

Those who know the future don't talk about it.

—Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*

Under all these lives I've lived, something else has been growing. I've evolved into something new.

—Dolores Abernathy, *Westworld*



Life began with a snowstorm.

“The absolute *nerve*,” said Theresa Underwood, speeding down the highway. It was nighttime; snow hit the windshield, covered the road in a white blanket. “I could see a slap on the wrist, but firing me is a shameless power play, am I right?”

The only other sentient being in the van was her faithful bird, a budgie named Wilma, whom Theresa had begun bringing with her pretty much everywhere. Wilma sat perched in a cage buckled into the passenger-side front seat, staring out the window as if contemplating where things had gone wrong.

“I mean, *shit*,” said Theresa. “It’s not like I was jacking *twenties* from the till.”

“*Jacking!*”

If the sign of a devoted listener was word repetition, Wilma was world-class. He was also, despite the name, a male budgie, something Theresa’s husband had once pointed out, to which Theresa had responded, “Gender is a social construct, Howard. Also, it’s a fucking bird.”

Theresa lit a cigarette with one hand, negotiated the steering wheel with the other. “Like that place is gonna miss the pocket change I took. My boss, ladies and gentlemen. Forever trying to prove his balls.”

“*Balls!*”

And so it went: Theresa Underwood drove through the snow like a bat out of hell while Wilma the budgie yelled “*Balls!*” (his own testes having remained dormant so long as to be presumed

dead). And whether because of the snow or Theresa's blind rage—or, as she would claim weeks later, having emerged from a coma, "I'm telling you, Howard, the kid appeared out of thin air"—she did not see the girl standing in the middle of the highway until it was almost too late. At the last second, Theresa swerved hard right, tipping her sagging-rusty van onto its side, where it skidded some thirty yards before ramming into the barrier wall.

Before long, a traffic jam wound through the woodsy New Hampshire terrain like a great luminous snake in the night. Somewhere in the middle, from the warmish interior of a small hatchback, a young man called Ethan said, "I cannot believe this."

His wife Alice said nothing. Secretly, she believed the traffic was karma, the poetic revenge of a universe that did not abide man's irresistible urge to utter the phrase *we're making incredible time*.

"Check the app again?"

Alice raised her phone. "Still no service."

"Can't remember the last time we had so much snow this early in the year." Ethan sighed. "We were making incredible time, too."

She loved him. She did. But five years in, Alice couldn't help wondering if her list of Minor Husband Annoyances wasn't a bit longer than most. As if on cue, Ethan pulled out a plastic bag of peach gummies, made an ungodly amount of noise opening it, popped one in his mouth, and leaned his seat back as far as it would go.

"So long as we're just sitting here. May as well be comfortable."

She tilted her head toward his flannel pj's. "Any more comfortable, you'd be comatose."

“I’d think someone in your condition would be more chill about casual wear.”

“My *condition*?”

“You know what I mean.”

“First off, I almost never do. Second, that’s not *casual* wear, hon. It’s *sleepwear*. And third”—she pulled the elastic waistband of her maternity pants, couldn’t help noticing they didn’t give as much as they used to—“these are actually pretty comfortable.” A lie; she hadn’t known comfort in months. “Incognito pj’s. Whereas yours are just . . . *cognito*.”

“That’s not a word. Also, how dare you?”

“Yes, how dare I live my life in pants.” She reached over, pulled a gummy from the bag; it tasted like dirt and chemicals. “I apologize on behalf of all humans in pants.”

“Maybe your mother could’ve given you more *incognito pj*’s instead of a lifetime supply of monogrammed baby towels.”

In the back seat, no fewer than two dozen washcloths and bath towels—with hoods of raccoons, elephants, foxes, and a variety of Disney characters—were stacked and buckl-ed in like the tiny human they would soon dry off.

“It was a *baby* shower, Ethan. For the *baby*. Not me.” Her hands went suddenly to her stomach—a familiar achy clench.

“You okay?” Ethan stopped chewing, sat up. “Is it the . . . Braxton thingies again?”

*Braxton thingies*. For a scientist, he could be really stupid. “Braxton Hicks,” she said, and the feeling passed, and she forced

a smile because she knew he was trying, but God save him if she didn't have this baby soon, and God save them *all* if this traffic didn't start moving.

*Time to take matters into my own hands.* Alice rolled down her window.

"Hon?" said Ethan. "It's *freezing*."

Shortly after coming to a standstill in this mess, the truck driver in the lane next to them had rotated through an assortment of evocative eyebrow-raises and quick-winks, all of which she'd pretended not to see. Now Alice motioned for him to roll down his window. "Hi," she said; the snow was heavy, the flakes thick.

