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THE TAKING OF JAKE LIVINGSTON

Ryan Douglass

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LIVINGSTON**



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[Dedication T.K.]

JAKE



I'd hate to be that kid who died in PE class.

Steven Woodbead never saw it coming. He was doing a body roll. I don't know what he was listening to—just that it was bass heavy and kept playing from the speaker even after he hit the grass.

Woodbead is dead, but I can still see him, bursting into light every time the javelin splits his head. His shirt knifes open and firecrackers burst like bees from his chest, dispersing him in a siege of glowing embers.

There's this moment afterward when that spot is silent, and I wonder if that was his final loop, if Steven has finally passed on. And then he pixelates back into shape, his smile empty, his eyes white, dancing all over again. Judging from the short shorts and retro windbreaker, Woodbead must have died forty years ago in a PE period like this one, when someone carelessly threw a javelin and screamed "LOOK OUT!" a moment too late.

"Jake!" Grady's voice whistles through the air like a firework behind me. "Wait up!"

Can't talk right now. Too busy watching Woodbead blow up, hoping he'll be done with that awful business soon. In the year

I've been at this school, I've noticed his body parts slowly fading. Three fingers of his left hand have already dissolved, and his right leg ends just below the knee.

The ancient brick castle of my school fades into view.

"Jake!" Grady falls in line next to me, head all sweaty. "Um, earth to Jake?"

"Oh. Hi, Grady."

He's three inches shorter, with a white face and bushy orange hair. "You trying to ditch me, man? I've been calling you for twenty minutes!"

"Have you?"

"You're always so damned zoned out."

Our voices are pitched so differently. Mine subdued and kind of deep, his nasally and shrill.

Our friendship never really settled in—it's actually a long-lasting accident, which started at the courtyard tables last year, when he invited himself to sit next to me. I was reading. He asked me what I was reading. My solitude ended and I've never gotten it back.

A whistle shrieks from the field. Coach Kelly's got his blue eyes set on me. His neck is stiff and the bill of his hat hides the top half of his face. He's pumping his arms in slow motion, as if to pantomime proper running. It's so condescending.

Oh, what I'd give to punch him in the face with no consequences.

I hate it here. Swear it's like there's a giant floating BLACK KID sign over my head encouraging my teachers to pay me bad attention. Most days I want to run off this campus and stay lost forever.

And most days? I can't figure out what I hate more: seeing the dead, or being the one Black eleventh grader at St. Clair Prep.



The blue stall of the second-floor bathroom is where I change from PE sweats to sweater vest. Covering the walls are stickers and flyers. Varsity Crew Team, Math League, St. Clair Democrats, and St. Clair Republicans. All surrounding a doodle of Mr. Krabs, captioned *Krabs is one thick bih*.

The stall door clacks behind me as I check myself in the mirror, adjust the tie, smooth down the do-rag line on my forehead. My hair is an awkward mix of textures, nappy on the sides, curly on top. I can never quite tell the barber what I want because I don't know what I want.

On my way out of the bathroom, I hear my brother shouting at someone from somewhere.

“Give me back my shit, man!”

The hallway traffic buzzes like a chaos of katydids. Navy-blue uniforms in stark contrast to pale and tan faces. An occasional brown person. We're like child soldiers in a Catholic military, desperate to get out. Girls roll the tops of their skirts down to make them shorter. Some of the boys pop their collars, and Benji just yells at teachers.

I stop walking when I see him arguing with my chem teacher, Mr. Shaw, on the landing past the glass.

Mr. Shaw is holding my brother's snapback out of reach. “*No hats in the building*. It is against the dress code.”

“It's *not* a hat! It's a headband. Show me where the dress code says *no headbands*, bruh.”

Benji is five-eleven, but Mr. Shaw is a giant at six-five and can hold the hat higher than most people, his jacket sleeve forming a curtain that hangs over Benji's face when he does it.

Benji is loud and embarrassing, but I count on the fact people don't know we're brothers. You couldn't guess it because Benji's heavy like a linebacker, with a warm beige skin tone and a smooth wave pattern. I'm two inches shorter, skinny as a pole, with golden brown skin, and I throw water on my hair at random times during the day to activate my little curl. I always look ridiculous, but it seems like when my hair is wet, the Joshes, Todds, and Trevors of this place are less likely to touch it.

I hate my own name. It makes me sound like one of them. *Jake*. It means *someone who takes or overthrows by force*. That doesn't sound like me, but it's what my dad wished I would be—powerful.

Mr. Shaw is guiding Benji in the direction of the principal's office as I slip into my first class. Benji's arguing the whole time. Sometimes I wish I could be like him. Instead, I'm silent all the time.



Whenever Mom used to ask me what I learned in school, I couldn't tell her. I still couldn't.

I live in the back of class, hidden. Dead world appears around me like a subaquatic wasteland of lost matter—failed tests, rusty trophies, dismembered trumpets, and ripped baseballs. Lost memories floating through the walls, over everybody's heads, and out the other side. The phantom activity all blurs together in a drone of chaos I've trained myself to ignore. That guy in the tweed vest who breaks the school chair over another dude's neck in chemistry. That awkward moment in econ when a car crashes through the wall and just sits there with phantom bricks like visual static on its windshield, obscuring the bloody person inside. The lights blink so bright they block the board.

I wanted classes only on the second floor to avoid proximity to roads. The third floor is too high. The ghosts up there jump out of windows.

I am always focused on drawing. My notebooks are filled with demented sketches that normal people would call weird. Robots with spider legs and worms crawling out of eyeballs. Eyeballs with giant bellies. A boy with a bloated, bleeding heart for a head.

