to share, becoming
impossibly close, ride-or-die, tight compadres forever. At least until the next summer,
where—afta full year of not seeing one another—Heather was destroyed to learn that
the entire first day—sometimes two—of her visit had to be spent growing comfortable
enough with her cousins to be best friends again. But it always happened, they always
warmed up, and so would her and Carminda. They’d just spent a meaningful day together
this week, right? So if it takes cousins a day or two to warm back up with a year of
separation, then it should only take that time divided by three-hundred-and-sixty-five or something right? That’s how these things work, probably.

“But anyways,” Carminda said, the sweet sound of a transition bringing Heather’s focus back to the present. “Sorry, for being boring.”

A mind reader. A goddamned fucking mind reader. Heather laughed and scanned Carminda’s face for a hint of supernatural knowledge but found none.

“No,” Heather said. “That’s cool.” Though it wasn’t and Heather was no closer to understanding Carminda’s life than she’d been one meal prep earlier.

And they sat in their silence. So Heather brewed a pot of coffee to escape it.
The evening carried on through the usual grade school patterns, which was fine, Heather supposed, though she was ready to get on with things. That was the only template they knew for spending evenings together. Just the three of them, now minus one. It all felt like such a waste of time, the emptiness of ritual. Putting on a movie, eating snacks, pretending as though the world hadn’t changed and neither had they. Heather watched as Carminda allowed herself to be jerked from sleepover cliche to cliche without making so much as an effort to mention the reason for her summoning. As they snacked their empty calories, Carminda avoided Heather’s gaze and spoke only softly of inside jokes and memories without making a move to form new ones. But even that fell to silence as the movie, a Batman movie from their youth, picked up steam.

From her seat on the couch, Heather reached for a bag of M&Ms such that she could look at Carminda with all the stealth she could muster. Fortunately, Carminda appeared bored, texting from behind a throw pillow and only stealing the occasional polite glance at the TV when it got loud enough to be unignorable. Under different circumstances, this might have caused Heather a tremendous deal of anxiety, the notion that her friend was bored in her company and the implication that Heather might actually be as shallow as she feared. But the feeling was mutual, Heather couldn’t care much less about the movie and if Carminda didn’t either then they could move forward. Heather could and would worry about her own boringness at a later time and turned the volume down a little on the TV, which again Carminda failed to notice. This was enough movie.

“I’m not really watching this, are you?” Heather asked.
“Not really. I mean, it’s good though. A classic.”

“That’s fine, don’t worry.” Heather said. “Let’s talk about the plan.”

The reference to the plan seemed to relieve Carminda, who perhaps feared she’d have to be the one to introduce the topic. Why that would dismay her so was anyone’s guess. Perhaps she found the idea embarrassing. She was, after all, a student of the sciences; soft as the social sciences are there was a chance she fancied herself a proper scientist. And if nothing else, the educational taboo could be an obstacle for Carminda. Perhaps there was another explanation as well, perhaps a religious discomfort with approaching subjects of the metaphysical. But this wasn’t the time for list-making, Heather decided. This was a time for action.

“So, here’s the plan,” Heather said. “First, I need you to see that the hands are real, that it’s not all performative.”

“Performance,” Carminda said. Then she wrapped her fingers over her mouth and said sorry from between them.

“What?”

“Nothing, she said. “Just a bad habit. I want to learn more about your plan”

Heather said the wrong word, was that it? She had to have said the wrong word. Fuck, she felt silly. Fuck, she felt like a toothless hick. Fuck, this didn’t used to happen in high school.

“What did I say?” she said and hoped desperately that it sounded more like self-betterment than insecurity.

“Technically, the word’s performance, the word you want, but it doesn’t really matter. Sorry.”
“Are you sure? Performative sounds right.”

“Yeah, but it means something different.” Carminda rung out a throw pillow before her as if she were making stone soup. Heather’s face grew blood hot and a heavy mass distended out from her gut.

“I just have this professor,” Carminda said. “And the difference between ‘performance’ and ‘performative’ is one of his big pet peeves. Sometimes I forget to shut it off.”

