

THE OTHER HOUSE ON THE HILL IN THE COUNTRY  
OR, THE LEGEND OF HOOK MAN FINGER

*You don't think in depression that you've put on a gray veil and are seeing the world through the haze of a bad mood. You think that the veil has been taken away, the veil of happiness, and that now you're seeing truly. You try to pin the truth down and take it apart. And you think that truth is a fixed thing. But the truth is alive, and it runs around. . . . The truth lies.*

—Maggie Robbins

He was lying on the couch in the house on the hill in the country on a morning in the middle of spring.

The couch came with the house. And he was alone on it. The doors and windows were shut. The light neutral. He was thinking about nothing, working through the country's preeminent crossword puzzle.

She was standing in the room of dead space limply holding a softcover book about starting gardens from seed.

Her lips parted. She was about to exhale. Caffeine moved in her blood. She was thinking about real estate.

The dog curled at her feet on a rug she imagined her father would've estimated was worth twenty-five thousand dollars. The cat skulked silently somewhere.

A week earlier, their landlord had dropped in to inform them they'd have to vacate the premises four months hence at the end of their lease.

Six evenings later, they'd decided to go grocery shopping the following day. They'd made it a rule to plan and check in with each other before committing to any activity. Theoretically, they encouraged each other to be honest and open when they wanted to flake. But they both almost always wanted to flake on every plan, so despite their forethought, they often felt trapped in this world of their making.

Responsibility was a burden. Plus they hadn't really made this world. Even eating, which had become their favorite shared pursuit, often seemed like too much work. Sometimes their life before the plague felt fake.

She stepped into the room and sat on the couch. He folded the puzzle he'd solved into quarters.

—Would you rather go sooner or later, he said.

—I don't mind.

She was still holding the book about gardening.

—I was thinking sooner.

—Just let me brush my teeth.

He needed to get dressed and brush his teeth too. He hadn't meant to imply they needed to leave that instant. All the same, when he looked at his phone he saw it was nearly afternoon.

Going into town might not have been an ordeal under different circumstances, or even to different people, but they'd made it into one. It was their way of instilling a sense of a home-life-centrism. Perfunctorily they groomed.

She brushed her teeth and poured a generous helping of milk in her mug. She killed the carton and dropped it in the overflowing recycling bin. The dog's nails clicked.

—Hoo-oo-ou-dini, she cooed.

His neon orange rope harness dangled over a chair. She unspooled it like a snake. When she turned back around, the cat was wrist deep in her mug, rapidly spooning to its sandpaper tongue and putrid teeth, lapping milky pawfuls of tea.

She groaned. And tossed the cat by its neck out the kitchen, grabbed the dog, who was trying to jump on it, by its collar, applied the neon orange rope harness, and dumped the mug's contaminated contents in the sink.

That morning, the cat had tramped through the house, parading a slack sack of rodent, bald tail twitching, and darted away before he could wrest the vermin from its jaw's zipper clench.

From the front of the house, parallel the kitchen, one of the only spots that consistently picked up LTE signal, she could hear him speaking to someone.

—Hi, he said. —Hi, can you hear me?

He put the phone on speaker.

—This is Andrew, he said. —Is this the library?

—Good afternoon, Andrew, the other voice said.

—Hi. I know I've got a bunch of overdue books. I'm coming by to return them. I was just wondering if you could leave the stuff I have on hold on the book drop.

—What time will you be here?

—Uh, like fifteen minutes?

—And are you aware Anna has a very long overdue DVD?

—Yeah, he said. —We still have it.

—I'll check your books out and leave them on the drop in a few minutes.

—Thanks.

—Thank you, Andrew, the librarian said.

He hung up and moved to the kitchen.

—Do you still want to watch A Final Woman, he asked.

—Yeah, she said.

She knew how long she'd had the DVD checked out. She couldn't request new materials. They'd put a block on her account. She wanted to watch the movie, but it wasn't easy to be in the mood for foreign cinema at the drop of a hat.

—Okay, he said. —But it's on you to make sure it gets returned now. I'm done being your advocate.

He piled library books and DVDs on the kitchen island. He balanced a thermos of coffee on top.

She stared at the sink.

—Are we going to the library?

He nodded.

The dog stood by the door in the mudroom looking back at her over its haunches. Harness and leash draped behind it. It moved its feet in place.

She approached. The dog cowered. She loosened the harness and suspended it on a peg by the car keys. The dog looked at the door.

—Come here, Dini, she said.

The dog's eyes became forlorn as she heaved it up and conveyed the small beast to the room with the couch, which was also the room with the television and the crate. She crated the dog, and as she returned to the kitchen, its whimpering increased in volume and urgency, and she felt defeated, near tears.

—You don't want Houdini to come, he said, not making eye contact with her.

—I don't want him to throw up.

—I don't think he'll throw up.

She hesitated, and he carried the pile of DVDs, books, and coffee in the crook of his arm and closed the door behind him with his foot.

He recognized his impatience and irritability. He didn't feel like he should have to explain himself to her. In a few minutes, it would most likely pass of its own volition. He'd put on piano music, and they'd drive into town, and the tension would melt.

He elbowed the sliding wood lever to open the side entrance of the garage and elbowed the button to release the electronic panel door. Library materials collapsed on the hood of the car. He grabbed the thermos before it rolled off and exploded, and he gathered the rest of the pile in the backseat.

He stood outside and beheld the house. It was more space than they needed, but she'd managed to get it at a deal. And she was trying to lock the front door. He watched her struggle. He knew the key he'd copied for her stuck. Only the key their landlord had given him personally turned without a hitch.

Still, he thought, as he lurched to the house, took the key from her jostling grasp and locked the door without saying anything or making eye contact.