The final bell brings me home. The glockenspiel does its *ding dong ding* thing and my eyes waken to my second reality—the one where ceiling lights blast through ghosts so hard I can barely see them. And the world is replaced by kids who don't know my name.



I live in Atlanta, but not really. Clark City is too far out for the train to come, unless it's one of those freight trains crawling slowly down the tracks and forcing cars to wait five minutes for it. Clark City's half Black, a quarter white, and a quarter blend of Congolese, Eritrean, Afghan, and Vietnamese. Food trucks offer our most convenient eateries—Benton Bell's wing truck and Strong Island Caribbean Café. Houses hide behind trees, their windows boarded, roofs slogged down in moisture. Construction workers tear projects down and put more corporate things up—car dealerships and gas stations. The breaking and building never ends.

There is no crosswalk to my subdivision, so I jaywalk when the timing feels right, making it across the street just in time for a car to rip through the fog behind me, thrashing my back with cool air.

Blue lights flash in the distance, up the curve to my house. Lights from police cars and caution tape stretched across a

driveway. The police are talking to my neighbors—the Mooneys, I think. Their home is a plantation-style thing with a wraparound fence, dripping with fake cobwebs for Halloween. Also: fake graves in the lawn.

The middle-aged couple in navy-blue suits is lonely. They hug each other in the driveway. Her head is in his neck, and he's staring into space. A field of indigo light curls off their heads, forming a smoky field with chunks of matter like planet waste—ice and dust and tiny rocks, melting into a living thing.

A pair of ghouls hovers over them, dipping their emaciated gray heads down to suck the smoke through their spiky teeth, slit nostrils, and eyeless eyes.

Their business is none of mine. I keep pushing to my house.

There's a ringing from somewhere. No . . . screaming? Screaming and begging.

"Wait! Stop, WAIT!"

Must be coming from behind an open window, or dead world.

I'm cold suddenly. Summer always ends late down here, but it's officially over now, and the wind is not warm anymore. A gust of it blasts my beanie off my head and I spin to catch it, finding myself face-to-face with a rib cage. It's like . . . a giant rotisserie chicken stripped of meat, obscuring everything behind it. A torso that would disappear around my hand if I reached out to touch it.

No nipples, a stretched, long neck, and a giant head, alien-shaped, with gaping holes in place of eyes.

I turn and it follows me, like a zombie hobbling after its meal. Then I'm running up my driveway, suddenly unconvinced that it can't actually touch me. I know what I've read about the creatures, and what my medium mentor, Ms. Josette, has taught me—*They can't hurt you, because they can't touch you.*

So why does the ground shake when they walk, rattling the street pebbles? Why do the asphalt cracks look strained under their footsteps? The hatchbacks and minivans parked on the street seem worried a storm will destroy them.

The creature's horrible shadow falls over me, sinking my stomach into no-man's-land.

I'm not the one grieving, so I'd be of no interest to the leeches of dead world. They tend to avoid happy people, instead latching on to the most sullen, tragic person in the room. I've only ever grieved my dog, Appa, who died of heart failure two years ago. My family's mostly alive, except for my grandfather, who died six months before I was born. I don't think I'll ever see my dad again, but he's still alive out there.

Now there's laughter—children's laughter, and the pop of a gun.

Something terrible happened in my neighbor's house.

It's getting cold too fast, like the entire winter is dropping here and now. A shadow comes down like a blanket of ice as I search my four pockets—slacks and hoodie.

Where are my keys?

There are moments when it controls me. The shadows, the darkness. Moments where I become dizzy, undefined, just a floater like the failed tests in my classrooms.

But I know my porch—a column of white balusters. I know my front door—dead bolt and handle that you push down to get inside. A freezing wind sweeps under my hoodie, pulling me backward. I tilt my way into the house and click the door shut.

The TV's playing from the living room. Somehow. Mom's out of town.

"Benji?" I call.

No answer.

The air is cold inside, and the house so dim that even the earth-tone prints on the wall have lost their luster.

Around the entryway, the TV plays. Someone turned to channel 2 news, unless it turned itself on, to announce a program to an empty room.

“We have to put a stop to gun violence. How many more people have to die?”

There’s a headline with a picture of my neighbor—the son of the weeping couple.

**MATTEO MOONEY, SURVIVOR OF HERITAGE
HIGH SHOOTING, FOUND DEAD IN HOME**

Oh my God . . .

Matteo is . . . dead?

I don’t know anybody in the neighborhood, but I did notice when Matteo moved in. Him and Mr. Mooney forced a sofa through the door. Matteo was shirtless, shirt was tucked into his back pocket. The neighbors were all spying on his sweaty jock body, his shapely pecs. The sun was a hot bubble swelling over Clark City, and the humidity made me take off my own shirt, open the window, and put the fan in it. I watched Matteo come in and out of the house, wondering how much I’d have to lift to get so big. I wanted so badly to grow over my collarbones and elbows.

I sink into the couch leather.

I remember the school shooting. The Heritage killer sent a shock wave through all of Atlanta. Everyone was paranoid because one of those things had come so close to home.

A clip of Matteo speaking at a podium. It’s dated from a year ago, right after the shooting. Cameras flash on the tears in his eyes as he looks out over an outdoor audience. “How many more

of our friends do we have to lose before we say enough is enough? There are demons out there who just want the world to burn. And we have to come together to make sure they can't get the weapons to harm us."

It cuts away. Matteo's face appears side by side with the shooter who attacked his school.

Sawyer Doon. Yes, the menace with the straight blond hair and blue eyes.

The news anchors reappear, their faces molds of fake sadness. "Heartfelt words from Matteo Mooney. May he rest in peace. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Mooney family. The cause of death is currently unknown."