"Hey, sweetie."

She gave him a smile that lasted a blink. "You have a radio, right? You know anything about what's going on up there?" She pointed ahead, into the eternal demi-glow of taillights.

"Van tipped on its side."

"Oh God."

He nodded. "Fucking-A."

"How far up?"

"Not a mile, even. But in this weather . . ." Quick Wink shoved a large wad of chewing tobacco into the space between his bottom lip and teeth.

Alice smiled, rolled up the window, put her hands in front of the vents to warm them.

"Now we know," she said.

Ethan nodded. “Fucking-A.”

“Stop.”

“That guy’s staring at you.”

Alice switched on the radio: a classic rock station, warbly Beatles, the early years. She and Ethan were silent for a few minutes, each wanting to spare the other their current question, neither knowing the other was wondering the same thing: What *exactly* did it look like, getting snowed in on the highway, miles of humans buried alive in their own cars?

Ethan shook the image, popped a peach gummy. “You could have thanked him.”

“What?”

“The truck driver.”

“Come on.”

“You asked for information and he gave it to you. In this weather, you asked him to roll down his window.”

“Tell you what. You trade in those pj’s for a pair of big boy pants, and I’ll climb on top of this car with a bullhorn and let everyone know just how grateful I am.”

“I’m never getting rid of these pants.”

“One morning you’ll wake up, and they’ll be *gone*.”

“If they’re gone, I’m gone *in* them.”

“Ethan.”

“What.”

She pointed through the windshield to a roadside billboard thirty yards ahead:

# NEXT EXIT

## BLESSED CHURCH OF THE RISEN SAVIOR

### “SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND”

But it wasn't the sign she was pointing to. Someone had climbed up there, was standing on the ledge with what looked like a can of spray paint.

“What's the windchill up there, you think?” Ethan chuckled. “That's some serious commitment to the defacement of public prop—”

Alice inhaled sharply, held her stomach again, only this time her breath quickened, her eyes focused on the small but widening patch of dampness in her lap. “Ethan—”

“Oh shit. Okay. It's okay, right? We have time, I mean. They said in class, we have one to two hours from the time—”

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu—”

“Okay, okay, just breathe, like we practiced.”

“*Please* don't use the corporate *we*—*motherfuck*, I cannot believe this is happening now.”

Ethan looked at the car ahead of them, tried to measure the distance between it and the median. But snow was piled on the side of the road, and *I could maybe inch around one or two cars, but one slip and we're in a ditch*. “Okay,” he said. “You're going to be okay. We're okay.”



*“Stop saying that word.”*

Ethan turned from the window, looked around as if something inside the car might present a magical solution—

“Not like this, Ethan, not like this . . .”

His eyes landed in the back seat, where a monogrammed stack of woodland creatures and Disney characters were buckled in, patiently waiting to be put to use.

Seven car lengths back, Dakota Sherouse sat alone in her car wishing she'd never left the house that night. She wasn't sure what was worse: this traffic jam, or the date that had preceded it. At least she'd insisted on meeting Bob at the theater. Imagine being stuck with him now.

*Bob.*

Perhaps unfairly, Dakota had always assigned value to a person's name. Her mother's name was *Zoe*; her lifelong best friend, *Estelle*; her only long-term relationship, with a man named *Pieter*. Though credit where it was due: Bob had found the cutest little movie theater. It was kind of a drive, and the date was a bust, but you could hardly fault the venue for either.

Phone unresponsive, Dakota turned on the radio to search for a traffic report, when ahead, she saw a young man exit the driver's side of a hatchback, sprint around to the passenger door, and help a very pregnant woman get out.

“What on earth?”

Seconds later they both climbed into the back seat of their car.

Trancelike, without knowing what she was doing, Dakota

opened her door, the shock of cold barely registering. She walked between cars, through a fog of exhaust, until reaching the hatchback. There, she saw the woman lying in the back seat on a pile of animals and Disney characters—*baby towels*.

She tapped on the window; inside, the man turned, looked up at her, eyes full of panic.

“I’m a midwife,” she said.

Gladly surrendering his spot in the back seat, Ethan did what he could from the front (next to nothing): he held his wife’s hand when she wanted, left her alone when she wanted, offered nervous encouragements. “Ethan,” said Alice, her sweaty hand squeezing his. “*The heat.*”

He spun around, adjusted the temperature, and was about to turn back when something through the windshield caught his eye. The roadside billboard, now defaced . . .

## NEXT EXIT

~~BLESSED CHURCH OF THE RISEN SAVIOR~~

NOW VOYAGER

“SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND”

. . . and there, high on the ledge, the girl who’d defaced it was looking down—right at him.