He offered Anna her keys. Then he went a step further and dropped the car keys in her palm. They walked to the garage in silence. They both walked to the car's passenger door.

She swallowed.

—Am I driving?

He nodded and got in the passenger seat.

—To the library?

He pretended not to hear her.

She shuffled around the car, not wanting to keep him waiting, and launched the driver's seat forward, clicked her seatbelt in place, put on her glasses, and adjusted the rearview and side mirrors. She started the engine. He reached over and pulled, unlatching the parking brake.

She looked from him to the hand brake. She put her foot on the foot brake and shifted into reverse, backing out in a straight line past the driveway and onto the front lawn. He motioned turning the wheel, but she kept pulling back straight. He extended his hand to the wheel, and she issued the sound of a whine-cum-subdued-guttural-scream.

—Brake, he yelled.

She braked.

The car stopped.

He shifted to park and pulled the hand brake.

—Maybe, he said, closing his eyes and massaging his brow. —Let's avoid this today.

She said nothing. Her heart pounded.

—Or... Okay.

She shifted to drive.

—Stop, he said.

He disengaged the parking brake.

She was slow to turn right out of the driveway, and he held his tongue.

Soon, however, he was saying, —Center up.

She pulled the wheel to the left before driving into the dented guardrail at the side of the road, crossed the double yellow lines with the driver's side wheels, then got the car in the middle of the lane and turned right again up a steeper incline than the hill on which they lived.

—Center up, he said.

He considered putting on music, but remembered she didn't like to be distracted by sounds when she drove. He slid the lid of the thermos, drank, and resealed it. A car crept behind them. He looked in his side mirror. Another car was behind it.

—If you're not going to go over thirty, he said. —You have to pull over and let the other cars pass.

She gripped the wheel and put some weight on the accelerator. She noticed a dip on her right and a blind turn around the side of a mountain someone had blown up to install this road, after they'd installed borders, property lines, but before they'd ever considered such an idea as a municipal code. The paved area narrowed, and she tried to center the car, glancing at the rearview mirror. Vehicles loomed in the dust.

—Center up, he said.

She took her foot off the accelerator. If he didn't do something she was going to drive in a ditch alongside the creek that flowed down the hill into a river, all the way gently sloping to the ocean at the southernmost point of the abutting state.

—Pull over, he said.

They were being tailgated.

—I don't know where, she appealed.

—There would've been a good place.

He pointed as they passed a spare shoulder of ice and caked mud. The car directly behind them veered left and sped past. The other car behind that one must have already turned off somewhere.

In front of the library, instead of crossing illegally over the double yellow lines and parking backwards on the seldom-traveled country road, as he would've done, she attempted a K-turn in the intersection.

He resisted reaching over when she failed to turn the steering wheel at the optimal moment, so when she reversed, she did so into the same position from where she'd started. And then proceeded in undertaking the identical endeavor again.

—What are you doing?

—Parking, she said.

When she'd maneuvered the car to a circumspect space, he jumped out before she could show him she'd remembered the parking brake. She felt dizzy with disappointing him, as well as the cloying resentment that he was, walking away from her, resenting her for not driving better when she hadn't wanted to and he'd refused to make any meaningful effort at instruction.

He disappeared into the library. She imagined him saying something disparaging about her to the librarian, like, you know, women, despite the librarian being a woman, and his scorn for small talk with acquaintances in obligatory situations. She anticipated his fury.

As he exited the library, feeling jauntily pointless and annoyed by her now twenty-minutes-old whine-scream and acknowledging he could've been more patient, except for the fact that he'd already taken note of his impatience and felt owed the unreasonable, he knew, expectation that she could read his thoughts and actions, or at least give him the benefit of the

doubt, as self-aware, and as flippant, flighty, emotionally-charged, not to be taken seriously, and temporary, he saw her exiting the driver's side door, anticipating his fury, and get in the passenger seat.

He sat at the wheel, readjusting the mirrors. The engine idled. He seamlessly shifted into drive, performed a U-turn, and coasted down the hill toward the house. He considered putting on music. He felt relieved to be driving, but he also felt hopeless. The day had soured. It hadn't been ruined, he thought, but it would be, if he wasn't careful.

She hoped he wouldn't say anything. In ten minutes, they'd be past the house and on toward town, which was in the opposite direction of the library, and she'd squeeze his hand, and he'd sigh, and she'd tilt her head, raise her eyebrows, and shoot him her eyes. His anger would fizzle. And if his could, hers would too.

They could submit to each other. The strain could reverse. The chance for simple wordless reconciliation lingered.

—I need you to keep a level head, he said.

—I'm sorry.

—I'm not a driving instructor.

He whipped around the blind turn going fifty, then fifty-five miles per hour.

—I'm sorry, she said.

She could tell he wanted to lecture her, but he couldn't think of what he wanted to communicate.

—If you want me to teach you to drive, you have to be able to take my advice in good faith. You can't be mad if I try to tell you to turn the wheel.

—You didn't try to tell me, she said. —You put your hand on the wheel. I felt scared and confused.

—Okay.

He rolled his eyes and turned to look out the driver's side window as he drove past the house.

—You need to not be short with me, she said.

—Okay, he said.

—You just went off at me. I want to tell you how I feel.

—If you don't like the way that I teach, you can find a new driving instructor.

—Okay, she gasped, sulking.

—I don't want to run errands right now, he said, turning suddenly into a driveway, shifting into reverse, and gunning the engine, the car bucking back up the hill toward the house.

Instead of nosing right in like he had every other time he'd driven home, he navigated beyond the dirt driveway, and backed in with such deft, practiced finesse it could only be interpreted, by him and by her, as a taunt.

She'd started to sweat.

—Why do you feel you can lecture me, but when I criticize the way you act, you punish me?

