

THE CARETAKER

ALSO BY MARCUS KLIEWER

We Used to Live Here

THE CARETAKER

A NOVEL

MARCUS KLIEWER



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*For my Aunt Marilyn.
I miss playing board games with you.*

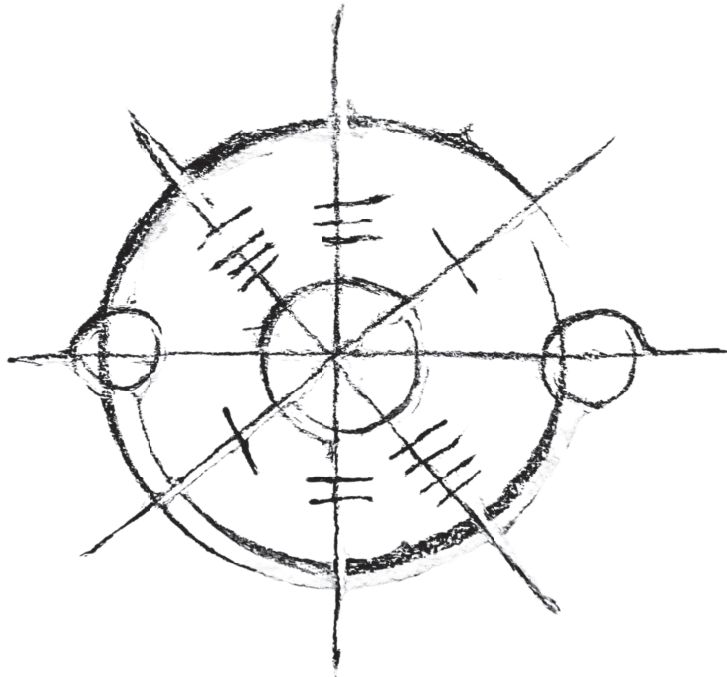
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This story covers themes and situations related to depression, OCD, grief, and suicide.

You will find no rosy platitudes here. Life can be rough—it's often full of suffering. And it's an awfully lonely thing wanting to stop existing—even more lonely if one fears being shunned for speaking about it. I believe discussing these topics, rather than keeping them buried, does more good than harm.

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, please consider visiting www.findahelpline.com.

THE CARETAKER



The child cast out of the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.

—Unknown

FOLLOW THE RITES

The trail of muddy footprints led off the front stoop, tracked across the gravel driveway, and disappeared into the darkened woods. David Carnswel had no choice but to follow.

He didn't want to, that much went without saying. He wanted to shut the door, lock the dead bolts, crawl back into bed with his wife of four decades, and doze off to sleep like he'd never heard those three hollow knocks to begin with. But what David *wanted* held no weight. David *needed* to follow those footprints—nothing less than the survival of humanity was at stake.

Careful not to make a sound, he stepped back into his foyer. He pulled on a pair of gum boots and an olive-green rain poncho. He wore nightclothes underneath—sweatpants and a short-sleeve tee—suboptimal attire for the weather. But he couldn't risk rummaging around up in the bedroom for a change of clothes, it might wake his wife. And if Grace woke, she would start asking her questions:

What are you doing up so late?

Was somebody knocking at the door again?

And the one that really got under his skin: *Are you sure you're feeling okay?*

Grace had long suspected David was losing it, that maybe he was in the not-so-early stages of dementia. David had suspected as much himself when the visions first struck. He'd been standing in line at Costco, shopping cart filled to the brim, when a vicious migraine thwacked into his skull like an axe into a cut of dry wood. He'd buckled over, gripping the cart for balance. A flood of nightmare imagery followed, so vivid he could almost hear it, see it playing out on the glossy concrete floors. Hallucinatory aberrations showing precisely what would happen if he failed to return home immediately. Imagery far worse than the darkest depictions of hell. He dry-heaved twice, abandoned his cart, and shoved his way through the crowds. *Get home. Now.*

Soon after, the Rites had been revealed to him in the quiet of his living room. The voice of God didn't boom from the heavens. The clouds didn't part. The Rites simply emerged in his thoughts, self-evident, as if they'd been there all along, as if he'd only forgotten them until now. The Rites he must follow to protect humankind from unspeakable suffering. The Rites that had him tracking down footprints into the dark woods at twelve in the morning.