She was young, a teenager probably. As the wind whipped her hair around, she smiled at Ethan, eyes blue and fiery. Her lips moved, and he found that whatever she'd said had filled him with hope. And then the girl turned, descended the ladder, and disappeared into the woods.

Hours later, and in a different place, their angelic midwife swapped for a team of tired-eyed nurses and doctors, Alice held a healthy baby girl swaddled up tight. "I didn't think she would be this calm," she said.

It was true: their baby was awake, quiet, staring right back at them. And though Ethan could not explain it, he felt it was not the first time tonight he'd seen those eyes.

PART ONE

IN

THE

UNTO●LD

WANT

# NICO ●

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## *Etymologies*

**Y**ears ago, long before the narration of her father turned unreliable, dissolving like one of those Sweet’N Lows in his favorite stale black tea, Nico would climb into his armchair and sit in his lap as he read *The Phantom Tollbooth* or *Tuck Everlasting* or any one of the hundreds of books in the cozy-dank Farmhouse library, and even now, even here, she could smell her father’s beard, feel the glow of flames from the fireplace, hear the soothing salivary tones of his reading voice, and Nico wondered if perhaps *that* was life after life: not a physical place, but a loop of some former time in which a person, after death, was allowed to relive over and over again. There, in a story, in her father’s armchair—in her father’s arms—Nico hoped that was the afterlife.

She supposed she would know soon enough.

## *Constellations*

Nico stared into fire. Beside her, Harry’s breathing had long ago fallen into time with hers, and she thought that one could hardly call them two separate entities, that at some point between

yesterday and today, she and her dog had consolidated into a single, cosmically connected creature of survival. Maybe this telepathic bond had been there all along, lying dormant below the surface; maybe it took leaving the Farmhouse, entering the wild, to coax it out.

All around, the trees were thick: every few feet, the base of a trunk exploded from the earth, rose up into the sky where branches reached like arms to hold hands with other branches, tree-sisters and tree-brothers seeking touch, listening for words of comfort in the dark night. *I am here. You are not alone.*

The thought of trees talking to each other warmed Nico's stomach.

She pulled a pen from her bag, held the back of her hand up to the firelight. There, in the space between her thumb and forefinger, was a single line in ink. Carefully, she drew a second line beside it. According to the map, the Merrimack River ran over a hundred miles from New Hampshire to Massachusetts before spilling into the Atlantic Ocean. It helped to think of the woods on a large scale; by contrast, their walk in them seemed minuscule, their destination much closer than it actually was.

She stared at the lines on her hand: two days down. At the rate they were going, she hoped to reach the river by the fourth tally, leaving her with four more to get to Manchester.

Not the *Kingdom of Manchester*. Just Manchester. She could still hear her father's voice: *The Waters of Kairos are real. Manchester is a real place. . . .*

She knew Manchester (or what was left of it) existed. Outside of that, she wasn't sure what to believe. Her father had seemed lucid enough, though the line between lucidity and opacity had blurred considerably these past weeks. The problem was, there was no protocol in place, no books on the shelf, nobody in the wide empty world to help her answer this question: *What do you do when the person you most trust hands you a fiction and calls it fact?*

On her back now, tucked into the sleeping bag, Nico looked up at the stars and thought of her parents. How quickly her memories of them had come to resemble a place more than a person: a permanent imprint in the armchair, a dusty seat at the dinner table, the empty mantel by the fireplace, her mother's dog-eared Bible. So long as they lived in the Farmhouse, the Farmhouse lived. It was the body and they were the heart. But it was quickly becoming a ghost, every nook and cranny a whispered reminder that her mother was gone, her father wasn't far behind, the beating heart was winding down.

The fire popped; beside her, Harry shimmied in his sleep, his front and back haunches lurching in a running motion, chasing the squirrel or rabbit of his dreams.

Winters in the Farmhouse were cold, but Nico found comfort in them: cozy spots, always a fire, an extra blanket or two. It was late October now, what her mother called *pre-winter*, when the year skipped fall altogether and the sun went to bed early. Out here, she felt she was seeing the true nature of cold, a bitter-bleak affair. At

least once, probably twice in the night, she would wake up freezing and add wood to the fire. Still, bitter-bleak or not, here was the truth: part of her—a small part, buried under the threat of woods and Flies, the loss of her mother, the fear of reaching Manchester to find nothing at all—down there, burrowed in, was a part of Nico that was *glad* to be out here. That she'd made the unknowable horizon known, reached out and grabbed it, turned it like a glass doll in her hands.