“Well, what’s the difference?” Heather said. She gathered all the confidence she could find lying around and straighten her back up nice and tall. So badly she wanted Carminda to know these words don’t scare me. I am capable of learning.

“It doesn’t really matter, what—”

“—Tell me,” Heather said and Carminda jumped. Why would Carminda jump? Did it sound like a command? They’re just having a nice discussion between two educated equals. This was a pleasant meeting of the minds for them both, Heather’s high school diploma and scattering of college credits against Carminda’s Bachelors of Science and scattering of Master’s credits.

“Oh, I think I see,” Heather said, though she didn’t.
“My old professor used to say that it was like when language and action were the same thing. ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’ is the other big example.”

“No, yeah, I think I get it,” Heather said. “Like saying ‘I think we should see other people.’”

“What?”

“Like, once that’s out there you’re kind of obligated to see other people.”

“Oh. Yeah, maybe. I don’t know, this isn’t really my area of expertise.”

A splash of envy brushed over Heather’s body. The way Carminda said ‘I don’t know’ was so effortless and honest. Could you imagine saying you don’t know something with so much confidence? I don’t know has such an air of authority. Heather refound herself among the awe.

“So here’s the plan,” Heather said. Her face still felt flush and she chose her words carefully, lest she sound like she were speaking straight from a conspiracy cork board. “So far, only I’ve seen the hands. But this is fixable and a valuable fix at that.” She scanned Carminda’s face for a hint of cynicism but found nothing that couldn’t be explained by a healthy dose of projection. But maybe she should have said ‘hitherto’ instead of so far. Maybe she should have coined a long Latin word for the hands.

“I’ve been making lists and I have a bunch of theories,” no, wrong word.

“—hypotheses regarding the origins of the hands. But I don’t have enough information to start ruling any of them out. Well, I can rule some of them out, actually, since an Addams’ Family reference is still on the table.” She laughed to herself. She cleared her throat.
“So, tonight we will conduct an experiment to disprove the chance that these hands are a form of, I don’t know, psychosis? We’ll stay up and when the hands drop you’ll examine them, check if I’m pulling some kind of elaborate trick or whatever and then we’ll take pictures. Maybe even try and keep them, the hands I mean. Bring them to a priest or a doctor or something. I’m kidding about the priest.”

Heather looked to Carminda who was, midway through a coffee sip. How slowly she seemed to sip, obviously selecting her words very carefully as to not destroy her feeble-minded friend. “And the coffee is just Folgers. I promise it hasn’t been contaminated with—like—ergot poisoning. Or whatever.”

Carminda set her cup onto the coffee table and wiped a driblet of spit from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. “Cool,” she said. “Let’s do it.” Heather wanted to feel relieved but something—maybe a waiver—in Carminda’s voice sounded uncertain. Possibly projecting? Probably projecting. Though Heather, for a moment, considered explaining ergot poisoning just in case. But she figured that was unnecessary when Carminda took another sip.

With a plan in place they returned to their movies and their snacks, with less of the guilt than Heather experienced when she was actively waiting for the subject to drop. They’d talked about it and it was real now. There was no backing out. Everyone was on the same page.

***
Night set upon Heather’s bedroom as the last rays of sun disappeared from beneath the crack in the plywood that held her window together. But before they settled in for the evening, there was business to be taken care of. Heather summoned Carminda over to the closet door and dragged it open. Inside was a mess of colorful fabric, most of which never got worn, among other knick knacks. But, of course, there was no insidious interdimensional self-materializing box.

“See?” Heather said. “Nothing up my sleeve.”

Carminda nodded in agreement but made no effort to explore the closet more closely. This was, Heather decided, fucked up. Some scientist. There could maybe be a hidden trap door on the ceiling, or perhaps the box was wrapped in a jacket, or maybe it even rested on top of the shelf but was somehow covered in a corrosive goo that would chew through the shelf but, somehow, leave the box unharmed such that in a few hours time the box would fall through the hole and impress everybody. Heather had no idea how one would do that but the fact that Carminda wasn’t even checking for it was, in her opinion, rude as fuck.