David scooped up his military-grade flashlight—always left in a tray above the fridge. He padded out onto the stoop and peered down, stubbled chin nearly touching his chest. He flicked on the flashlight—a white circle casting onto the welcome mat between his boots.

Narrowing his eyes, he studied the wet footprints. Sneakers this time. Good omen. Or, at the very least, the lesser of many bad omens. Sometimes it was socks, and on a few occasions, bare feet. David could never predict the behavior of Visitors who opted out of proper footwear. Sneakers, at least, meant who, or whatever, he'd find at the trail's end would be relatively easy to handle. Knock on wood.

He'd taken to calling them "Visitors" as of late, these strangers from the woods. The Visitors came in many forms, and David had names for

each and every type. He always named the things that made him uneasy, the things that defied his understanding. He'd once named a spot of melanoma "Frank" before the doctors removed it from his shoulder. Names gave malevolent things a shape, gave them a place in his mind to settle. It was the bumps in the night from the things he could not name that kept him awake.

He looked up from the stoop, and swept the light toward the trees. The footprints led to where they just about always did: one of the many meandering trails that went to the Windfall Inlet. Another good omen. He wouldn't have to hack his way through underbrush and blackberry brambles tonight. He released a weary sigh, his breath fogging into the cold night air, white swirls catching warm light from the living room window.

He softly shut the door behind him, and jangled out his keys. He locked the door and tested the handle. Sometimes, the Visitors tried to double back on him, get inside the house. If they got inside, things would get exponentially more difficult. And he wasn't letting Grace get pulled into this mess—the less she knew, the better.

Stuffing the keys away, he plodded down the stairs. He trudged onto the drive, gum boots crushing wet gravel as he moved alongside the footprints. A dull ache throbbed in his aging knees. During his college years he ran center field lacrosse, but nowadays he could hardly run at all. A salty breeze wafted from the looming woods ahead—the bittersweet stink of rotting trees and the Pacific Ocean.

He lingered at the threshold where the gravel driveway met the tree line—the flashlight's beam cut into the black, glistening off lichen-spattered trunks. The trees were especially drenched through tonight. Droopy and tired-looking, like they'd been dredged up from the bottom of a drained lake.

He started down the trail. The rain had stopped a while ago but drops still fell, stragglers from the branches. The slightest breeze would shake them free, and cause the trees to murmur fragments of a language man could never speak.

And the forest grew more untamed with every step deeper. Trees of different types formed gnarled ranks, enclaves of their own. A huddled clique of birch whispered rumors of the Douglas firs across the path. And the corpse of a fallen oak lay at the feet of the Douglas firs. The once mighty oak had been uprooted in a storm last spring. Now it was a rotting metropolis of bulbous knots, wood-boring beetles, and flesh-colored fungus. David stepped over it.

Three minutes or so down the trail, the night lulled into a tepid stillness, a paused frame in a movie. Quiet too. No birds, no crickets. Yet another good omen. On a wet night in the Oregon Coast wilderness, silence was business as usual. Off-putting if you're not used to it, but David had lived here all his life.

It's when the crickets and the birds were chirping, that's when he knew, without a doubt, he was in for a miserable night. Like nature itself was trying to warn him about whatever he might find at the end of the trail. So he took comfort in the silence. Solace in the lonely sound of his gum boots squelching against the path—

A rustling noise. He swiveled to his left, training his light on the source. An elk, about a stone's toss off the trail, munching away on a wilted aspen sprout. She raised her head unhurriedly. Her eyes reflected back the light's glow, and stared blankly at him. It was a stare that made him feel like just another animal out here, something to be sized up, categorized.

The elk finished chewing, swallowed, then loped off into the woods until she dissolved into the darkness. The muffled thumping of her hooves faded shortly after. It was a rare sight, an elk this far up, this close to the Windfall Inlet. Most of them settled down in the valley, closer to the river. Another slow breeze pushed through the branches above, straggling raindrops pricked against David's hair, seeped down and met his scalp—cold stings blooming into lukewarm blots.