He killed the engine, strode with swift concentration, unlocked the front door, and slipped into the house.

She sat astonished, overwhelmed, stunned, and mad. She waited in the car, knowing they'd come to an impasse. She waited for the next thing to happen.

Inside, he uncrated the dog. It trotted to the door to find her. He sat on the couch and looked at the folded up crossword. His thermos of coffee was still in the car.

As he made his way through the room of dead space and the kitchen, he passed her storming in from the porch.

As he returned from the vehicle thermos in hand, he passed her tugging along the dog's harness, and she departed in exasperation.

He stood in the kitchen, watching from the window. The dog and the woman he loved half-jogged past the car, posed at its descending angle facing the street, ready at a moment's notice for escape, down the driveway.

If they turned to the left, he might have something to worry about. If they turned to the right, which was their normal direction for walking, he'd go read.

She trudged by rote to the right, muttering through gritted teeth words of vitriolic simplicity. Throwaway phrases she didn't think about as she spoke them or register as they spewed from her quivering lips, following the twists of the road along the riverside.

He pattered to the room with the couch and looked at words on the page. He recognized most of them, but the sentences rolled by without meaning.

He wondered how much their animosity could sustain. Perhaps by the time she came back she'd be contrite and soft. If she was, he could find it in himself to concede. He'd apologize first. They'd salvage the day.

He felt confident, almost calm. He had made the right choice postponing their errands. If he hadn't, right then they'd be screaming inside tight corners of metal and glass, speeding down the state highway, burning gas, fanning flames of regret.

After a few more minutes, he'd managed to center his attention. He left the present and was transported to literate reverie.

She was rapping her forehead with the the ball of her hand. The muttering had ceased, but her mind kept on racing. He had sabotaged them. Mocked and humiliated her. She hadn't wanted to drive. She just needed more milk. And he'd forsaken the dog. It needed dog food. He was doing this all just to show her he could.

He had power she lacked. And when he was upset, he couldn't resist wielding it. He had to put her in her place. Let her know no matter what he was in charge, older, smarter, better with money, more collected, and she was exclusively inferior.

The dog stopped to smell something. She jerked its harness. Feces belched from its anus, which had in her negligence lost control and was clenching, unclenching, the canine's brown eyes drawn up in a pitiful squint.

She kneeled on the pavement, petting its face.

—I'm so sorry, she cried. —Oh, Houdini, I love you. I'm so sorry, my puppy. My sweet little guy. I'm so sorry...

It was his fault, she thought. And picked up a half-smoked cigarette butt by the railroad tracks and lit up out of spite.

When she returned to the house, she slammed all the doors in her path, stomping her boots, and sauntering through the room, where his countenance hid behind the buttresses of an open library book, lost in his selfish interior cruelty.

She stomped back and forth, in the kitchen, the dead space, the mudroom, seizing jumbles of laundry from the drier and hauling trails of them across the hardwood floors, past the room with the couch and television and crate, into the room where they slept, and heaved it all on the bed that belonged to their landlord.

She folded towels, sheets, t-shirts, socks, underwear, and everything else. The only thing she could do was reflect on how he'd chosen the room with the couch, among so many others,

because that way he'd passive-aggressively kept her from watching television, which was all she could think of to do to calm herself down.

That way, two hours passed.

He finished his chapter and placed the book down. He felt better. He considered suggesting she drive to the general store, closer than the town proper. He'd be patient and penitent and promise to be a better instructor. When she proved to herself she could drive anxiety-free, they'd be buoyed. They'd get groceries and smoke cannabis.

He went over what he wanted to say in his head. He got ready to say, would you like to try driving... Or, can I make up for this morning... Or...

He crept toward the kitchen. He knew when he saw her, the right words would flow. They'd skate off of his tongue candidly.

But laying eyes on her face, vibrating with tautness perched over the kitchen island, her palms flat upon it like she was concentrating hard on not burning down the place, it possessed such indignant disgust, he was stunned and flung far from whatever amends he'd prepared.

He wondered if she were thinking the same thing.

She was thinking, why doesn't he speak? She could feel the contours corrupting her mixture of rancor, affection, and obstinacy.

He paused. He couldn't possibly say what he'd planned.

Instead, he said, —I'll just go get dog food and milk.

She scoffed.

He touched the back of his neck.

—Unless you want to go grocery shopping still.

—I've been wanting to go grocery shopping all day.

She stood up and glared.

He looked away.

—Well, you don't seem to want to go with me.

—I don't, she said.

—Well, I'll go get the dog food and milk, then.

He began to move past her and out to the porch. He couldn't bear to continue this cascading rapport.

—You don't get to take away my grocery shopping privileges, she said.

His hand rested on the doorknob.

—I don't want to spend time with you like this.

—I don't want to spend time with you either.

—I'm going to go, he said.

—No you aren't.

She stalked off to get changed.

—Do you want me to wait for you, he called after her.

—Can't you see I'm getting ready?

She charged into the kitchen.

—Can't I just go alone?

—No, she seethed.

—I don't want to spend time with you right now.

He dropped the keys on the kitchen island.

—You don't get to decide how I spend my day.

—I'm not.

—Stop yelling at me, she keened.

—I'm not yelling, he monotoned.

—You don't get to decide.

She began to hyperventilate.

—Actually, I do, he said.

What happened next was unlike anything that had happened before, and he was surprised by the pleasure he detected coursing through his consciousness. Some weeks were so devoid, any aberrance, even terrible, at least proved their lives remained mutable. And she too felt sick delight as she snatched up the keys.

—I'm taking the car.

She grinned through tears.

—No you're not, he said.

—Watch me.

—You're not going to do that.

She raced through the mudroom and swung open the door with such force its knob bore a hole in the wall. He heard the fracture of plaster, and she yanked it along, slamming behind her.