“Do you want to look more closely?”

“Nah,” Carminda said. “I trust you.” She trusted Heather. Perhaps therein lied the difference between the two of them. Heather was not certain that she trusted herself. Instead, Heather went through the theatrics of patting down some pockets, sliding some hanging dresses along their homes on the closet rod, and making a big scene of adjusting her work shoes—ex-work shoes, technically—possibly for Carminda’s benefit but certainly for her own. Carminda barely noticed, if at all. So they closed the closet door, but as they did, Heather began to grow curious about what would happen if she left the
door open that night. Could she watch the box appear? Perhaps but not tonight. Best not to introduce a new variable given the current experiment they were conducting. Besides, leaving your closet door open is a perfect way to be eaten by a monster.

As was tradition, they burnt incense and Carminda produced a single badly rolled joint, nothing like the masterpieces Marco would roll. Carminda turned it over in her fingers and handed it to Heather along with a lighter for the first hit. Heather reached but felt her arm get caught in an invisible wall before she could seize it.

“You okay?” Carminda asked. “Something up?”

Heather hesitated, but took the joint. She held it on her lips for a moment then removed it.

“I’m one-thousand percent going to smoke this,” she said. “But I just want you to know, when the hands appear it has nothing to do with any of this. It’s real.”

“Sure,” Carminda said as she slid a plastic gas station lighter across the sheets toward Heather. “I mean, it’s pot not, I dunno, ergot?”

“Totally,” Heather said. She draped a forced laugh over how square she felt in this conversation. “No, I feel that. I just, I don’t know, man. I don’t know.”

“Don’t want any room for doubt?”

“Don’t want any room for doubt. Yeah.”

“I can respect that.”

Heather nodded and lit the joint. She drew in a hot breath and the taste of roasted flower rolled across her tongue and settled into her mouth and throat. She passed the joint and pulled in a wave of fresh, clear, incensed air to bring the smoke all the way down to the bottom of her lungs, tilted her head away from Carminda, and exhaled a plume of
smoke at the blinking string lights over her bed. As Carminda smoked, she reached into her backpack and connected a Blue-tooth speaker to her phone, which synced with an ugly, robotic beep. Before long, smoke and down-tempo hip-hop worked its way into the corners of the room and the bliss of escape settled over Heather like a weighted blanket.

At last, her worries were ironed over and the monologue in her head that compelled her to make lists and fret about the nature of coffee and dead old women grew quieter. Her limbs grew heavier, her head lighter. She looked to Carminda, and watched as smoke streamed out her nostrils and swirled toward the top of her head, like a billowy white mutton chops. There, in the center of her breast, Heather felt something or perhaps more accurately the absence of something. She felt the total and utter absence of anxiety throughout her body, like a pedestal with a dusty ring in the center where something was moved for the first time in an age.

She felt free.

She felt comfortable.

She felt focused, her usually scattered mind honed to a precise point that was aimed only at the bass line that slowly stomped along under the music’s melody. Then, as if from nowhere, her mind shifted without permission toward the space on the bed where might have sat Marco. The spot was dense and empty under the pressure of her newly focused mind that refused to diffuse. Heather closed her eyes and squeezed them until she saw spots. As she did, she drew in a deep breath all the way from the top of her lungs to the bottom of her diaphragm and reopened her eyes as she allowed the air to escape. When she refocused, her mind had left Marco, and found the dead woman from Starbucks and with it a coat of dread poured over Heather’s body as she cringed in her
seat. Carminda placed a hand on Heather’s forearm and Heather fell awake, like being caught nodding off in class.

“You good?” Carminda asked.

“Yeah,” Heather said. “Yeah, I’m good—”

There was a thump.

Carminda jumped in the bed and turned toward Heather who, though uncomfortable, shrugged with plain familiarity. The two turned their gaze back to the sliding closet door.

“See?” Heather said. Carminda didn’t budge, she kept her eyes fixed upon the door as if some slight of hand would distract her from the truth of the situation.