I turn off the TV and stand up, staring at nothing. I guess a ghost came and turned it on when I was gone.

Murder. In my neighborhood. Matteo was like . . . eighteen? Nineteen?

I slog up to my room, and the house begins to feel heavy and too silent around me, like *someone is here, something will jump out*.

No one's here. I'm in my room, turning my book bag upside down. Textbooks, pens, and worksheets fall free in a frenzy on my mattress.

I lift the blinds and watch the blue house at the end of the street. Police lights reflect in the second-story windows.

Strange. I never thought the richest kid in our community would be the one to die.

I collapse on the mattress and watch the globelike light fixture.

The final daylight surrenders to the dark trap of night. Ectomist creeps at my periphery, snakelike and sinister.

It's the matter that eats ghosts alive as the seasons turn, nib-

bling on their fading bodies, burrowing inside of them like termites. It's everywhere and nowhere at once, coating the carpet, thickening the air with glittering fibers.

It's always seeping in through the vents, the plumbing stacks, and cracks in the plaster like nitrogen dioxide, here to asphyxiate me in my sleep.

SAWYER



October 9

Dear Diary,

Don't know why the doctor made me do this, or who I'm even supposed to be talking to. It's too dark in the shed to even see what I'm writing. So there's no way to make sense of what I'm thinking. The lantern only shows me the center of the page. What I wrote before doesn't matter. What I write next won't either.

"Sawyer! Sawyer! Sawyer!"

Have you ever heard your name called so much that you wanted to die?

Momma must hate me. Made the doctors release me from Hapeville before I could promise Tom I'd never try to kill myself again. So I don't know if I will try again. She took me out of there a week ago because it embarrassed her to have a kid at a treatment center. I know from what Annie told me when we got home, when Momma was out of earshot: "Are you sure you're okay? Because you know they wanted to keep you in there and Momma made 'em let you go."

I pictured all Momma's coworkers at the diner judging her for not being able to answer the question "How's your son doing?"

This outhouse turned shed turned haven was where my dad kept his power tools. Momma hasn't touched it since he ditched us last September. She always asks me if I tried to off myself because he left. I think she gives him too much power.

The pine trees are so long they sneak through the crescent at the top of the door. The wallpaper in my cell at the clinic felt just as three-dimensional and murky, and I guess it reminds me of there, that place that felt more like home than here. Something about a hospital gown, a public bed, a tall, dark man named Tom talking to me twice a day. He had beautiful bones in his face.

"Sawyer! Sawyer! Sawyer!" You should hear my mom yelling right now.

No one past the forest will know she's shouting. But it will annoy the shit out of my sister, who's probably in her room doing nothing.

Momma always asks me if she's a good mother. I don't know what to tell her.

She only ever started cooking for me after I tried to hang myself. She makes more sandwiches than necessary and refrigerates them for the next day, so they aren't as good when I eat them.

"SAWYER, are you out there? Please come inside and eat!"

August is over, but when it was here, you could hear all these cicadas chattering at a frequency that felt designed to shatter all sense in the brain and turn you insane. I opened the screenless window and listened to their hellish roar. The terror of it.

They formed the soundscape to my process as I wrapped an extension cord around the fan.

I have never been on the same page as anyone.

I've heard the question "How's Sawyer?" more in the past week than I ever have before. Momma's always got the phone on speaker before and after work. Aunt Celia, Uncle Rod, Gramma, and even my kid cousins Connor and Georgie all want to know how I am.

"He's doing all right!" she says. "Gettin' lots of rest and all that good stuff."

She never even asks how I'm doing. She paints her nails and watches TV and brings men home every so often when she thinks we're asleep.

Uncle Rod says we should move out of the forest. "Great big world out there," he says. "Can't be stuck in Bill's bumfuck Georgia fantasy forever."

Funny how Rod is just like Bill but thinks he is different.

"We're all adjusted here," Momma says.

I have never been adjusted and neither has she. She stares at the overflow of dirty bowls by our sink until no more can fit. Says, "You or Annie gonna take care of these dishes anytime soon?" I think she has more problems than me.

My dad, Bill, had more problems than both of us put together. He slapped me in the face if I stared at him for too long. He sold prescription drugs and was a cable man. At the grocery store, when the self-checkout said "Help is on the way," he punched the screen and shouted, "I don't need it, you bitch!"

His skin looked like a graffitied skating ramp. He did improvement projects, like painting our whole house puke green. I live in a section of forest at the end of a long dirt trail. Regular wheels aren't made to weather it, but Bill liked it out here because he didn't want neighbors.

My dad was a sadist who dropped a ten-pound weight on a duck at the lake when I was five. I think he forced Momma to marry him and make a family so he could move it to the woods and then abandon it.

“Sawyer!” Momma’s voice is more grating than a blender.

If she cares, she’ll come and find me.

JAKE



Mom and Benji argue about everything, so I keep my earphones in all the time.

We're on our way to school, speeding some because we're late. The Tahoe's driving past Freedom Parkway and John Lewis Boulevard as Benji and Mom scream about . . . something. The dress code, maybe, or Benji's flopping grades.

My music selection is a slow bleed because I'm not fully awake. The Postal Service, SZA, and Syd. I'm drawing faces in the window fog—dragons and devils. A ghoul followed home from Matteo's house yesterday. I haven't seen one of those things get so close to me since . . . well, since the first time I ever saw one like that, in my bedroom when I was ten.

Mom's getting my attention from the rearview mirror, her jet-lagged eyes doting and impatient. I pull out my earphones.

"I know you're tired of me asking," she says. "You sure you don't want to get your license?"

"I'm sure."