Through a window, he saw the cat on the lawn. Faint traces of mud, dirty patches of snow, and new grass in places where the sun baked through thin, hazy clouds. He wondered where the dog was.

—Fuck you, she had shouted.

—Fuck you, he returned.

He hung back in the kitchen, watching from the window. She was moving without thinking, impelled by the ridiculousness of her life. She thrust the key in the ignition and engaged the engine.

Exhaust surged from the tailpipe. Her breath billowed and carped. She scowled at the windshield, gripped the wheel. Grains of rubber gave way to her flexed palms. From the driver's side window she could sense his approach.

But the man she gave everything, every last drop of love, understanding, time, and her precious, scant self, halted off at a distance. He didn't close in and holler, threaten, admonish, or bang on the glass or the hood. He didn't stand in her way. He folded his arms. He shook his head back and forth.

—No, he said.

She made a face full of vulnerable loathing.

—You've crossed the line. If you take the car, I'm leaving when you bring it back.

He paused.

Then, knowing he shouldn't say anything more, aware of their predilection to feed off each other's vehemence, and take things too far, he added, —Actually, I'm leaving either way.

She knew she had taken it to an unprecedented place. She felt irredeemable. She'd fucked up. She figured she may as well go through with the rupture to its extremest degree.

But she didn't. She turned the key to the left, killed the engine.

He threw up his hands, made a face, and she threw hers up too, mimicking his grimacing gesture and smirk. He turned his back and marched inside to the room where they slept.

He looked at nothing. He stood in place. There were windows, lamps, shelves, impossible roots of confoundment.

She appeared in the doorway as a silhouette. He looked away.

—I don't want to spend time with you, he said.



—Stop trying to control me.

—It's like you don't know we moved to the country without you having a car or a driver's license.

She growled.

They both seemed bewildered by it.

—Let me just buy the dog food and milk.

—You don't know what kind.

—Merkel Brand Limited Ingredient Grain-Free.

—It's not grain-free, she laughed.

—Okay, Limited Ingredient Not Grain-Free.

—I don't trust you.

—Great, he said. —I don't know what to do with that.

She took off her glasses and threw them at him.

—There's nothing I can do when you're in the midst of this rage.

—Then leave, she wept.

She hurled open the door from the room where they slept to a little rotting back porch that almost never got direct sunlight, and which they therefore avoided.

—Leave, she snarled. —Leave me.

—I don't want to, he said.

—Break up with me, she taunted.

—I can't believe you would say that. I know you don't want it. You know I'm committed to you. When I've been working for months to...

He almost said get an engagement ring, but he didn't want to ruin the surprise. Plus he honestly hadn't given finding a ring that much thought. He certainly hadn't been working on securing one for any measurable time.

—You act like I would break up with you, but you know I would never. You're just playing the victim. Just stop.

And in the rising temper and tempo of his attack, he lost vestigial sense of boundaries or tact.

He came up beside her and pitched the door in.

She slapped the wall beside her.

He slapped the wall beside him.

—Is this what you want, his voice rose in frenzy.

—You're an asshole, she rattled.

—You want me to scream and lose my mind, you're so fucking ungrateful.

—You really are an asshole.

—Why don't you throw more shit at me?

—Maybe I will.

—I ask for so little, I cook and clean and be quiet and put up with your miserable depression, lying for days on the couch, scrolling through real estate listings, watching daytime TV, filling out game show audition applications. You think we can buy a house together? You don't even have credit.

—Fuck you.

She ran out of the room.

—I'm leaving, he spat.

—No you're not.

And for a moment, he considered staying and trying.

Staying and trying. That's all life really was. Staying with someone even when things aren't fun. Trying with someone. Holding your tongue. Lying, if necessary, when you must.

He heard her moving around. Pushing and bellowing and pounding. He thought of the face she'd made in the kitchen. The one that had caused him to forgo the crucial apology, extend an olive branch, talk things out. He'd still have to do all those things. He'd only prolonged his impatience and irritability. He'd only deferred the exchanges of pity they'd be forced to exchange. He'd delayed their rapprochement and wracked hope and peace from the day.

So he slunk out by way of the rotting back porch, found the keys still in the ignition, turned them to the right, and rolled down the driveway, turning left, and still rolling, waiting for her to appear in the yard, chase the car, up the ante, and treble the score.

Yet she didn't. And when he realized she was done with him, he realized just how slow he was moving, and stepped on the accelerator.

She peered through the window of their office upstairs. The one with his untouched pottery wheel and bricks of arid clay. Where she'd laid down a tarp, set up two fluorescent lamps she'd found buried in the basement, and planted fifteen trays of seeds, before their landlord had dropped in to inform them they'd have to move out at the end of their one-year lease.

It had been more than a year since the plague had cast down on them, and though they'd been vaccinated for weeks, they still preferred to log in to the Department of Labor mobile app and claim weekly benefits.

They didn't want to work. They had their reasons. Besides, they'd made more on unemployment than they ever had from full-time wages.

He had a lot of audacity to claim she was lazy. All he'd done since the first snowfall, when they'd gotten word of his friend from college being slain by police for some terroristic conspiracy he never would've pulled off, was crossword puzzles and check out library books he had no intention of finishing reading.

He'd submitted a handful of half-baked grad school applications, but he'd been rejected by all but two, and because of his confused pride, he believed anywhere that had accepted him must have something wrong with them to think him worthy of funding, and had declined their offers, and for months they'd doubled down in isolated directionlessness and doubt.

Meanwhile, her seedlings wilted and swelled. He was gone. She'd teach him a lesson, she thought. She'd jump from the rooftop. In a couple of hours, he'd find her mangled and bled out, or brain dead, whatever, too late. Every time he'd look to the dog, he'd remember her, how he had failed, and what might've been.