Around her, the sounds of the wild undulated, rolled in loudly, flowed out softly; a circular pattern took shape in the sky, the stars themselves a cosmic connect-the-dots. Soon she would be asleep in Harry's musky scent, dreaming of herself in a little boat at sea, being pulled by an orca, guided by a large bright eye in the sky.

For now she looked to the stars for answers. "How can I fight this darkness?"

The stars were cold and uncaring as ever.

## *Furies*

"What do you get when your dog makes you breakfast?"

Having finished his strawberry granola, Harry looked up at her expectantly.

"Pooched eggs," said Nico.

A single tail wag; it was the best she could hope for.

Breakfast today was the same as it had been yesterday: one



serving of strawberry granola crunch and a strip of rabbit jerky apiece. It would be lunch and dinner, too.

Blood was the stuff of lore. A long lineage of logic she would never understand, but which her parents had locked on to in the early days of the Flies, when she was still a baby. They maintained live traps along the Farmhouse perimeter, mostly for rabbits, the occasional gopher, but never doing the killing outside. The cellar was for slaughter, skinning, dressing.

Whatever the logic, it had apparently imbedded itself in her.

She could not bring herself to hunt.

Luckily, her dad had been economical in his packing, raiding the food supply buckets for lightweight items. Most of the freeze-dried dinners were out; they required too much space, weight, preparation. There was no chili mac (her favorite), but plenty of strawberry granola (palatable), and a good amount of her dad's homemade jerky. Aside from food, her backpack contained a water-filter bottle, sleeping bag and bedroll, two gallon-size ziplocks of lighters, a compass, folding knife, map, extra socks, a small first aid kit, and packs of ground cinnamon. So long as strict attention was paid to rations, their meals would be taken care of, and they had enough Fly repellent to last weeks.

Nico sat with her back against a tree, savoring the jerky. "Why aren't koalas actual bears?"

Harry tilted his head as if to say, *Go ahead then*. It was a look inherited from his mother, Harriet, whose death would have been

unbearable were it not for those same humanoid eyes she'd passed on to her pup. (As for the breed of Harry's father, there was really no way to know, given Harriet's propensity to disappear into the woods for days at a time.)

Harry was a medium-size two-year-old, perky ears, dark black fur. Like his mother, he was playful without being needy, more intuition than simple smarts.

"So now *you* say, 'I don't know, Nico, why *aren't* koalas actual bears?' And I say, 'Because they don't meet the koalafications.'"

Not even a wag this time.

Nico stood, kicked dirt on the remains of the fire. She wrapped herself in her coat, pulled on the backpack, and was about to set out when a deer appeared, and it began to snow, and it felt like the one had been waiting on the other.

Her mother had often complained how much of the wildlife had been wiped out by Flies. Squirrels had survived, and rabbits, all things rascally and quick, animals that knew how to live in claustrophobic places. Nico had seen a moose once: enormous, mythical, like something from a storybook. But that was years ago.

They stared at the deer, and it stared back, two dark orbs inside white eye rings, and time slowed to little wisps, gliding like one of these thousand snowflakes to the ground. Grayish-brown skin. Antlers. "A whitetail," whispered Nico. A buck, though it had been in a fight or suffered some sickness, as the antlers on one side of its head were gone, and a back leg was bleeding.

Sunk in the animal's glow, she didn't hear it at first.

Then, in the distance, a low hum . . .

Swarms had a way of conjuring sounds she'd only imagined: a fleet of trains, a collapsing skyscraper from one of the old cities, the cyclone in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. From the Farmhouse cellar, it was hard to tell whether a swarm's volume was due to size or proximity.

She put a hand on Harry's head, felt him trembling. "Easy," she whispered, scanning the area for places to hide. "Easy . . ."

The whitetail raised its lopsided head to the sky, its nostrils flared. . . .

It happened fast: the humming burst from the trees, a deafening roar now, and the Flies came down like holy thunder, a celestial arm from the sky. She jumped behind a tree, yelled for Harry, but he'd run off somewhere, *where, where*, she couldn't see him, and now she was on the ground, couldn't remember falling, heart pounding against the quaking earth. From where she fell, she saw the white-tail covered in Flies, and for the first time in her life, she understood the fury of the swarm.

By the tens of thousands they worked as one until there was no visible grayish-brown fur, no broken antlers or red blood, no deer at all, only a deer-shaped thing, black and pulsing. The deer barked, a nightmarish screech, and as the Flies began lifting it off the ground, Nico buried her face, covered her ears, and did not move until she felt Harry's warm breath and wet nose against the back of her neck. And even though it was quiet again, the thunder in her head lingered.