I look out the window. I could never trust myself on these roads, where the cars crash as often as they reach their destinations.



We arrive when everyone else is already in class. St. Clair's front grass is so green it looks artificial. It probably is. So the trees and tulips in the big lawn out in front of the school where we stop the truck could be fake too. Maple leaves sweep the air from the brick walkways to the belfry. The stone saint on her post looks unhappier than usual to see us.

Benji gets out first and shuts the door without a word, like always.

Mom sighs. "Have a good day, Jake."

It doesn't sound all that sincere. I think his negativity rubs off on her and then she transfers it to me.

I get out and stand there on the asphalt, watching the truck head in one direction and my brother in the other.

I'm always by myself.



Ms. Kingston is teaching when I make it to English, harping on about something I'd have been lost on if I'd arrived on time.

She stops mid-speech when I enter, puts a hand on her angular hip, and gives me a green-eyed hate glare. "Nice of you to finally join us. Have a seat."

I steal a chair in the discussion circle next to Fiona Chan. All I really know about her is she's the one person in class who doesn't stare at me like an escaped prisoner when I get here late.

Ms. Kingston's still watching me as I unpack. "Anything you'd like to say?"

"Oh. Sorry."

She shakes dead brown hair out of her face. "Anyway. Now that everyone has *arrived*, we can turn back to our discussion.

Everyone should have read through page 109 of *The Great Gatsby*. Chad? You started our discussion last time. Who are you passing the baton to?"

Chad Roberts—he's one of those rugby dudes who can't mind his own business. Chews his gum extra loud and throws his voice in your face when he speaks. Just needs to be heard. His girlfriend, Laura Pearson, sits right next to him, doe eyes fluttering every time he makes a move.

"Uhhhhh . . ." Chad picks up the book like he's never seen one before and then slams it down. Leans back in his chair and fixates his beady blue eyes on me. "I want to hear what Livingston thought of the reading."

"Benj—" Ms. Kingston gives her head a little shake. "I'm sorry . . . *Jake*." She almost called me Benji. "Anything you found exciting or meaningful about the pages?"

Her tone is condescending, like she already knows I didn't read. Which I didn't. But not because I *can't* read, like she thinks. Just because *The Great Gatsby* is a snoozefest, and if I'm gonna read words, I'd rather them be by Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, or Stephen Graham Jones, instead of the guy who wrote a story about the tragedy of being rich.

I'm silent. Fiona raises her hand, but Ms. Kingston doesn't acknowledge it.

Ms. Kingston pivots her utterly offended frame toward me. "Have you arrived late and neglected to read, as well?"

At this point, there's no denying it. "Yeah." My voice is a mumble. "Sorry."

"In that case, why don't you go and sit outside and read?" She flicks a finger at the door like she's commanding a dog. "You can spend the period catching up to the rest of us."

I'd rather not be here anyway, but it's embarrassing to have

to turn my back on everyone and hear the silence crackling with judgment as I leave.

“Okay! Let’s try that again.”

Ms. Kingston’s voice quiets as the door hisses shut.

The hallway is creepy when abandoned. Too silent and big for one person. I feel like a piece of food tossed through a giant’s hungry intestine.

The ceiling lights are bright enough to rip right through the function of my corneas, so I close my eyes. “Ah, peace,” I whisper. “St. Clair diploma will set you up nicely for a college with an impressive national ranking. Or something.”

I want to be a cartoonist, but I’ve never thought of a degree as an important part of taking people on visual adventures. In fact, school never feels very important at all. I have no friends here—not that I had any friends at my old high school either, but this one has less fights.

I open my eyes, kick a pencil across the floor, and listen to it roll. Each classroom I pass has some teacher warbling on like a robot, and I’d hate to be the kids in there. In fact, being out here is a reprieve.

There’s a droning documentary from a dark room. A flute creating a tune from the auditorium. Trumpets and tubas and triangles adding a questlike whimsy. The intensity builds, and more instruments join. A clarinet. Drums growing in power, rising like a tempest.

A gunshot.

A gunshot?

The music collapses to a stop as more gunshots sound off.

I break for the doors and then trip, my body splashing into the floor like a spilled tray as a ringing torpedo goes through my ears.

It's silent for a moment. Someone bursts from a classroom and tears down the hallway. Screams chase him from the door.

BANG!

It's empty, and then overcrowded all at once. Kids tumble like zombies from classrooms, bumping into each other or falling down. I find my feet and fall against the lockers. Someone trips and falls beside me, books splattering out of her hands. I rush out to help her and a hand yanks me by the jacket and throws me into the lockers. "MOVE!"

Chad. Leaving me in the dust.

We've rehearsed the steps a million times. *Run. Hide. Fight.* But I can't move.

A hand meets my arm, sending my heart into my windpipe.

"Jake!" screams a voice. "We have to go!"

A girl moves past me. I follow her hair through the chaos. My wits blur across the ties and vests, spilling out like ants from a disturbed hill, hands grabbing and heads bumping into backs. Our ceilings are the kind with panels that push back. I could climb on someone's shoulders, jump into the ceiling, and hide.

"Bethany?" someone screams. "BETHANY!"

Shuffling and panic, everyone screaming, running this way and that, only half certain they're here. Kids frantically jabbing at their phones fingers shaking, silencing them? Texting their final goodbyes?

My palms crash into the push handle. I fly into the sunlight, plain sense returning to me in the shuffle down the steps. Tree branches sway like veins ripped from their connectors, but they're shielding a bright sun, and I'm underneath it—not trapped in that horrible school, not a victim of the shooter.

I'm alive. I'll make it home.