But she couldn't risk jumping. She'd brushed up on suicide during the collective bargaining sessions to unionize her last workplace, where she'd been let go shortly after their contract was voted in. She knew anything less than ten stories had a fail rate she couldn't afford to hazard.

Maybe she'd hang herself from the limb of a pine tree. That would make a nice scene for his return. Or maybe she'd overdose on his hidden stash of ketamine. He'd find her foaming and vacant. He'd rue the day he treated her like a kept woman, no, worse, like a child, like some responsibility he hadn't intended to take on but had accidentally, and humored her by shouldering.

It was just like a man to act like he didn't object to the life he'd inherited by merging it with someone, anyone else, though especially, she thought, a woman. A wounded, battered, mentally unstable bitch. She could imagine him hissing it through ground teeth in the car he was

so careful about when she drove, but which when he was behind the wheel he treated like a curt weapon.

Sometimes, the way he drove, she thought he was trying to kill them both in what could be misinterpreted as an accident. Jerk the wheel and sail into gray air, then the river, rocks, and wet earth.

She could tell he wanted out. But she could beat him to the punch. She wouldn't give him pleasure of dying without knowing he'd led to hers first.

She rifled through his desk in the office. The neat stacks of papers. The saved bills and notices and receipts. She knew even if she found it, she couldn't overdose on ketamine. Hadn't he once told her that's why he'd quit? You went deeper and deeper without any lapse or reconfiguration of faith.

She was moving away from her death drive into a more familiar state. One of degradation, melancholy, ululation, and waiting.

She went to her own desk, popped the bottle, and swallowed two Klonopins. He'd only mentioned milk and dog food, she thought. Tomorrow they'd have to go out again. They needed toilet paper, hand soap, seed-starting solution, and cannabis.

He drove to the farmer's co-op with a steadiness that dazed him. He had no desire to floor it, wrench the wheel, or overtake the cars ahead. He wasn't even listening to music. He was bemoaning them. He probed his soul for equal parts mercy and bitterness.

They'd miscommunicated, he thought. But he couldn't sense when. He drove along the river, thick with bare, stretching verdure, boughs slung skyward with foolish trust that this world would keep up its end of the deal.

The planet was powerless, he thought. The farmlands were barren. The soil was spent. The earth was a maze of more human compulsions. Evermore it meant nothing to him.

He was glad he had done what he had. He was glad he was gone. Perhaps he would keep driving. Or he could go get all the stuff they were out of, deliver it back to her, to prove just how accountable, reliable, and bound to her as he truly was. Then, when she couldn't deny that, he'd raise the stakes one more time, and split.

The whole half-hour drive into town was downhill. After he'd cruised out of eyeshot, he'd barely placed pressure upon the gas pedal. He'd passed sickly otters, deserted motels and overgrown campgrounds, rusted trucks without wheels, racist iconography of bygone indigenous peoples, beetle-eaten conifers, and unproductive sugar shacks. The drone of his internal monologue was an incomprehensible whirl of hollow violence.

He pulled into the farmer's co-op and put on his mask. He bought seed starter, dog food, cat food, and Peanut M&M's. He felt vapor on his upper lip. The tiny weather patterns and pressures amid the synthetic fibers. He sanitized his hands.

He drove to the cannabis dispensary and waited outside. In town it was warmer than on the hill in the country, but the sun moved behind buildings and clouds.

—What's going on, he asked the guy who normally checked their IDs and waved them promptly inside.

The guy was wearing a neck gator adorned with a flame motif.

—The medical ID scanner's broken, he replied. —Gonna be a hot second.

—I'm kind of in a hurry...

The file behind him swirled and broke, and he was allowed to go through, too shiftless to have applied for a medical license, which, had he put an iota of effort into, would've saved them hundreds of dollars in taxes paid on the flower, and suggested so much otherwise.

He was greeted by two more gatekeepers who checked his driver's license. The last time he'd been at this dispensary, they'd ripped him off. He'd ordered 3D, which boasted a total active cannabinoid percentage of twenty-seven, but when he'd returned home and opened the opaque plastic bag, he'd found an eighth of MTF, registering only nineteen percent, which, at the same price, represented a significant, to be exact, thirty percent, difference with regard to bang for his buck, or so he'd figured, though he didn't know how to account for that.

They'd probably lied and pocketed the better stuff for themselves. Everyone was pitted against everyone else. He flipped through the menu, studying the available products.

—Can I get an eighth of 3D, he asked.

—We only have quarters, the employee said into an sphinxlike mask.

He ordered a different kind of cannabis called Mother of Grapes and demanded to see the jar before it went in the bag. But the jar went in the bag, and he had to repeat himself and read through a panel of scratched plexiglass.

—Thank you, he managed. —Last time I ordered 3D and you gave me MTF.

The employee said nothing.

—Can I get a refund?

The employee put the jar in the bag.

—I'm not lying, he said.

And once outside he tore it open and read the label three times in the dim parking lot before he was satisfied it said *Mother of Grapes*.

—You cool, the guy in the flame gator asked.

He shrugged.

—I thought you were in a hurry.

—I lied.

—Where's Anna?

—At the house.

He drove to the food co-op and bought a gallon of milk, a twelve-pack of toilet paper, two bottles of hand soap, a vessel of peanut butter, a packet of bacon, and six grain-free protein bars, still thinking he might go drive up to the northernmost abutting state, turn off his phone, and camp for a few days. It would feel good to be cold and alone in the woods.

He plugged in his phone and played piano music on low volume.

When the Klonopin hit, she stretched out on the couch. The dog emerged from under the bed and crumpled in an adjacent spiral.