## *Optics*

Underfoot, a mix of leaves and snow, fresh and old. After the swarm, the day seemed to go on forever, all the noises of the forest a potential threat.

Eventually they fell into an accidental game where Harry would run ahead, never too far, but far enough for them to feel the underlying suggestion of aloneness. They'd go like this for a minute, not biting into the solitude, just nibbling at it. Inevitably, Nico would break first. She'd whistle for Harry's return, count to five under her breath, and he'd come bounding back. (It never took longer than a five-count.) When he returned, she would tell him what a good dog he was, and he would wag his tail, and she would tell a joke or two until he decided to play the Game again—run ahead, nibble of solitude, whistle, five-count, triumphant return, verbal affirmation as to the quality of Harry's petsmanship, and so on.

A few hours in, they found a narrow stream that hadn't yet frozen; they stopped long enough for Nico to refill her filter bottle, and for a quick bite, and by the time they'd started the second leg, their moods had lifted a little.

"Mom used to say the only thing worse than not being educated about something was pretending not to be." In addition to the paranoia of Flies around every rock and tree, the whitetail had stirred something unexpected in Nico. "In the interest of not pre-

tending, I have to admit—I had not considered the possibility of other people. A deer? Fine. And we knew Flies were a danger. But people. That’s a whole other deal.”

Honestly, the thought of seeing another person scared Nico less than the thought of another person seeing her first. She was stronger than she looked but couldn’t help wondering if this wasn’t a bit counterintuitive. Appear strong and you never have to prove it. Appear weak and you’re constantly disproving it.

Harry ran ahead (all hail the Game!); watching him go, Nico played a different sort of game. She found a tree in the distance and imagined a stranger’s eye peeking out from behind it.

What would this person see?

Two outliers headed east, little dots on a map inching toward the Merrimack River: a dog, medium-size, black fur, breed unknown; a teenage girl with watery white skin, hair yellow as the sun, blue hoodie, long black coat, backpack.

Maybe they wouldn’t even see a girl and a dog. Maybe they would see only meat.

Ahead, Harry stopped dead in his tracks, stared up into a tree. As Nico neared, she followed his gaze, and at first she wasn’t sure what she was looking at. Some droopy animal hanging from the branches, furry but flat, strangely indefinable, something that belonged in the ocean, if anywhere. Whatever it was, its colors blended into a tree whose leaves waffled between shades of fall and winter. Then, slowly, a shape took form: twiggy legs, a belly ripped open like a too-full sack, the absence of insides, of eyes, of life. The

antlers—a single set only, its beam and tines camouflaged among the branches.

“The whitetail,” she said. Hollowed out now, not a carcass so much as a sagging hide and bones. This morning the deer had commanded their attention with nothing but its theatrical presence; it commanded attention now, too, though this was a different kind of theater.

Nico had always possessed a natural capacity to feel what others felt. She could close her eyes and live there, be them, feel this, do that. Now, eyes closed, she tasted lead and panic, felt the wave of Flies behind her like a tracking tsunami as thousands of feverish nips burrowed into the innermost Nico, her body slowly filling as she lifted off the ground, emptied of muscle and organ until, nothing left, the Flies dropped her back to the earth a discarded shell, the saddest of fallen stars.

At her feet, Harry dug a hole. Nico couldn't help being proud of her dog's aptitude, how quickly he had learned what follows death.

# KIT

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## *spacedog & computer #611*

In the beginning, there was nothing.

Then the world.

Then people, but no art.

Then people made art.

Then people died.

Now there is art, but no people.

Kit set down the chalk, wiped his hands, and turned to the empty classroom. “And that’s how it went. A brief history of art in the world. By Kit Sherouse. Your professor. Amen. Goodbye, or whatever.”

Even at twelve, Kit felt a many-reasoned sadness at his little playact. Not because he was the one teaching, but because no one was there to learn.

Which was a shame.

Because Kit knew a lot.

Oil paints, for example. He knew all about those. How they were made of natural pigments from heavy metals, e.g., cadmium red, titanium white, et cetera and so forth. It was for this reason, Kit knew, that oil paints could last decades without going bad.

(Also, he knew about *e.g.*, which was an abbreviation for

the Latin phrase *exempli gratia*, which meant “for example,” for example.)

Kit stood alone in the art classroom of William H. Taft Elementary School, staring at the blank page on the easel in front of him, stewing in the adrenaline of artistic possibility.

“I could make anything,” he said aloud, knowing full well what he would paint, having painted the same exact thing the last 610 mornings.