It's silent, and still, and cold. No police at the carpool lane. No

SWAT team in the front yard. Everyone who escaped is just . . . standing around. Catching their breath with their hands on their knees, laughing, or comforting their friends. As if the whole thing is already over . . . or never happened?

Principal Ross and Vice Principal Davis are standing together—one plump and one thin—as we panic and pour out. They're out of the way, but close to the school, as if there's no real danger.

Because there isn't. It was just a drill.

JAKE



The administration brings us into the auditorium for an assembly when it's over. They're a military line on the stage with our janitor, Mr. Dao, standing off to the side. Principal Ross asks us to applaud him for how subtly he placed hidden speakers down the hallways and then operated the noise.

My gray-haired, hunchbacked principal walks across the stage. "Okay, Saber Cats." He's always lackluster, bored, breathing heavy. "What did we learn?"

Everyone is quiet at first. And then teachers chime in about what was done wrong or right.

Turns out everything was done right because there's no wrong answer.

What do you do when there's a shooter, anyway? You try not to panic, try to stay alive, hide in corners, board up doors with desks, and escape through doors or windows. All of it is right, as long as you are trying to stay alive.

What if my classmates were murdered?

What if, at some point, it wasn't a drill? What if they passed into the afterlife and were stuck in their death loops, dying forever? I would see my acquaintances running down hallways and

staircases in terror. I would never be able to forget it because it would be right in my face all the time.



I don't make it past the front lawn at the end of the day. I just plop on the ledge by the parking lot and roll a rose quartz stone around in my hand. It's hard to just bounce back to normal after a schoolwide panic.

"Hey, brobro, you need a ride?"

Benji. He's making his way around the ledge to meet me. No track practice today, I guess.

"Why are you just sitting there by yourself? Where's Grady?"

"Grady takes the bus."

"Come on—Mahalia's waiting for us."

Benji picks me up by the armpits and steers me through the parking lot.

My brother treats me like shit most of the time. Sometimes he treats me okay. I hate it when he's nice to me, because I know it won't last, and it creates cognitive dissonance in my perception of him.

Mahalia is at the wheel when I open the door to her blue van, her hair in a ponytail of fresh microbraids. She smiles back at me, face joyful and friendly, as always. "Hey, Jake."

Her skin is pretty, like polished amber, and she smells like tea and flowers. Mahalia is Benji's ex. She grew up in church with us, lives in our neighborhood and drives her mom's car, so we hitch rides home with her when she's not tutoring or doing yearbook.

Benji gets in and instantly starts with smart comments. "Careful not to hit anybody backing out, Maha."

“All front seat passengers must remain silent for the duration of the ride,” she says, rolling her eyes and adjusting the mirror. “It’s the rules.”

Unlike me, she claps back against my brother’s sly comments. I swear he causes her more stress than necessary, even for an on-and-off couple. For some reason she puts up with it. They both put up with each other.

“Have you finished your application?” she asks Benji, without looking at him.

“What application?”

“Georgia State? The one due in two months?”

“That’s forever away.”

“Benji, you’ll get high and look up and it’ll be January.”

“I’ll finish it in time.”

“You already got rejected from your entire first round. Do you wanna be a flop forever?”

“Thanks, Maha. Appreciate you so much.” Benji balls up his fist and looks out the window.

Benji’s had girlfriends since the fifth grade. Mahalia’s probably the one girl who stuck because she cares for him while challenging him. And she takes no shit.

I wish I had some of that quality in me.



At home, Mahalia takes a long deep breath and looks sternly at my brother. He looks back at her, and I feel like a third wheel. When it’s time for them to say goodbye, it’s like they don’t know how to when I’m around.

“Catch you later,” Benji says, and leaps out of the car.

Then Maha and I are sitting there, just the two of us, sans the

guy who's incredibly hard to talk to but whose approval you still seek, in a weird way.

"Sorry Benji's such an idiot," I tell her. "I'm embarrassed by it."

She laughs and then sighs, looking sadly at the steering wheel. "Aren't we all embarrassed? I just want more for him, you know? Like, why can't he be more studious, like you?"

"I'm not that studious."

"But you make an effort, at least. He's so smart and is just wasting it. Anyway . . . I hope you're okay after the craziness of today."

"I'm good. Thanks again for the ride."

"Always."

I get out of the car and find my brother in the driveway, squinting at me as she drives off.

"What were y'all talking about?" he asks.

"Just reassuring her at least one of us is a nice person so she doesn't feel alienated from our family entirely." I walk up the driveway, stick the key in the door, and twist. "Is Maha your number one or number three now? Kinda hard to keep track."

He reaches between me and the door and hits me in the chest before I can finish. The knob twists in my hand and I fall against the doorway, coughing as the door swings open.

There's a smell. Blood? It's coming from inside the house.

The pink-orange light comes through the open door, capturing letters on the wall of our entryway.

S.A.D.

They're in dark red, like the work of a hateful vandal with no artistic talent. A demonic four-year-old's school project. It came from a deep valve in the body that never should have been touched in the first place. It's sticky. Wiggly. Done, most likely, in the blood of some unassuming person.

I'm not breathing. My head is dizzy.

"What . . . the . . . fuck?" Benji is confused too.

"You see it too?"

This is not some dead object bleeding into my reality—this writing is really here. And someone meant for us to find it.

SAWYER



October 14

DIARY,

My sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssister drives me nuts!!!!!!!

I can't fucking breathe. Just broke our coffee table. Turned it over in the living room, threw it right into the TV stand, made a giant cracking noise. The glass cracked right down the middle. I peeled Momma's books off that brown bookshelf and let them loose behind me.

She screamed my name and ran desperately from the kitchen.

I snatched a candleholder off the mantel and threw it at the wall, so it stuck there, in a dent of crumbling plaster.