She turned on the television and flipped through reruns of Family Feud, The Weakest Link, The Trickster, The Chase, Supermarket Sweep, The Price Is Right, Step Ladder, and The Quest. Washed over by Dateline on GAPE, 30/30, and You'll Weekly Investigates.

His whole trip lasted two hours, and merely four and a half had elapsed since she'd driven to the library. Still, the day felt so over. She wished the sky would go black and she could sleep until her cells abdicated to a fresh replenishment of body who'd forgotten the urgency, the fight or flight, or any notion of behavioral designs, and would float back to cuddling with, adoring, and depending on him, among a sense of inherent balance, a conscience that lacked spite.

She heard the garage door churn from a cognitive membrane behind the benzodiazepine. She heard the front door creak. The dog trotted to look. He patted its head.

—Hi, Houdini, he said through a mouthful of grain-free protein bar.

He lined the groceries and provisions on the kitchen island. He treaded upstairs to their office and finished chewing, searching the nearest coordinates on freecampsites.net.

After a while, he went downstairs and sat next to the dog on the couch.

First he blamed her. Then he took it back, blamed himself.

When she started to talk, he interrupted.

—Just let me talk, she pled. —I let you.

After ten or fifteen minutes of silence, he departed, went upstairs to their office, unfolded a cot their landlord had stored in a closet, and tried to sleep.

The sun set.

When he came back down, she was staring at the icon of LG, which stood for Life's Good, gradually drift from one corner of the television screen to the next, an unsophisticated and mostly unwitnessed result of some forgotten and underpaid graphic design MFA candidate.

—I'm confused, she said.

—What?

—It doesn't feel like we finished talking.

He shook his head.

He went to the kitchen, found the jar of cannabis. He brought it back to the room with the couch and held it cupped in his hands while she spoke.

After many hours, they hugged.

—I don't know what we could've done to avoid this, he said.

—We've been miscommunicating.

—I just wanted to avoid another fight.

—The only thing you could've done is said I love you at the right moment.

They smoked the cannabis and took more Klonopin. The dog rested its head on his thigh. The cat sidled through, knocking over the pipe with its paw. He closed his eyes.

She looked at her phone. A notification appeared for a new real estate listing nearby. She showed him the screen, and he nodded. She nodded. The dog stood up and turned in tight circles and succumbed to an almost identical coil. It yawned. And he put his hand in its mouth, but it didn't bite down. The cat watched from a perch no one saw in the corner, and all four of them in the house sighed as one.

\*

The house hadn't been their first choice.

When they had concluded they wanted to move away from the city, which represented the epicenter of infection at the height of the plague, the young couple had set their hearts on another, more modest abode. Wedged farther south, the detached rustic structure had been part of a semi-operative farm owned by an ancient, theatrical warlock and his no less sinister consort.

But they'd lost out on it for reasons they couldn't understand, and wouldn't have believed if they did. They were lucky, in fact.

The other house on the hill in the country was a quaint colonial cottage. It sat higher along on a taller hill in a more rugged tract of the very same valley. Classically beautiful, painted white with doric columns, it was more space than they needed, but that was better than less. The back yard came affixed with a fence. And just across the front ran a wide, winding river, spotted with rapids and beavers dams, where toothless men in cracked waders, regal ducks, and bears alike fished, parallel an active freight train track.

Their landlord had closed on the place only two months before he'd decided to let it out. He was addicted to pornography, and indebted to a number of online sex workers. He'd come into a fortune and was so taken with its charm he'd bought the house without bothering to find out the county wasn't wired for high speed internet.

In exchange for the deal on rent, the young couple was responsible for overseeing the man's pledge to somehow increase the property's value among the ramshackle, nonviable agricultural steads of the scorched valley town.

The pet projects were oversteps. They included receiving pipes for a new gas line, acting as building code liaisons for an inground swimming pool that wouldn't be dug until they were gone, or what about when the crew showed up two days before Christmas to install solar panels on the garage?

All winter, through the rime of prior nights' snow and sleet, masked handymen spaced six feet apart drilled holes in exterior walls, inspected the basement and attic, traded shifts in the port-a-potty perched at the end of the driveway, delivered on a flatbed truck while the couple had been asleep.

And come spring, some new start-up with a government contract had announced plans to bring the domain technologically up-to-date. They figured it would be immediately, predictably delayed, but that hadn't stopped their landlord from showing up at the doorstep to make known his intentions of moving back in.

The man wore long underwear and oversized, stained Pink Floyd t-shirts both times they'd met him. It was a wonder he'd managed to find more than one too large for his frame.

He offered to knock off a month's rent for the inconvenience, just as long as they set up the new tractor he'd ordered and tended the lawn that summer leading up to their order to leave.

By the time he apprised them of the state of their rental agreement, they'd lived in the house three times longer than him. They felt some ownership over it, between bouts of disdain.

Because, despite the man's schemes, the house was far from flawless. At first they'd thought there might be something seriously wrong with it.

For one thing, it seemed reasonable to harbor doubt when anyone abandons a place they've just purchased and rents it out at so undervalued a rate. They conjectured as to whether it was haunted or cursed, downright corrupt to its foundation. After eight months, they'd concluded it was simply an antique, which, latent evils aside, posed formidable challenges of its own.

For another, the place was infested. Mice, voles, shrews, and chipmunks never shied from its walls and crawlspaces. And along with small rodents came their parasites, lively vectors of disease increasingly damning in the region, most specifically a scourge of deer ticks.

The young couple had grown used to the full-body inspection and removal of arachnids. Not to mention the dank odors of death and decay, among the hidden, moldering carcasses deposited by the cat every day.

The stairs needed repairing. They creaked and sank. The runner was loose, and both she and he had sustained full-on summersault falls down them.