He stepped forward, put brush to paper, and out it came. *First the moon, big and bright.* He painted that moon, bigger and brighter than he’d painted it yesterday, and around it, a swirling navy night sky. *Now, at the bottom, the dog.* He started with the head: snout up, looking toward the moon, perky ears, *and now the body*, which he outlined first, and then filled in with black. Once the dog was done, he turned his attention to the blank space in the middle of the paper where the giant key would go.

The key was similar to the one his Dakota wore around her neck.

Maybe it was the exact one, who could say.

Yesterday it had occurred to him too late that if he mixed a little glitter into the gray paint, he could make the key shimmer. He did that now and felt a rush of excitement when it worked: a shimmering key in the sky, like cosmic space dust. Whatever it was, this was the closest he’d gotten to an accurate rendering of the vision in his head.



He stepped back, took in the painting. The dog, the moon, the shimmering key.

“Okay,” he said, wondering if today was the day. Maybe he could stop here. Maybe he could be done. The three images worked well together; there was no space on the page begging to be filled.

And yet . . .

Stepping forward, as always, he allowed the brush to take over. In the sky, around the moon, where stars might have been, Kit painted a computer from the olden days. Big and boxy. Now a keyboard with a cable. Now a computer mouse, like the one he’d found tucked in the back corner of the maintenance closet, beige and ugly and hanging in the sky as if that were its most natural habitat.

This time, when he stepped back to take it in, the piece didn’t just *look* done—it *felt* done.

Strange, how a person could create something they didn’t understand. But maybe that was what made art great: *Who cares where it comes from, so long as it comes from you?*

The walls and ceiling of the classroom were plastered in various versions of this same painting. Covered and recovered, as Kit had run out of space long ago. He signed the bottom of this one, and beside the signature, a title: *Spacedog & Computer #611*.

After removing his smock, Kit crossed the hall to the library.

Because William H. Taft had once been an “elementary school,” and because, in the olden days, “elementary schools” were populated by younger children, the library was mostly filled with

kids' books. Kit was twelve, which, according to Monty, meant he would soon be spending more time in the old person library down the road.

And look. It wasn't that Kit didn't like the old person library. It was the insinuation that a library for old people had more wisdom than a library for children.

It only took a few afternoons in the old person library for Kit to debunk this theory. (*Debunk* being a word he knew that meant "remove the bunk.") The stories were different, yes. Most of the covers were bigger, and some even had print so large, Kit could have read the pages from across the street. There were "books on tape" and "audiobooks," which, so far as Kit could tell, had been nothing more than very long grown-up versions of bedtime stories. But there was no more or less wisdom to be found in the old person library.

Plus, the William H. Taft Elementary School library was *way* cozier.

Here, his books were arranged by genre, and then alphabetically by author, because Kit had a brain in his head.

He'd finished reading the nonfiction shelves years ago, and was currently in fiction, halfway through the *Ls*. Not bad considering he usually only had about an hour before he had to be back at the Paradise Twin for high sun curfew. The paintings weren't dry by then, but dry enough to hang.

Kit curled into the orange beanbag chair, opened *The Call of*

*the Wild*, which was about a bunch of snow dogs who wanted to be boss, and picked up in a chapter called “The Dominant Primordial Beast.”

This was where Kit waited for his paintings to dry.

This was where he became a Knower of Things.

### *oh sarcophagi, cacophonies of catastrophe!*

William H. Taft Elementary School belonged to Kit, just as Pharmacy belonged to Monty, Sherriff’s Office belonged to Lakie, and Garden on the Roof belonged to his Dakota.

It was just the four of them in all of Town, so they got to do things like that, pick out their own buildings.

When picking a building, one had to take into account two things: that building’s proximity to home (the Paradise Twin Cinema), and the amount of hollow bones and leftover people-bits that would need removing. Schools and businesses were a safe bet, as they’d mostly been evacuated before things got really bad.

Houses were tricky. In the olden days, houses were where people had lived, according to his Dakota. People would save up their cash-bucks to buy a house. They would spend a bunch of time picking one out. What people in the olden days didn’t know was that no amount of time or cash-bucks could keep a house from becoming a sarcophagus (which was a fancy word he knew that meant “tomb”).

Houses were cacophonies of catastrophe.

He'd been inside a few, during scavenges. They were dark and smelled like a woodstove casserole of death and farts. The worst cases were the ones where the Flies hadn't gotten in to clean up the job. These houses had people-bits galore, rotten skin, cartilage, and, everywhere, the crumbs of humans.

You knew where the Flies had been. Flies left nothing but hollowed-out bones. Little piles all over the place, once people, now a heap of strange flutes around an empty skull.

Once, when Kit asked why all the bones they found were hollow, Lakie said, "Flu-flies mine them for marrow," and Kit felt bad for the people who used to live in Town. These silly people with their pockets of cash-bucks and dead dreams and houses full of marrowless bones.