“I’ll get it,” Heather said and she rose from her place on the bed. Carminda followed behind her to the closet splitting her attention between the closet and Heather with a glare that was not entirely empty of suspicion, though only just. Heather wrapped her fingers around the handle and with all her body pulled the closet to the side along its track, and the closet door shifted open. There on the floor was a single old box with flaking green paint crammed atop her work shoes pressed into a closet with no wiggle room for additional belongings, much less the space needed for an entire box to fall from on high and tumble down to the floor. Heather wondered how the box could thump so, considering the cushion on which it seemed to land each time. Perhaps it wasn’t the thump of falling after all, perhaps it was something else. The thump of materializing in thin air? Would that make a thump?

Heather braced herself, steeling her gut against what she knew would find since Carminda’s overawe seemed to have left her somewhat statuey. She drew back the
sliding door and there, in its usual position, was the box. Heather turned her body outward toward Carminda and waved and open arm toward the box, daring—just fucking daring—Carminda to question the truth of the moment after having declined to investigate with proper scientific rigor but a few hours before. But Carminda made no sound, instead communicating only through a rapid parade of confused expressions and open-mouth attempts at producing sounds. She looked like the videos of amateur magicians shocking zoo animals with their sleight-of-hand the sometimes watched when her insomnia exhausted Heather’s other options, though she wagered Carminda would not appreciate the comparison. When it became clear Carminda would not make any sort of move whatsoever, Heather took the lead and picked the box off the floor and brought it to her desk, slid her incense burner and lamp to the corners, and placed the box under the spotlight. Behind the box, the plywood no longer seemed like a barricade to keep an intruder out like it did in the daylight. Perhaps the red ‘Keep The Fuck Out’ on the other side of the board was meant more for her than she had hoped.

“Ta da?” Heather said and she wiped away a decade’s worth of dust from the top of a box she’d opened two days before. Carminda blinked the everloving cognition back into her brain and finally began to speak.

“How did you,” she started to say but stopped as Heather radiated hatred at the implication. “How did it—” she said but couldn’t find the right way to finish the question.

“Fuck if I know. I hoped you’d have an idea. Want to open it?”

Carminda’s face said no but she approached the box regardless. She reached forward but her hands grew slower and less sure the closer they got. But the time for
discretion had already passed and she pressed through and seized the lid at either side, creaking it open. Light slid through the growing crack between the lid and body, manifesting a pair of intertwined hands severed inches below either wrist. Carminda gasped and dropped the lid in an electric hop away from the desk, an unconscious step toward safety.

“Heather,” she said. Mind reeling, she turned toward her friend. “I don’t understand.”

“Me neither.” And for once, that not knowing felt like a triumph.

The hands uncoiled themselves from their grip on one another and Carminda screeched. Heather closed the lid and held it down. As she held it in place, she noticed that there was no force pressing up against the lid, no attempt at escape, but she’d be damned if she left the reanimate severed hands unsupervised.

“See?” she said. “What did I fucking say?”

“You’re right, you’re right. Oh God, eww, what is it?”

“I don’t know, man, I don’t know. Hands in a box.”

“What does it mean?”

“Fuck, I have no idea. But you’ve seen it now, so I’m not crazy.”

Carminda recoiled at the word crazy, as if she had taken—for once—personal offense. But then she took a firm stance and raised and lowered her hands in rhythm with her steadying breath. And, like that, she was back. It was remarkable how quickly she returned. Heather would have liked the privilege of hating her for it.

“Okay. So, now I’ve seen it,” Carminda said. “What do we do next?”

“Do you want to touch it?”
“No, I don’t want to fucking touch it! Why would I want to touch it?”

“In case you think it’s like a puppet or something?”

“No, no, no. Let’s, I don’t know, Catch it?”

“Like in a cage? It’s already in a box.”

“No, the whole thing,” Carminda said. “I don’t know. Let’s tie up the box or something, I don’t know.”

That seemed reasonable enough. Heather opened her desk drawer and found a frayed USB cable with exposed wires that she never threw out because it still kind of worked if you bend it the right angle. She wrapped the box in it over and over and over again, tying the stiff cable as best as she could, considering it was never manufactured to tie up anything at all.