Momma blocked my path as I went for the other one, screeching at me to stop.

Annie came running in the house, screaming too. "What the hell is wrong with you, Sawyer?"

I was making no noise, but I was the crazy one? Tell me how that is possible. They always say, "Come inside, Sawyer!" Like there's a point to being indoors. Now they will see why I don't like to be inside.

Momma hugged the vase close to her chest and turned on Annie, rightfully angry at her. “What did you DO to him?” Her voice was full of tears.

“Sawyer had dead bugs in the shed, Momma!” Annie was hysterical too, real riled up. “He tortured them to death and was just keeping them prisoner out there in old jelly jars.”

My bug collection had grown exponentially. Cicadas, crickets, moths, dragonflies, butterflies, and beetles stuffed in empty jelly jars lining the walls, like potpourri, living and dead.

I escaped down the hallway to my room, letting my sister’s nasally voice fade behind me. I want that voice to fade forever.

“What’s that got to do with you, Annie?” Momma cried, pleading. “What’s that got to do with you?”

I slammed my door, locked it, and screamed into the carpet. My room has one window, and a bed and a closet. A place to sleep, a place to hide, a place to escape.

Annie took my jars to the creek and tossed them all in. She threw out my experiments, just to destroy the one thing that brought me joy.

And they wonder why I don’t want to be here. Why I don’t want to live anymore.

The journaling thing. I understand it better now, and why Dr. Scott tells me to do it. It’s to keep me from hurting people, which I forget I can’t do. I think I tried to off myself because deep down I know I may hurt someone badly one day, and that seems unfair by normal standards.

I don’t belong here.

Ceiling fan, why did you break?

I shouldn’t have moved the bed out from under me. Annie only came running because there was a loud noise. I miss when they forgot about me.

I will never live this down—I will always be the boy with the breaking point.

I will miss the spiders the most.

Spiders even kill other spiders. Sometimes female spiders eat their mates while they're mating. Sometimes they eat their babies. Sometimes the babies eat the mom. They're my favorite. They mind their own space.

Momma's voice carried past the door. "What's he got to do with you?"

I hate how they say "he"—like what they mean is "it."

I used tweezers to pick legs off a daddy longlegs to determine how many it would need to survive. The answer is five, at least. With four legs taken off, it cannot survive, because half of it is missing. They cluster together and release a stinky secretion as a group when they see a predator. Clustered together, the spiders look like a big patch of hair. A single unit, unbreakable.

I am so sad.

I wish Annie was scared of the woods like Momma. I want them all to myself.

I'm not worth very much to my family, and they're not worth much to me either.

JAKE



Someone could be in our house. I'm dizzy and falling into the side table.

Benji grabs my arm and puts one finger over his lips. He leads me slowly, silently, through the passage to the kitchen.

The cabinets and drawers and oven are closed, the countertops just as we left them, with the mail cascading in a chaos ramp by the fruit bowl.

Thunder rumbles the floor. Benji pulls open the silverware drawer and takes out a butcher's knife. He hands me one too—a bread knife with a serrated edge.

We move through the kitchen like rogues, his knife held high and mine held low like a staff, because this knife goes in best from underneath.

In the living room, lightning blinks over the house. Another roll of thunder, low and dangerous as I follow my brother up the stairs. The rain starts and then grows into an angry monster, beating at the roof so hard our footsteps turn silent.

Upstairs, Benji fishes his pistol out from under the mattress as I watch the door. It scares me that he has that thing, but I couldn't make him get rid of it if I tried. Dad gifted it to him before we moved away. I grab the bat from the closet in my room.

As we creep down the hallway to Mom's room, my chest suffocates with this fear of dying forever and ever. A man will jump out of the linen closet and kill me, and the back of my brother's sweater vest, flashing under the lightning, is the thing I'd see on loop as blood seeped out of my throat.

Benji bangs on the laundry room door and I flinch. It leaves vibration in the silence—a backdrop for his voice.

“WHO THE FUCK IS IN HERE?!”

Silence is the only thing that responds to him. The house must be empty, but it doesn't feel like it is.

“We should turn on all the lights,” I whisper.

“Good idea.”

He goes right and I go left, to flip switches, crank knobs, and pull strings—laundry, hallway, Mom's bathroom. Her vanity, with the jewelry stands draped in necklaces, is still full. If this were a burglar, they would have destroyed that . . .

I meet Benji at the top of the stairs. The house seems protected now, so we let out the breaths we were holding. I awkwardly laugh and let the bat loosen in my wrist.

And then, like someone has watched our every move from a power box, the lights all go off.

Benji and I huddle like two shadows under the all-encompassing shadow of our house. The rain beats at the roof like it's angry we exist.

“It's a ghost,” I mutter.

Benji rolls his eyes. “It's not a ghost. It's a killer is what it is. Whoever killed our neighbor.”

“Are you kidding or serious?”

Benji pulls out his phone, clicks on the flashlight, and raises the blinding beam right in my face. “Why would I be kidding?”

I squint against it, raise my hand.

We don't know how Matteo died. It could have very well been a sadistic serial killer on the loose in our neighborhood. I can't figure out which is scarier.

Benji calls the cops, and then Mom. In the span of an hour my house breaks out into an episode of *CSI*.

I step outside, walk over by the mailbox, and let Benji do the talking.

The cold, fresh air sticks in my throat as the fog and ecto-mist seethe around my house and Matteo's. Two ghouls are lying on the lawn, which is quiet now that the crime scene has moved to my house. They're lying side by side, their arms crossed over their chests, like a married couple in one coffin.