*Marrow* was the fatty substance inside the bone, which Kit later confirmed with a number of literary sources in his very convenient library for kids.

### *what lay beyond*

He hung his latest painting on the wall beside *Spacedog & Computer #610* (covering up *Spacedog & Computer #403*), and then stood at the open window.

Because the art classroom was on the second floor and the school was on Main Street, and because Main Street ran through the heart of Town, Kit could see everything from up here. It was

warm but not too warm, the perfect weather for standing in an open window.

A breeze blew in his face, and he held it like a wish, imagined where in the world this breeze had been born. The middle of the ocean, maybe.

The ocean was one of the places he knew about but would never see. Like the moon.

Or Texas.

Or a jazz club.

It was a long list.

Across the street was his home, the Paradise Twin Cinema. Two stories tall, it was one of many old connected buildings on Main Street, all of them with history and things to say, though Kit loved the Paradise Twin most. It was stone and brick and had large iron letters across the top that read **PARADISE TWIN**, and below, a white-and-gold marquee that had once read **WELCOME TO PARADISE**, though a lot of the letters had fallen off.

For security purposes (i.e., to keep Flu-flies out), they kept a large semicircle of cinnamon spread on the street in front of the entrance; after high sun curfew, once they were all safely inside, the doors were barricaded.

Safe and sound. Tucked away. Home sweet home.

One of the reasons Kit had chosen Taft Elementary was its convenient location. Twenty-two seconds from here to the Paradise Twin.

Yeah.

He was fast.

There was Lakie now, walking home, rifle slung over one shoulder. She spent her mornings in the field behind Sheriff's Office at a shooting range she'd set up years ago.

Kit knew nothing of guns. Lakie, on the other hand, was about as efficient as you could be in most gun-related areas (i.e., shooting them, cleaning them, safety protocols, terminologies and so forth). What Kit lacked in the weaponry department, he more than made up for in the observation department. Most days, as high sun curfew approached, he stood like this in his window, watching over his little world.

A few doors down, Monty emerged from Pharmacy, where he spent his mornings on his crystal radio, or studying the Downfall of Society (DOS, as Monty called it). Where the shelves in Pharmacy had once stocked a variety of medicines, it was now home to hundreds of well-organized newspapers and magazine articles from the early days of the Flu-flies, as well as whatever books Monty could find in the adult library on the subjects of radio and communication.

He was what you'd call "obsessed."

Here's how that happened: a couple years ago, Monty found some kind of specialized earphone during a scavenge, and then spent months searching for the rest of the materials for his home-made radio. Apparently, a "crystal radio" required no batteries or electrical power of any kind, although its reach was limited.

Still. Any distance seemed impossibly distant.

“Hey!” Directly across the street, at eye level, his Dakota stood on the roof of the Paradise Twin. She was super-dirty, which meant today was for planting or harvesting. (Canning days were just “sweaty-dirty.”)

It was no secret where Kit got his complexion: pale white skin, freckles dotting his nose and cheeks. His mother was the same. *Theater tan*, she called it. *The palest of Paradises*. But he had to admit, recently, she was looking more flushed than usual.

She pointed at the sun, then held up five fingers. *Five minutes*.

“Dakota Primavera tonight!” she yelled.

He gave a thumbs-up. Dakota Primavera was her homemade potato pasta, plus crushed tomatoes and a seasonal rooftop vegetable.

There had been a time, Kit knew, when some people’s convictions or diets or preferences had compelled them to forgo the consumption of meat. Here in Town, they were vegetarians because, as his Dakota said, “When the majority of the world has been wiped out, you don’t kill what’s left.”

Kit didn’t mind. He had no memory of meat. Not to mention, his Dakota’s garden was an overturned cornucopia of variety, and she was basically a culinary genius.

Until a few months ago her garden had been in an old park down the road. But a swarm had come, fast and strong, and she’d barely made it back to the Paradise Twin in time. His Dakota had taken an extra-long bath and they’d burned her clothes, and the very next day she’d started transferring the garden to the rooftop.

Up there, she had the best possible vantage of the surrounding mountains. She kept a large handheld bell with her, and they ran weekly drills with no warning. She would ring the bell, and each of them—Kit from his classroom, Monty from Pharmacy, Lakie from behind Sherriff's Office—would drop what they were doing and *run* to the Paradise Twin.