“There,” Heather said and she gestured viola toward the box. “How’s that?”

“We should probably get something stronger before too long, I don’t love that—”

There was a thump.

By instinct, Heather turned her head toward the closet, a sharp pain in her stomach that she might find yet another box sitting atop her work shoes. But there was no such box beside the one she had already lassoed. She turned back to Carminda, whose face was grim and pale, her eyes fixed on the desk. Carminda shook her head no and pointed toward the box.

“Heather,” she said. “I don’t think the box has been dropping.”

Confused, Heather turned back to her desk and stared at the box. She grew cold throughout her body as an experiment—one for which she feared the results—set itself on her mind. But she had to know, she had to know for certain. She raised a fist and
rapped it atop the box with the meat of her knuckles. To her terror, the sound of a knuckle
knocking against the box was indistinguishable to the nightly thumps.
So, the hands were knocking but did that change anything? Really, truly change a single thing? Heather wasn’t sure but she hoped the answer was ‘no’. If the hands had simply been falling, then it didn’t have to mean anything. Falling is dumb; falling is mute. People fall by accident, it happened in Starbucks. Trees fall in forests even if you can’t hear them. But a knock? That felt intelligent. Communication. Heather shivered. Communication. If it, the hands, could communicate, then it could mean something. She hadn’t realized how comforting the total meaninglessness of falling was until it was gone. But if it’s knocking, it’s communicating.

If it’s knocking, it knows there’s a listener with ears that can hear.

If it’s knocking, it can want.

“What does it want?” Heather asked aloud. Carminda cringed at the question and bounced from leg to leg. She didn’t expect an answer but Heather felt it needed to be said. She rubbed her temples and collected the data. A pair of magic hands trapped in a box wrapped in a USB cable knocking presumably for her listening pleasure. Well, since not-knowing was all the rage tonight, Heather could be the first to admit that she knew very little about the psychology of magic hands. Being boxed in, on the other hand—Heather made a note to retire the idiom—was a little more familiar. If Heather were a pair of hands locked up in an impossible box, then her only real objective would be to get out. A stretch? Definitely. But a more grounded stretch than the leading Addams Family hypothesis. Progress, relatively speaking.
She fished under her bed and retrieved her baseball bat. She passed it to Carminda who accepted it with some hesitation.

“Just in case,” she said. She folded the box underarm and lead them outside, stopping to grab the baseball bat from under the couch as she went. They rounded the apartment building and set up by the plywood outside Heather’s room. As they arrived, they found that Heather’s message had been altered, a think-of-the-children type rolled a couple coats of beige paint across the word ‘fuck’. That sucked. Heather was kind of itching for a fight or at least a spirited argument. This was unsatisfying. Passive-aggressive. There was a knock from beneath Heather’s armpit and she pulled her mind back to the task at hand.

“New plan,” she said and she placed the box by her vandalized window. “We’re gonna let the hands out.”

“Heather, that’s really stupid.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Heather unraveled the USB cable and waved Carminda to give her space. Carminda obliged and hefted her baseball bat as she fell back. Once more, Heather swept her gaze around the perimeter. No one was out. Fair enough. The hour was ungodly. She dropped the cable into the grass. There was another knock from within. Heather unfastened the latch, took a step back, and raised her baseball bat to swipe the lid open from range.

“Wait!” Carminda said and placed a hand on Heather’s shoulder. “What if it’s evil?”

“I mean, it’s a pair of hands. We have it beat in size and number.”

“And you feel confident about that?”
“No. Not especially, no.” The not-knowing was intoxicating.

“So what then,” Carminda persisted. “What if it’s evil?” Heather pondered the question for a moment.