He returned to the task at hand. The path took a sharp turn leftward,

but the footprints continued straight on, directly into the woods. Odd. Not unprecedented, but strange enough to make him slow to another stop. Usually the footprints chose one or the other: off the path or on.

He raised the light once more. The underbrush here was sparse. A few spindly patches of devil's club sprouting out from a layered carpet of dead leaves and pine needles. And the trees were politely spaced apart, like introverts at a cocktail party. The footprints were trickier to clock in this terrain, but David barely took another breath before picking up the trail again. A crunched leaf here, a snapped twig there. For him, tracking came just about as natural as walking.

The footprints led in a mostly straight line, veering only to avoid the occasional tree. He noted a familiar boulder—he was nearing the property's edge. He figured it was another five hundred feet or so until he reached the roped-off boundary he'd strung up a few months back.

He should've come upon the Visitor by now. He picked up his pace.

The baritone rumble of the ocean began to hum in the dirt, hum in his bones. And with every step forward the cold grew more shameless, running dead hands against his skin. He grumbled to himself. That's what he got for throwing a rain poncho over top a T-shirt, and—

A white blur darted out from the underbrush straight ahead, moving small and quick along the ground. A rabbit. It shot right by him, making a beeline toward the house—now a glimmering speck between the distant trees.

The rabbits were new this year. Yes, there had always been wild rabbits out here, that mousy brown color, but these new ones, they looked domesticated. Many were chocolate brown, some were calico, a few solid white. The offspring of an abandoned pet, David supposed.

A faint sound leaked out from the shadows which the rabbit had fled. David tilted an ear:

Soft whimpers.

The sound might've sent a chill down most spines, but David only

exhaled a sigh of relief. It was just a Weeper. A Visitor type he'd dealt with many times before: calm them down, then lead them back toward the house, away from the property line. As they follow you, don't look back. No matter what you hear, never look back. Soon, the Visitor would vanish into thin air, the sound of their footsteps ceasing. Even still, don't look back, continue to the house. As bizarre as it sounded, this was all but routine by now. Hell, he could practically do it blindfolded.

But in the few times he had failed, the times he was unable to calm the Visitors down, the times they went from whimpering to weeping, or screaming cryptic nonsense—he'd had no choice but to run. Aging knees be damned. Run back home before they could beat him there and make his life even more difficult than it already was.

He marched toward the pitiful sound, wind in his sails, but his confidence quickly gave way to a sinking sense of doubt. The sound of those whimpers, soft and wilting, was terribly, terribly familiar.

It wasn't *him*, was it? It couldn't be *him* . . .

David's legs carried him forward, one foot after the other. He stumbled into a sloped clearing, a jagged gash in the woods barely thirty feet across. At its opposite end, pacing back and forth: the Visitor.

This one wore the typical getup: blue denim jeans and a yellow rain poncho with the hood pulled up. A young man of medium build, face hidden as he stared down at the ground. He didn't react to the glare of David's flashlight, he only murmured to himself, "No, no, no . . ." His voice quivered, already on the verge of breaking into sobs.

David's heart lurched into overdrive. It couldn't be him . . .

David was ten steps into the clearing when his heel snapped a fallen branch. The Visitor whirled to face him, and all at once, David's deepest fear manifested. This Visitor was exactly who David had dreaded it would be, right down to every last detail: the sandy brown hair, the mole on his left cheek, the slight bump on the bridge of his nose. Every detail, save for one:

The eyes.

The Visitor's eyes weren't that familiar dark brown. The dark brown that had paid such close attention when David taught him how to drive, the dark brown that had blinked guiltily when he'd been caught smoking cigarettes behind the backyard shed, the dark brown eyes that could've made David surrender everything—his fortune, his home, his very life—just to look into them one last time and tell the boy how much he meant to him, but . . .

These eyes weren't a dark brown. They were a pale blue, so cold they were almost white.

The Visitor shifted its weight, blinked. "W-what do you want?"