Standing in his window now, he let go of the breeze, imagined it floating down Main Street, up into the endless mountains that surrounded Town. He thought of a book from the nonfiction shelves about the solar system, and how someone had written in the margins of a page, *THE FINAL FRONTIER*. From this book, Kit learned that there had once been some very smart people who knew an awful lot about space. Some had *gone* to space, flown rockets *into* space, explored regions and documented their findings. *However*, the book said, *outer space is an infinite ocean in which humans have only yet dipped the corner of a toenail.*

Kit thought back to that day of their very first drill. After his Dakota had rung the bell from the rooftop and they'd all run to the Paradise Twin, she'd looked them in the eye and said, "We will *not* be caught off guard."

"*Again*, you mean," Kit had said quietly.

As far as he knew, they had been caught off guard exactly twice: his Dakota's recent close call, and years before, when Kit was very young, the swarm that killed Monty and Lakie's biological parents.

He hadn't meant anything by it. But the looks they'd given



him that day taught him something. There was a code. A right way, and a wrong way, to speak of the Flies. Surviving, running, fighting, preparing, defending—these were part of the code. Reminding everyone of a time when the Flies had taken something from them—this was not.

How to be human, it seemed, was an infinite ocean in which Kit had only yet dipped the corner of a toenail.

PART TWO  
IN  
THE  
HOUSES  
OF  
LIGHT

# THE DELIVERER

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I find the house in my 7th Life, according to the Red Books.

The only thing more exquisite than its architecture—all sharp angles and natural wood and enormous triple-pane windows—is its ingenuity. To say it was built on top of a mountain is only half correct, as the entire back half of the house is actually set *into* the mountain, immersed in mineral, rock, soil. Where architectural designs had once attempted to bend the will of nature, my house bends to nature's will.

And with such grace.

Survival really is the cleanest aesthetic.

The mountain itself is a scripted *V* flipped upside down: on one side, a steady, incremental climb; on the other, a steep drop, uncounted hundreds of feet to the bottom. During my 7th Life, according to the Red Books, I saw this upside-down *V* from miles away, and came up here to jump.

Imagine my surprise.

Not only in finding the house (and its many miraculous amenities), but at the decomposed body dangling from the upstairs walkway, greeting me upon my arrival. No identification, no note,

hardly any sign he'd actually lived in this place so meticulously designed to withstand Flies and the darkened world.

*The Architect*, I call him, though I can't be sure he was the one who designed the place.

Whoever *had* designed it had done a spectacular job.

My house has no hallways, and few walls. On the ground level, the suggestion of a kitchen nook with an island counter. Beyond that, an open area with a couch facing an enormous wall made of glass. Such majesty in a snowstorm! Thunderstorm! Any storm! Those are my favorite nights, sipping wine, reading a book, listening to records by this glass wall, while outside a storm rages.

Upstairs, a loft space with a bed to end all beds. Four-poster. Mattress you could swim in like a pool. Most mornings, I wake in the cupped palm of this mountain to find the clouds outside my bedroom window. I usually lie in bed for a while, if the Red Books allow, and stare at the photograph on my nightstand until my heart hurts.

Onward now, through the house.

Out back, beyond the chickens in their fortress-coop, through the vegetable garden (a harvest calendar in the kitchen, which veggies for which season), beyond the ten-thousand-gallon rainwater harvesting tank, twenty more steps: here is the edge of the cliff, the tip-top of the upside-down V.

Here is the true source of ingenuity, survival, life. . . .

The entire face of the cliff is covered in solar panels.

Countless hours I've spent here, sitting on the edge of the world, contemplating the manpower, machinery, or magic involved in attach-

ing so many panels in so many unreachable places. It seems impossible, yet there they are, tilted just so, unfettered access to the sun.

*Who were you, O Architect, O man of mystery? Military? Government? The ultimate wealthy survivalist? You, who'd gone to such great lengths to preserve your life, considered every possible angle but your own mind—who were you?*

Chilled eggs in the refrigerator. A stovetop to cook and heat water. An AeroPress and beans for coffee. Vinyl spinning in the living room, lounging by the glass wall.

I am not complaining.

I push buttons, flip switches, my own little kingdom in the clouds. And when that godlike power swells inside me, I remind myself that *light begets light*, that my power to create it is only the subset of a greater power, perhaps the greatest: the sun, that beautiful burning orb.

Here, in the earth's song of ruin, my House by the Solar Cliffs is a reprise of survival. In it, I have learned to be grateful for repetition. And while summers are hot and winters are long, and while aloneness is itself a presence in the room, *loneliness* is nothing but pure absence, a reaching down and hollowing out. I have learned to love myself, my own company. I have learned that you can hate a house only so long as you avoid a fundamental truth: that you are the one who calls it home.

Even now, in my 160th Life, I am learning new things.

I write all these things down in the Red Books, so that I might never forget.