“Then swing really hard.” Before Carminda could object, Heather swiped the underside of the lid with the end of her baseball bat and the box knocked open. They both jumped back and held their baseball bats in two-handed grips, watching their foe in the low light of distant parking lot bulbs and the little light that escaped out from Heather’s room under the seam in the barricade. From within their nest, the hands unraveled themselves like a pair of cats untwining from a shared nap. Heather tightened her grasp on the bat and dug her heels into the grass in a steadier stance, never taking her eyes from the hands who lethargically twisted at the wrist-stump until both the left and the right pointed outward, pointed toward Heather and Carminda. The hands rocked back in the box onto the base of their stumps, standing tall, and then reached forward, both of them seizing the rim of the lid in perfect symmetry. As the hands tightened their hold on the rim, the incomplete muscles in their forearms drew tight and the veins to nowhere that ran under the knuckle skin flared.

The hands lifted themselves out of the box.

They fell onto the grass, palms upward.

For a moment the hands were still. They did not move. Their muscles did not tense. They did not start signing “hello”. Then, at once, the fingers began to drum against the grass, stretching forward then curling back toward the fist. It started at the pinkie fingers and then rolled inward: pinky to ring finger, ring finger to middle, middle to index, and then resetting again at the pinkie. With each cycle, the fingers stretched a little
farther forward like a warmed up yogi until at last the fingers—always one at a
time—scooped the dirt beneath them and dragged their wrists forward with them. Inch by
inch. The hands crept forward, leaving the open box behind them and closed the distance
toward them both. Carminda raised her bat higher. Heather, however, noted the hands’
speed—inchwormesque—and instead stepped a couple feet to her right, out of the hands’
trajectory. When the hands didn’t change course, Carminda did the same. Before long,
the hands scooted past them both and continued crawling away from the apartment
toward the parking lot and into the light.

    As the hands passed them, they seemed to pick up speed, growing more
comfortable with its rolling walk and stretching its legs—so to speak—greater distances.
What was at first a slow dirge began to take on a faster tempo. There was no longer
downtime between fingers, as soon as one curled, the next one lifted with industrial
rhythm. If it took the hands a minute to cross the distance from the box to the point
between Heather and Carminda, it took half the time to double the distance. Heather
looked to her co-conspirator, whose constant blinks of confusion and discomfort probably
meant she saw it too.

    “Accelerating,” Heather said finally, putting language to what they both knew.

    “I think we should follow it,” Carminda said with an aura of investment. A knot
of indigestion was at once sliced out of Heather’s guts at the suggestion, as she was
washed in something not unlike relief. At last, a proper bonafide suggestion from a
woman who had refused to take this seriously. No, Heather wasn’t being fair to her. She
was here, wasn’t she? At night at her friend’s house in the middle of the work week.
Maybe she took it seriously but certainly not literally. Now she was and the world felt warm.

Heather nodded and followed behind the hands. Accelerating as it was, its fingers were still no match for a pair of legs and the duo followed behind it with ease. At first unable to walk at a natural gait without completely overtaking the hands but, as they followed it, their strides steadily grew. Before long they found themselves walking quite naturally into the parking lot, nervously checking as they went that no one would catch them doing the unthinkable.

Heather considered getting a pair of leashes for the hands one day. If someone were to observe them then they’d surely just assume that they were actually walking two very ugly dogs and that their eyes were playing tricks in the gloom. She laughed to herself at the thought and then a little harder when she saw how humorlessly Carminda followed the hands. Did those kinds of surreal intrusions just not pop up in her brain? Or were they there but Carminda just found them unfunny?

The hands stopped walking and a vibration of despair crossed Carminda’s being. Heather looked up from the asphalt to see the hands had stopped in front of a well-kept, second hand VW Beetle with a few semester’s worth of University of Central Florida parking stickers stuck against the rear window. Carminda’s. They stood silently for a moment, waiting for the hands to do something but they remained in total stasis, unwavering and facing the car.

“I think,” Heather said. “It’s waiting to be let in the car?”

“No shit.”

“So, hear me out here—”
“-No,” Carminda said and she widened her stance for impact. “No, we’re not letting it in the car.”

“Okay, I hear you and I respect that. But what if we just opened the door and saw what happened?”

“Because,” Carminda said, nearly spitting. “It wants to go somewhere. And if I open the door then we’re going to have to drive the hands somewhere and it could strangle us in the car or make us crash.

“Maybe it just wants inside the car?”