The first month they'd moved in, she'd nearly broken her neck, and spent two weeks on the couch in convalescence. Similarly, he'd caught his heel on a loose, dirty nail, pushed up by the carpet, which didn't fit the old steps. Another time he'd slipped and descended one by one, sacrum and spine bouncing, cloaked in contusions.

The back yard found itself in constant conflict with nature. Huge, hollowed-out trees, technically their neighbor's, gave way and fell on the fence.

And forget about neighborliness. The surrounding residents were ornery as their ages, beset by the depletion of land and fitness, and the encroaching runoff from the nuclear plant farther uphill. Everyone in the town, they'd taken note, walked with a limp.

Wind tore through the valley. It whipped in mercurial, gyrating patterns, tempting infrastructure and scattering debris.

The fireplace had been stoppered. The chimney sealed by some previous owner. The heating oil bills were outrageous.

In the fall leaves clogged air vents. In the winter it was so dry their skin fissured and bled. In the spring all was damp.

And thousands of ladybugs had made municipalities of the window frames, breeding and teeming amid each one facing south, which accordingly corresponded to half of the windows in the house.

Maintaining the house was such work of course they'd stayed unemployed. If a day or two passed in which they failed to pay due domestic attention, the whole thing went to shit.

Homemaking was labor. And though they'd been born in the fallout of the century that had toiled to deny this, they understood how much effort went in to keeping a house. They sensed their landlord was not up to the task.

The man had to slump in a busted porch armchair because the walk from the driveway had put him so out of breath. The young couple couldn't imagine he'd survive long enough to even see the place flip. In a matter of months, he'd contract Lyme disease. The obese, stale pervert couldn't possibly contort his body to detect its telltale rash. If not that, he'd tumble downstairs and snap his back. Or otherwise go into cardiac arrest attempting to move a branch.

They begrudged their landlord for the lease. And they begrudged him kicking them out. But they stood by their conclusion to move to the country. They were afraid to admit they could've made an error in judgment.

What was more, they hadn't explored the alternatives. They'd undertaken obligations to each other and their hastily acquired pets. The world was not only uncertain. It was suspect, uninviting, progressively shameless. The dog, at least, liked the place. He was never sure of the cat.

Mostly he stayed in their office, hunched over his puzzles and lagging laptop, trying to ping the one-and-a-half bars of LTE from his phone into a serviceable hotspot.

He could be moved to do chores, but he rarely initiated activity. When she passed her virtual learner's permit exam, he'd laughed and driven her to the DMV. He'd waited in the car while she had her picture taken. He figured if she wanted something, like to practice driving, go grocery shopping, amass garden supplies, or whatever, she was capable of asking.

Time had altered in exigency, but it kept on passing. She hugged her knees to her chest and smoked cannabis on the couch, watching satellite television. Their landlord hadn't forced them to foot that bill, so the least she could do was put it to use.

It only picked up fifty channels. Primarily these aired true crime nonsense. And thus she'd become versed in the gamut of theft, arson, kidnapping, sex trafficking, traffic accidents, and accidents in the home, which led to the impulsive interment of crippled children in shallow backyard graves, quarries, creeks, as well as serial killing, temporary-to-permanent psychosis, alien abductions, fugue states, orphan tagging, and possession by every kind of demonic being.

People made money. People became butts of jokes and were decapitated. Bodies were disposed of and uncovered. Prosecutors forced false confessions out of intellectually disabled

folx. People lied. People were sorry and lied to and served sentences and families commented on how prisons were justice, and a few even admitted it didn't feel as good as they'd hoped.

She was learning how easy it was to get caught. Why anyone risked murder, vice, being shipped off to prison or mental hospitals when what they so clearly wanted were uncomplicated ways out of their already bleak lives. She wondered. Why didn't more people kill themselves?

She submitted game show audition applications. She answered follow-up emails and texts from production coordinators, scrolled her phone for her best extant selfies, reviewed questionnaires.

When the sun set, he joined her, and they watched Jeopardy!, and then he left. What she really wanted was a cigarette.

The young couple had been smokers. But the new president has passed an executive order banning their favorite brand because the holding company had kicked his son off the board of directors due to a conflict of interest.

He had taken it as an opportunity to quit. And though she told him she had too, in solidarity, that cannabis alone was enough to feed her oral fixation, the truth was she still craved them. She took any opportunity to sneak a drag, sinking so low as to smoke the butts forsaken by bikers who, engines raging, opted to litter the riverside.

Sometimes thoughts infringed that they'd made a mistake. Sometimes they thought they were wrong. Still they didn't admit it. Theirs was an unspoken fate. They tried not to think of what each other might be. Mostly, they tried to think nothing at all.

Unwittingly their begrudging turned on themselves. For having to live. For having to share in the pall.

It was a mystery. Who would take action? What would they do? When would it matter? Why would they want to?

And where did the urgency of these questions derive if it had no effect? How could they manage to stay unconcerned? If it really was life or death, which would they elect?

They inched to the room where they slept. Inhumed themselves in unwieldy blankets. They let the mystery chime like the rusting weathervane in the shape of a turkey atop the house's rooftop when the wind whistled through it.

\*

The next day, however, their questions were made immaterial by the sight of an eagle in a tree.

The morning was yellow and pink. Sunny and damp. Sleepy and alert. The air carried an abstract, wavering temperature.

The young couple walked on a path of dead leaves in the woods along the river holding hands. They were puffy and weak from their sustained bickering. Already they couldn't remember how or why it had happened.

The dog followed off-leash. It loped over moss and lichen-stained stumps. It sniffed ferns, investigated fungi, saplings, cold-weather shrubs. It disappeared into thickets and bounded out yards before them.

They approached a dense accumulation of timber and slick, swarming vines. These bent and opened like an arch, which they ducked and passed under in sight of the riverbank.