He didn't recognize David. Of course *he* didn't. This wasn't actually him, *it* was only a Visitor, and yet . . .

David cleared his throat and did his best to collect himself. *Calm the Visitor down, don't let things escalate.* "I . . . I'm here to help." David's voice cracked.

The Visitor wiped its nose with the back of a hand, suddenly looking embarrassed, ashamed even. It put on a brave face, and said, "I'm just trying to find the lookout, but I keep getting lost." It gestured behind. "I think it's out that way, but . . . I keep ending up here."

David's gaze shifted to the woods beyond. The property line was visible, that pale, thin rope only forty feet away. "N-no, not that way," David lied. Never allow a Visitor to leave the property while in your presence, by whatever means necessary. One of many things David had learned the hard way.

"All right . . ." The Visitor blinked again. "Where is it then?"

"It's uh, the lookout? It's back here." David nodded over his shoulder, toward the house. "Follow me."

The Visitor remained rooted to the spot. "I'm pretty sure it's this way . . ." The Visitor sniffed again, turned off, and started moving toward the property line, when—

"Wait." David swallowed a lump in his throat.

The Visitor looked back at him. To most, its expression might have appeared neutral, apathetic even. But David could read every crease in the young man's face, read between those lines faster than he could read the words on a page. He could feel, right down to his core, how broken this young man was, unbearably lost and alone. Hopeless. If only David had seen it before, all those years ago, and—

“What?” the Visitor prodded.

“You . . . you don't want to go there . . .”

“So the lookout *is* that way.”

“. . . Yes,” David admitted. “But . . .” *Follow the Rites. Calm them down.* “Whatever you're going through”—David stepped closer—“I'm here to listen. All right?”

The Visitor hesitated, seeming to consider the offer, but again it turned away, and—

“Caleb,” the name shot out of David's throat like a cough. It felt strange to say it aloud. He hadn't done so in many years.

The Visitor slowed, and looked over his shoulder, brow furrowed. “How do you know my na—”

“Caleb, please, just . . .” David dared another step closer, doing his best to stay composed, to not fall apart into a sobbing mess. “Stay a bit longer,” he said. “Talk to me . . . please. I can listen. Anything. The darkest thoughts, y-you don't have to be alone with them. Okay?”

Caleb looked down . . . no, not Caleb, the *Visitor* looked down, eyes tracing over the wet dirt. He looked up. “Sorry . . . I don't think this is, I need to—”

“There's nothing good for you out that way, do you understand?” David's voice cracked again. “Please, just come with me—if I can't help you, then . . . I'll show you the way back to the lookout, I swear. Just come with me first . . . We'll get out of the cold.”

The Visitor considered this in silence, his face still an apathetic mask hiding so much sorrow. He kicked at the ground. With his toe, he

absent-mindedly lifted a patch of dead leaves—earthworms writhed and twisted in the muck beneath. “You got a smoke?” He let the patch of dead leaves fall back into place. He wiped his hands on his poncho, first the front of his hands, then the back. “I just . . . I could use a fucking smoke.” He shook out his hands and rubbed them together, breathed into clasped palms.

“Yes.” David nodded. “Back this way.”

“Course it is.” The Visitor rolled his eyes, then scratched at his earlobe, the exact same way Caleb used to. “And how’d you know my name?”

“There were others,” David lied, “down the trail looking for you, and they said your name was Caleb.”

The Visitor studied David for a long beat. “How far for the smoke?”

“They’re back in my truck,” David lied once more, “ten minutes this way.”

The Visitor chuckled bitterly, ground his teeth together. “You better not be a serial killer or something,” he said. “I got a switchblade on me.” He patted a jean pocket to show.

David shook his head. “My serial killing days are long behind me.” He had intended the line as a joke, meant to ease the tension, but immediately felt the urge to clarify: “That was a joke.”

“Yeah, I got it. Funny.” The Visitor made a shooping motion toward the distant house. “Just . . . lead the way.”

David gave a slight nod, turned around, and started forward.

The Visitor’s footsteps followed, crunching against dead leaves about ten feet behind.