I came closest to the monsters when I was ten. It was in my old house's basement, which I went down to explore in the middle of the night.

A jingle emanated all the way up to my room, like the music from a jack-in-the-box.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a ghost. I'd nicknamed him Swamp Steve because his hair was scraggly and dirty, like he'd just emerged from a swamp. He was rocking back and forth, hugging his knees, whisper-singing to himself, "*Half a pound of treaaaacle. That's the way the money goes.*"

I thought it was a corpse in front of him. Looked like a dug-up body. An arm was ripped off, its socket a mauve gap with dry tendons hanging out like power cords. But the thing rose, and I realized it was only a ghoul, gnawing on a piece of its own arm.

Swamp Steve sang, "*Pop goes the weasel,*" and broke into a fit of giddy laughter.

I scrambled up the stairs on my hands and feet, splintering

my knee. I was halfway to the top when a cold, hard hand gripped my ankle and yanked me backward. I spun around, kicking, and my foot vanished through the ghoul's face.

Steve began singing again, louder. *"Half a pound of black energy! Half a pound of power!"*

I leapt upward two steps at a time, toward the light spilling out of the door.

"Pop go the people!"



"Jake, come inside, please!" Mom's waving me into the house because the officers are leaving now.

I walk past them with no acknowledgment. Mom says we should install security cameras on the front door, patio door, and first-floor windows.

The thing is . . . none of the doors or windows were unlocked when we got here. There were no fingerprints in the blood scrawl either. It's like someone imagined the letters into existence.

Ghosts do stuff nobody can explain, because nobody can see it happening. So everyone is treating this like a breaking and entering and nothing else.

But it *is* something else. And I'm the only one who'll be able to take care of it, because I'm the only one who knows that it's real.



I should be sleeping, but I can't get that sloppy blood and those letters out of my head.

I'm under the comforter with my laptop, switching between a mindless conversation with Grady and research on the Heritage shooting last November. Matteo became known as a survivor, so the news thought to connect his death back to the occasion.

The backlight sears my eyes as I read the chilling headlines.

**SCHOOL SHOOTER OPENS FIRE ON CLASSMATES
AND THEN TAKES HIS OWN LIFE**

**6 DEAD AND 12 WOUNDED IN DEVASTATING
HERITAGE SHOOTING**

AN UNTHINKABLE ACT

A SHOCKING SLAUGHTER

WHAT WAS THE MOTIVE?

Sawyer Doon's face is sprawled across every page—the same picture of him in this gray hoodie, deadpanning the camera. Average white kid, hooked nose. Would probably grow up to wear a pinstriped shirt and some khakis and sit in a cubicle. He's not nice to look at or bad-looking. He's kind of just . . . there.

Tap tap tap tap tap tap.

Where is that coming from?

I always hear sounds, especially when it's dark, from dead world, even when they're far away. Sound is not a physical property here. It's just everywhere, even when you don't know where it's coming from. It could be something completely harmless. A woodpecker that wood-pecked itself to death.

S.A.D. . . . the shooter from the news was named Sawyer Doon. He killed people at Matteo's school, and then himself, and now S.A.D. himself could have broken into my house and left his mark on my wall. It could be the long acronym for Sawyer's name Sawyer . . . something . . . Doon.

I close my laptop, set it on my nightstand, and fall into my pillow.

There are several theories for why death loops happen. Mine is that the people who end up trapped just didn't see it coming,

so their minds got stuck in a glitch. Some people did see it coming, though, because they did it to themselves. Maybe that means when those ghosts cross over, they have more autonomy.

I curl up in the fetal position and try to relax.

The room is dark in all places but two—a orange salt lamp night-light, and the red display on my nightstand clock, showing 2:00 A.M.

The tapping sounds like a ticking now, like a broken clock. *Tick tick tick tick tick.* Or someone with long fingernails tapping them to a desk.

Where is that coming from?

I get under the covers just to toss and turn, to be too cold and then too hot, to put the pillow over my head to mask the sound of the clock, or the timer, or whatever's responsible for that *tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.*

In the ticking I fall asleep, my mind rationalizing it as a piece of the background.

BOOM.

I jerk up in bed and move straight through the covers, my body like a feather floating slowly to the ceiling. My hands are framed in a crystalline blue light. My room is teeming with ecto-mist and peeling mint-green wallpaper. The walls are adorned with oval mirrors and the black-and-white photos of a family that lived here before—white people in high-waisted jackets and sequined dresses.

My light fixture has transformed into a brass ceiling fan, which spins right and then left, shaking ecto-mist like snow from its blades as it glitches in its loop of dysfunction.

I swing my legs over the side of my bed, and they sink beneath the creeping mist that traces the floor. The carpet beneath is both crimson red and white, the colors exchanging in tricks of light.

BOOM!

I gasp at the noise and feel the air of dead world enter my throat like crushed ice.

Someone is banging on a door downstairs.

The carpet sinks around my feet like quicksand pulling me through the floor. The ecto-mist gathers around my feet to form a bed of clouds, which lifts me and guides me forward. In the doorway I peek back at my bed and find myself in it, fast asleep. The fluffy blue comforter stands in stark modern contrast to the old wallpaper and the oval mirrors.

The mist pushes me away from my body. It does this when I travel, decides where I go for me.

There are tremors in the silence, in the combo of the here and forgotten. Unintelligible whispers hiss like snakes as I glide the second-floor hallway, and the distant, unfriendly soundscape closes in on the quiet.

Hssssssssssssssss.

The mist at the top of the stairs is so thick it obscures all depth, and I don't know where I'd fall if the floor completely disappeared. There's no downstairs floor—only pieces of stairs peeking up from the shadows. I descend the stairs one at a time, but my feet don't feel a thing but the cold mist around them, and then it rises, up under my arms, through my ears.