“In what universe does the magic intelligent hands take us to my car—how it knew which car was mine, by the way, is going to fucking haunt me—and then go ‘okay, that’s fine I’ve had enough’ once we let, it—what?—climb in the glove box?”

“No, you’re right,” Heather said, conceding. “It obviously wants to go somewhere.”

“Obviously.”

“But, so what?”

Carminda looked at Heather with a look of dumbfounded disgust as if Heather had, without warning, squatted in the middle of the grass and taken a shit.

“’So what?’ So, where does it want to go? What do we do once we get there? Will it take toll roads? Is it going to bleed all over my seats?”

“It looks like the stumps don’t bleed.”

“ Fucking outstanding, Heather. Just great.”

“ Aren’t you at least a little curious to know where it wants to go?”
“Well, yeah. I want to know where it goes, I want to know why the hands are animate and how smart they are and if they can learn and what happens when you kick them; but I don’t want to die.”

“Okay,” Heather said, stretching an open hand. “Then give me the keys and I’ll report back.”

“You’re fucking high. Did you ever even follow through on your license?”

Heather winced. Did she even follow through? That phrasing, it was venom. Did she even follow through? Or did she quit like she quit everything. That was the implied alternative, wasn’t it? No, incidentally, she did not follow through. She did not have a license. And at that realization, any version of the night that didn’t result in Heather following the fuck through on these hands closed with a snap.

“Fuck you. Yeah, I’m a little high,” Heather said. “Because I don’t sit around all day smoking my misery away, so forgive me if my tolerance is a little low. But fine, don’t drive me, I’ll just follow the hands on foot if you won’t drive me.” Heather glanced over towards the hands, which remained immobile in front of the car.

“The hands won’t move until I open the car door.”

“Oh, so you’re an expert on the hands now, huh? You’re certain they’ll just wait here all night?”

“I mean, they waited in your fucking closet for, what, days now?”

“Then tomorrow night, when your fucking Bug is out of the parking lot, I’ll just follow it wherever it leads.”

“You’re just going to wander through Orlando at one in the morning? Are you fucking crazy?”
“Maybe!” Heather said. “I really might be. I don’t sleep anymore. I don’t have a job. All I do all day is sit in my apartment and try and watch Netflix and I can’t even do that anymore. I might as well get murdered. It’s not like I’m fucking living these days.”

“You can’t do that.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Then stop me.”

Carminda’s eyes darted around the empty parking lot as the invisible trigonometry of Heather’s challenge passed through her mind’s eye. Heather genuinely could not be stopped and she knew that. Carminda wouldn’t try force, probably. And if she called the cops to get her Baker Acted, she’d just lie. What was she going to do? Sit in the parking lot every night after midnight and just wait for Heather to follow the hands? Ridiculous and a huge time commitment. Heather didn’t play chess but she could recognize a check when she had one. Back-to-back, she felt mighty for outsmarting Carminda and miserable for finding this victory worthwhile.

“Fuck,” Carminda said finally under her breath. “I’ll get my keys, just chill here.”

Heather looked into Carminda’s eyes and tried to determine if they were droopy or bloodshot through the dark. It was fruitless. Carminda turned about-face and started toward the apartment for her keys, taking her baseball bat with her.

“Are you okay to drive?” Heather called after her

Carminda raised her middle finger and continued walking away leaving Heather alone with the hands. As Carminda slipped out of sight the parking lot’s emptiness took on new meaning now that she was alone with the unnatural. Heather choked up on her bat and locked her focus on the hands. They hadn’t moved, probably wouldn’t until the car
door opened; they were well behaved, if stubborn. That didn’t change the inherent discomfort in the act of vibing with the disembodied.

Heather heard a rustling in the hedges behind her.

Electricity conducted through her spine and her pulse quickened as her breath bottomed out. She seized her bat and turned her back to the hands by pure reflex. Through the low light, she saw the leaves at the base of the hedges began to shimmer and wave, cracking as an unseen intruder pushed through the hedges and toward the parking lot. A hole began to form in the base of the plant and the low lights caught against two small eyes, reflective like street signs, growing larger as they pushed through the hedge. Patchy emerged, pushing through the plant headfirst, giving Heather a slow blink as he joined her in the parking lot.