They walked in a wordless silence. David traced along his own footprints, back toward the main path. He kept bracing for the Visitor to disappear, for those following steps to go quiet like they always did, but—

“So you live out here?” the Visitor asked.

David was startled by the question, damn near almost flinched at the question. The Visitors never spoke during the walk back—well, only

once: an old man with a cowboy hat and a missing eyebrow had said: “It’s a cold night, ain’t it?” David never replied, because the second the question had finished, the sound of the old man’s footsteps ceased. So David had kept walking. *Don’t look back. Never look back.*

“You live out here?” the Visitor who looked like Caleb repeated.

David considered ignoring him, but . . . maybe for just a little longer, he could pretend he was talking to . . . just a little while longer. “I . . . I do.”

The Visitor’s footfalls continued crunching against the leaves behind. “For how long?” he asked.

David’s light crested the top of a gentle slope and revealed the dirt path ahead. “Coming on seven decades now,” he said.

“That’s a minute,” said the Visitor. “. . . I suppose I’ve been out here a little longer, though.”

David didn’t know what to say to that. *Just keep walking. Don’t look back.*

The Visitor went on, “You know . . . sometimes I forget who I am, just wake up in these woods, and—”

Instant silence. David froze and tilted an ear without looking back. He listened for the sound of footsteps, the cadence of breathing, but there was only silence. The Visitor had finally vanished. Relief, familiar and overwhelming, fell over David. It was a feeling he would always get after fulfilling a Rite. A calming rush of dopamine. As if, for just the briefest of moments, things had been made right in the world. But this time, the relief quickly turned to sadness—a deep sorrow he had not felt in a long while. A sorrow he’d almost forgotten. The kind of misery that soaks into your blood, tells you to have one more drink, tells you that it might be better to just fall asleep and never wake up, tells you that—

David shook it off, straightened up, and—

“I’m still here, David.” The Visitor’s voice seeped out from the darkness behind, dead leaves crinkling when it shifted its weight. A twisting lurch formed in David’s gut. The tendons in his neck pulled tight, his

head began to turn on reflex, but he caught himself, looked straight ahead. *Never look back.*

“I know you don’t have cigarettes in the truck.” The Visitor still spoke in Caleb’s voice but the tone was different now, pitying. Another long and terrible silence crept by. David didn’t know what to do. Keep lying? Keep walking? Stay put? He’d never had an encounter like this before.

“I know you blame yourself for what Caleb did,” the Visitor said. “I just hope you know that . . .” It paused. “I want you to know that Caleb blamed you too, David. He left this world hating you more than he hated himself.”

The words sailed through the air, and crashed into David’s psyche like rocks hitting the surface of a frozen pond. The ice fractured, and all the things he feared the most came rushing up. All the things he never allowed to take shape, the things he could not name, the things he would do anything to ignore—drink until he couldn’t see, drive until the tank ran empty, follow the Rites, follow the Rites, follow—

The leaves behind crunched with staccato THWACKS and—

Before David could react, the Visitor had pushed him to the ground with a forceful shove. Dull pain shot through David’s limbs as he fumbled in the wet dirt, frantic, groping around for his light. Rotting leaves, gnarled roots, and—he grasped the flashlight’s cold metallic grip. He raised it, the white circle of light glinting off the Visitor’s yellow rain poncho. It was hauling off down the path, straight toward the house.

David’s gasp of horror ricocheted around the dark. He lunged to his feet and started running. He ran faster than he’d run in decades, every aching bone in his body screaming at him. *HOME. GET HOME.* His light cast mad shadows as he barreled after the Visitor. Dark shapes began to move in his periphery. More Visitors. Dozens upon dozens. Some tall, some short, some thin, some broad. But all were clad in yellow rain ponchos. And all were running toward the house.

EXCITING OPPORTUNITY:

Caretaker for elderly husband urgently needed.

Three days of work. Competitive pay. Serious applicants ONLY.

If interested, please contact: carnswel54@aol.com.