I reach my hand out for the banister, but instead of mahogany wood I find cold iron, diving toward the bottom of my house like the drop of a roller coaster.

The picture frames on the wall down the staircase seem to be floating of their own free will, exchanging themselves for older pictures. Lightning blinks over the house, and the photo-shoot set of me, mom, and Benji from five years ago fades into a photo of a little white girl in a plaid dress. She's standing in front of the

old home, from the 1800s. Her dad holds a hoe behind her, and her mom, a shovel.

In the foyer there's a candle chandelier that isn't my house's. The mist seethes.

The kitchen is full of things that don't belong to the house today—ugly green countertops. Moldy bread and rotten fruit. A spray of flies circles the food. Pots hang from a rack in the ceiling.

I'm losing even more of my weight, lifting higher and forward, like something is sucking me right into heaven. The window to the patio door appears like a two-way mirror on a velvet wall, everything around it dulled by the murky darkness, which choose when to be bright and when to go dark.

Lightning jumps through the plastic in the slats, along with weeping shadows from swaying trees.

Everything goes dark, and I'm floating in total blackness and watching the window, like a lonely viewer in movie theater at night.

There's a shadow out there. A person. A man, walking back and forth like he's nervous.

His shape is like mine—skinny, but he's hunched, like a gremlin.

He claws at the air, gathering mist in a vortex. A ring of ectomist forms between his hands as he moves them in a circle. This mist . . . it's not the electric-blue color I'm used to. It's red, like blood.

He walks back and forth. The wood groans underneath him as a garble escapes his mouth. *Grrblgrrblgblrrrrrrrglbrrrrrr*. It's like something's drowning in his throat.

His movements become more abstract and odd.

He walks in tight circles. *"We're bonded now, Matteo. Inside and out. One and then another. We look out for each other."*

Hissing—intense hissing, like colonies of warring serpents.
No, an army of cicadas. Chattering.

And then, a tragic weeping, like a grieving mother.

“Shut up.” The voice of the person—the poltergeist—thunders from everywhere, as if it’s responding to the whispers. “Shut UP. SHUT UP, I SAID!”

I can’t look away. He grabs a fistful of hair. Lightning blinks and shows his pale expression, no expression in his eyes. His hair is straight and ratty like a cornstalk. His skin is a color of calk. He’s staring at me.

“Shut up . . .” He hits his head against the glass—BOOM. And again, like he’s using it as a battering ram.

My family will be waking up. They will hear this in their world too.

Or will they? Sounds like that—loud thumps—tend to carry from dead world to the waking realm.

Any minute now someone will come and save me from this before the glass shatters . . .

Or . . . this thing is going to break in and murder me.

“Shut up . . .” His voice is like an old, rusty locomotive. “No!”

His face . . . it’s the same face of the shooter on the news.

I knew it. Matteo’s killer was not human.

This ghost of Sawyer Doon has skipped its death loop and decided, of its own free will, to come back and kill more people.

Now it’s at my house.

“LET GO OF ME!” Banging his head against the window, like he’s punishing himself. “NEVER.”

He pulls his head back by the hair, and light washes away the scene. A tug of wind snatches me through the darkness. I catapult upward through space, through the walls of my house, their boundaries immaterial now. Streaks of blue and pink spill

through my eyes as ecto-mist rushes like volcanic vapor over my body. And then I'm gasping myself awake, from the cold opaque astral state to the box of my bedroom.

There's a blinding white beam in my face. "Jake." When Benji cuts the flashlight off, the hallway light outlines his silhouette. "You're having a nightmare."

I . . . was I? I could've sworn I was astral projecting. But I'm also human, and have regular nightmares too.

I lift myself out of my own sweat and plant my feet on the floor, pushing my hands into the mattress. "Oh, boy."

"Oh, boy, indeed."

"What was I saying?"

"Um . . . *shut up, let go of me, no* . . . sounded like you were fighting a kidnapper."

The ghost on the patio . . . spoke through me in my sleep?

"Anyway," Benji says. "Don't be so scared. Mom says we're getting the cameras tomorrow."

"Cameras won't do anything about the real problem."

"Ugh. Don't start talking about netherworld demons, please."



He was done with it all when I was five and he was six. I interrupted his gaming to tell him there was a whole possum in our backyard.

"You're lying," he said.

"No, there really is!" I insisted. "I bet you ten dollars."

I led him to the patch of grass where I heard the creature yowling from under the ground. He dug a hole just to prove to me there was nothing down there. What I found was a possum, running in circles around the walls of its grave, and what he found

was a skeleton wrapped in a dirty white T-shirt, worms and bugs clinging to the bones.

“You owe me ten dollars.”

Benji reburied the corpse with his foot and didn’t talk to me for three months.



He trudges out of my room now and clicks off the hallway light before I can respond. I follow and approach the top of the stairs as his bedroom door clicks shut behind me.

A roll of thunder shakes the foundation of the house as I put my foot on stair one. My hand squeezes the polished wood, grateful to have something sturdy in it. From here I can see the entryway and the living room, but the patio door off the kitchen is hidden.

I move down the stairs and through the kitchen. The blinds are shut. There was someone out there when I was asleep, but it could have been a nightmare. Sometimes I can’t tell the ghosts of my mind from the real thing.

The house rumbles as I reach for the door to the patio. In the kitchen, a time flashes green on the oven display: 2:06 a.m. The power was out, and I didn’t even realize it. I’m not all there, I guess—not fully awake.

Through the blinds, the platform outside is empty. Nothing but the pots where Mom’s plants have died.

No people, and no ghosts.