Heather’s whole body grew heavier without her adrenaline exoskeleton to keep her up and she dropped ass to asphalt. She muttered curses to herself. Patchy didn’t care and came toward her, rubbing his fur and smell in a serpentine between Heather’s calves and shins. Given the option, Heather would have been angry but instead her years of conditioning from nightly cat videos brought her fingernails to scratch under Patchouli’s ears and above his tail bone by pure automation. Patchy raised his tail, showed Heather his butthole, and closed his bright little eyes. His purr vibrated through her bones and brought her ease. Then, just as Heather forgave the cat, he left her and strode toward the VW bug, glaring at the motionless hands.

“No! Bad cat,” Heather said and started hissing. He didn’t care. By the time she got to her feet, Patchy was upon the hands, circling and sniffing as he went. She froze, feeling the time for sudden movements had just passed. She lowered back into a squat
and slowly made her way forward, alternating between sounds of *pstopst, tsksks*, and *here-kitty-kitty-kitty* as she extended a single hand in an inviting scratchy scratchy motion. Patchy ignored her. He settled behind the hands and reached the tip of his nose to the stump and drew a few quick sniffs before he started licking with his rough cat tongue.

Heather was petrified. Whether in fear or from the pure scientific curiosity of what would happen if she just allowed Patchy to lick the hands’ stumps. She wasn’t sure. But she didn’t do a goddamn thing. And neither did the hands. Patch continued licking the stumps, turning his head and moving around to better explore his new treat, but all the while the hands remained completely immobile. This little cat was more curious about the hands than Carminda was. Carminda couldn’t be bothered to check the closet for trapdoors and was hellish about giving the hands a ride. But this little shit saw the hands and immediately started licking. That was science. Maybe they should bring him with them. Heather grew cold as her subconscious reminded her of the association between cats and curiosity. In the gloom over Heather’s shoulder, she heard the sound of a jingling of keys in the distance as Carminda crossed the parking lot toward the car. Of all the sudden things to have happened to Heather that night, this was the lamest one of them all, but at the first jingle, Patchy launched a foot into the air and went zig-zagging off into the night. Inconsistent little shit. Fearless right up until he wasn’t.

Carminda unlocked her car and the hands returned to life, breaking their Queen’s Guard routine. They fell back onto their wrist stumps and climbed into the opened car door by seizing the bottom part of the car frame, pulling their weight into the space. Carminda crinkled her nose, revolted. That seemed unfair. The hands didn’t bleed, even the spots where Patchy had licked the stumps raw remained crusted and inoffensive, no
chance of staining the interior. And the hands didn’t seem to smell, though Heather
hadn’t smelled them as closely Patchy had. And even if they did, the car’s interior had
such a smell of lightly baked crayon that the hands would have to be really rank to be
noticed. Though, it could just have been the principle of the matter. Hard to counter that
one.

Carminda took her seat and placed her hands onto the 10 and 2. As she did, the
hands crawled their way up the car’s dash, pulling itself like a rock climber untethered to
the weight of a body beneath it, and crossed the top of the dash to the steering wheel.
Carminda seized her breath and drew her shoulders to her ears as the hands climbed
down the wheel and draped themselves atop of her own hands. Slowly, without making a
sudden jerk that might inspire the hands into strangulation, Carminda turned toward
Heather, eyes pleading for help. Heather raised her own hand and carefully reached
across the car, turning the keys in the ignition and starting the engine. At once, the hands
fell a bit to the clockwise side of the wheel and waited for Carminda to follow their lead.
She obliged and together, they turned the wheel.

Once, when Heather was in the second grade, she’d tried her own hand at
piano-lessons. During the first lesson, of which there were only about six, she placed her
own small and dexterity-free hands onto the soft backs of her teacher’s as her teacher
played a simple melody. This was one way to teach a child to play piano. And hands on
hands was one way to direct a terrified VW driver when the navigator had no mouth.