PART I

UNEMPLOYED TRAINWRECK

1

MACY MULLINS

Dad used to catch spiders and let them outside. Spiders were the “good bugs” he once said, they kept the “bad bugs” in line—kept the mosquitoes and the flies from achieving world domination. My childhood self was never quite sure: If spiders were so good, then why the heck did they look so evil?

“Goodness and good looks aren’t the same thing, Macy.”

I don’t know if Dad made that quote up or borrowed it from a Disney movie, but like so many of his little sayings, it never left me. It ran through my mind as I sat in the back corner of the Coastal Connector bus, gnarled trees blurring past my window. A desperate spider clung to the rubber seam outside; an unwilling stowaway to God knows where. The spider kept trying to climb the glass, only for the wind to knock it back down, make it start from scratch. Relatable.

My eyes drifted upward and met my dreary reflection.

A curse upon the miserable fuck who chose fluorescent light for

public transit. Its raw sheen was forming a frizzy halo around my curly brown hair. Fluorescent light always made my skin feel itchy—like I'd gone swimming in a slimy bog, then rolled around in fiberglass insulation to dry off. I shuddered, and rested my forehead against the clammy glass—the engine hummed in my skull, a low *vrriiiiii* that blurred into my thoughts.

My eyes flicked back and forth at the endless procession of trees sweeping on by. The final beams of daylight were streaming through their droopy branches. I released a tired sigh, breath fogging onto the glass. I pulled my sleeve over my palm, wiped away the fog, and . . . the spider was gone. Here's to hoping it landed somewhere nice. A spider village: spindly branches, shadowy nooks, all the flies you can eat. Somewhere better than here.

What was I even doing here?

I questioned every life choice, voluntary or not, that had led me to this point: en route to Brooksvew Heights for a job interview.

Brooksvew was one of those fancy rich coastal neighborhoods tucked safely away from all us poors. Just about the last place I wanted to be going on a Thursday night. But as a college grad saddled with a disturbing amount of debt, I had little say in the matter. None of the places back in town were hiring.

Or at least, they weren't hiring anybody like me.

I couldn't even blame them. I was never built for customer service. Despite all my best efforts to appear happy, likable, and highly employable, people always thought I was mad about something. It felt like I had a big sticker permanently plastered to my forehead, Sharpied scrawl reading: "Fuck off."

I was a mess when it came to landing interviews, and an even bigger mess when it came to landing actual jobs. In the last three months alone my inbox had collected more copy/pasted ChatGPT rejections than I could count:

Dear (Macy Mullins),

It was a pleasure to meet you and learn more about your goals. However, unfortunately, we won't be hiring you for this position, as we discovered candidates whose experience better aligns with our company. We truly value the effort and time you have invested in the application process, and we wish you nothing but the best in your future endeavors.

Regards.

Fuck off.

Soon enough, I turned to Craigslist. Buried among the lawn mowing, the couch moving, the sketchy “looking for a friend ;)” requests—I came across a so-called “Exciting Opportunity.”

Caretaker for elderly husband urgently needed.

The bare-bones description had the pull of a fisherman's lure, barbed hook and all. Vaguely ominous. And caretaking didn't even line up with my graphic design “background.” I can't say why the ad grabbed my attention, maybe it came down to the same things it always did. Rent, groceries, bills. Just the things that kept me and my sister alive.

Vague as it may have been, this Craigslist posting was the last branch to grab in my twenty-two-year, lifelong plummet to rock bottom. I had shot over a response, pathetic résumé attached, and, to my shock, heard back that very same day:

Hello Macy,

Can you meet for an in-person interview Thursday evening?

7:30 PM, at 5637 Brooksvew Heights.

All the best,

Grace

The commute to Brooksvew was over an hour and a half by bus, plus another thirty minutes on foot. Long trip, just for an interview. I almost didn't reply, but after another day of zero bites on my other "prospects" I caved.

I sent over a quick "See you then!" and told my younger sister where I was going. God forbid I turned into another Craigslist horror story. Ha.

The bus lurched to a stop. Outside, a flickering streetlamp splashed orange light onto a lonely back-roads bus stop—a crooked shelter flanked by outdated movie ads. Nobody was here. Why did we stop?

I turned my head and peered down the aisle. That cold buzzing light coated everything in its glistening sheen. Black rubber floors, yellow handrails, grimy velvet seats. The bus was all but empty—the herd thinning out with every stop farther from the city. Now, it was down to me, the driver, and one other passenger sitting near the front.

The other passenger's back was turned to me. She wore a neon-blue rain jacket with the hood up, strings of damp red hair dangling out at the sides. Did she pull the stop cord? I waited for her to stand, shuffle away. She didn't budge.

The driver leaned, gripped a hand around a yellow lever, and wrenched it back. The front doors flopped open, and the bus lowered with a wheezing hiss.

My eyes flicked back to the crooked shelter. Out from the shadows stepped the dark silhouette of a man. He'd been standing there the whole time, hidden behind a glass box ad for *Cars 3*. The back of his heels teetered on the curb, and his head was slumped forward, staring down at the wet pavement like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, considering the jump.

"Getting on?" said the driver. She was built like a bouncer, hair tied back in a short ponytail, broad forearms covered in tattoos.

The man on the curb slowly looked up. He murmured something indecipherable. An apology? Whatever he'd said, his voice was thin, like his vocal cords might snap—rusty guitar strings wound up too tight.

He stepped off the curb and pulled himself up onto the bus, bringing with him a manic anxiety that buzzed around like a swarm of unseen flies. Even from my spot near the back, I could see how gaunt he was, skeletal almost. Dark shadows settled in the pockets of his face, and his patchy beard did nothing to hide hollow cheeks; he looked twenty and seventy years old at the same time. He steadied himself on a yellow handrail. He cleared his throat, buttoned up a dirty jacket, and fixed his tousled hair. A failed attempt to look presentable.

Normally, I would've drowned out whatever was about to follow with music, but a few weeks back I'd loaned my headphones to my sister, Jemma. She had predictably lost them. She promised to get me new ones "soon," but Jemma was even more penniless than me, so for now I was stuck listening to reality.

The driver leaned slightly away from the man, as if his chaotic energy might be contagious. She pointed at the ticket scanner and said something about fare. The man nodded like an overeager bobblehead. He started patting his pockets, making a show of searching for a ticket we all knew he didn't have. Been there, done that.

"I must've," said the man. "Oh shoot." He looked at the floor, like the ticket might be down there somewhere. He looked up, motioned at a nearby seat. "You mind if I just? I—I can spot you next time, I—"

The driver interrupted him, grumbled something that sounded like "you said that last time."

"P-please," the man stammered, "I got, I have, I need—just . . . please?" He shuffled past without waiting for an answer. The driver caught him by the elbow, pulled him back with ease, and shoved him

toward the door. He caught his balance on a yellow handrail. “I can’t. I have to—”

The driver jutted her pointer finger toward the exit.

The man peered over his shoulder, down at the crooked bus stop. The surrounding woods stood unmoving. Blackberry underbrush tangled up between the trees like barbed wire. In the streetlamp’s orange glow, the forest felt like some monstrous nightmare waiting to pounce on unsuspecting prey. Spiderlike.

“Miss?”

I looked back to the front of the bus—the man was staring directly at me now. Why do they always lock onto me? I diverted my gaze, his tired face still stamped into my retinas—bright green eyes, strangely well-kept teeth. He probably had braces as a kid. At some point, somebody cared enough about this guy to pay for orthodontics. What went wrong—

“H-hey miss?” His thin voice butted into my thoughts. “Miss?”

I kept my eyes glued to the seat in front of me. Reading a line of Sharpied graffiti again and again:

LIVE, LAUGH, MURDER

He kept trying, looking right past the other passenger and locking onto me: “Could you spot me a couple bucks?”

I couldn’t spot him a dime. Hell, I could barely afford my own transit pass.

The driver finally intervened. “Off. Now.” She rose to standing, nearly a head taller than the man.

He looked down at the floor again, then looked to me one last time, wounded puppy dog eyes. I could only offer a pitying blink. He turned to the other passenger, started to open his mouth, and—

“OFF,” the driver repeated.