There, the crunch of their boots must have disturbed it. She was about to say something innocuous, yet she stopped, sensing an imminent, irreversible shift.

For an instant, all was still. Everything was one patina of endless, flattened perspective.



Then the raptor's head cocked. Its emblematic white head materialized against brown, gold, and black feathers. Its saber-curved amber beak parted. Its great wingspan spread. And then spread further, casting a shadow overhead.

The bald eagle took from its roost in a bare, gothic tree, branches splintering like letters spelling out an illegible Norwegian black metal band name. The blast of its flapping broke through locomotive. Then its wings broke the air.

Sun reflected a pulse of iridescence just when their eyes met. An instant. He blinked, and the bird of prey surged beyond. With each flutter, it pushed dozens of yards between them.

She was stunned. Every pent-up and lingering thought flung from her grasp. She squeezed his hand.

He was agog. The flying creature swooped. Its talons cut through the water, then rose up into the mountains imitating liberation.

The dog's face was gray. Its irises and pupils and wet nose the shade of ink. It reminded her of a trypophobia trigger. She kneeled on the soused earth. Mist arising around them. She fumbled for her phone.

That's when she realized the moment had elapsed. It was too late to record. The magic flickered. It endured in his squint. Tears welled, and the man she loved winced.

He didn't say I love you, though, at the right moment, or then, when it might have been. She'd never be sure. His hand in hers listless. She unclasped. The blood had drained from his lips.

He licked them.

She kissed him.

—Houdini, he said.

The dog craned its neck, which was part of its chest.

—Did you see that?

\*

For a while, everything seemed okay. The days grew longer. The sun shone through the windows at different angles. They went to sleep early and slept in past ten a.m.

They talked about the eagle. He suspected it was an omen, ringing in a new era. The impartiality of its features, though, kept him from waxing too philosophic. He wasn't sure if this era was one of good feeling or something different.

She said it had impelled her to want to get out more often. She felt close to sublimity. She spoke of the power in its flight. He spoke of its eyes.

Nevertheless, her habits were harder to break than anticipated. She could walk to the river and peer out between freight cars, wait for the swift perk of a white head basked in gold, a ruffle of feathers, the thrash of pinions. In truth, though, her glasses prescription was wrong. Even with them, she'd almost failed the DMV eye exam.

Her habits revolved around getting back to the couch. She might throw a ball for the dog, practice reversing in a straight line down the driveway, hammer sticks in the yard, watch the sun throw its light, staking out a garden plot, but the comfort of one leg sprawled on the coffee table and the other over an armrest of upholstery, the cool drone of trite transgressive reportage, the pharmaceutical jargon of cancer treatments and drug advertisements, the tumbling side effects, and the spark of afternoon cannabis, were more than she could overcome.

He, on the other hand, became restless. He'd bug her to trudge out into the wilderness for hours, get lost petting tree trunk slime, licking grass. And when he could tell she was bored, he'd slink off on his own without mentioning where or when or how long he'd be gone.

In the weeks after the eagle, she noticed his sleep schedule veer. He'd get up around two and do that morning's crossword, sneak into the dark morning hours, and slide back in bed before dawn.

She thought he thought he had tricked her. But he slept later each day. She brought coffee to his nightstand, and he'd pretend to sip some and yawn, and restore the blankets over his head until late afternoon, whereupon his itchy wanderings resumed.

He wasn't trying to mislead her. He couldn't explain. Something had happened with the eagle. Since then, he'd heard thoughts. Not quite voices, but like inspiring perspectives telling him to do anything. Solely soft conversations carried out in his subconscious. When he laid down to rest, their scant volume increased. He thought if he pursued them, they might reveal meanings. But they wafted cajolingly, teased, and brought no relief.

—I got a call back, she said, when he arose late, after three.

He lapped at cold coffee.

Eyes glazed over a window. His heart jumped. The cat was high in a tree. He handed her the mug and bolted out shoeless, in boxers and a t-shirt.

He twitched, calling its name, shooting glances in multiple directions before the blurs could cohere.

There was no cat in the tree. He went inside. It was on the couch, and so was she. The thoughts deliquescing a little. He felt outside of language.

—Did you hear me?

—What, he said.

He couldn't tell if it was him or one of the thoughts that echoed. He couldn't be sure how much he'd slept.

—What, he repeated.

—I got a call back.

—A call...

He tried to parse what it meant.

—A production coordinator from The Quest.

—Which one is that?

—The one where you and four teammates face off against one of the top Step Ladder champions.

—Right, he said.

—They're going to set up an interview over Zoom this weekend. I'm really excited. Last season one of the teams got to split a jackpot of four hundred thousand.

—Four hundred thousand what?

—Dollars, she laughed. —We could buy the house from our landlord. Or, like, put a down payment on that eighteen-acre orchard I found.

She held her phone out. A beat happened before he remembered he was supposed to use his finger to scroll through the pictures in front of him.

—I'm sorry, he said. —I'm a little distracted. I haven't been sleeping well.

—I've noticed... Do you think, like... Is everything okay? Do you want to maybe try one of my pills tonight?

—No thanks. No. Thank you, though. I think I need more exercise. I think I'll go for a walk.

—Do you want me to come along?

—That's all right, he said. —You seem really comfortable. I know I've been annoying. I feel like I'd just annoy you running around.

—Have you found anything interesting?

—Something like that...

He wondered if he could tell her about the thoughts. The eagle's eyes. The guilty greed of solitude. The impenetrable perception of providence. The edging trembling catharsis that hovered on the horizon and refused to drop.

—Andrew...

—Huh?

—Is something wrong? You can tell me.

—No, no. It's just...

Her heart seized.

—I feel like we've been miscommunicating, he said.

\*

The night before her Zoom interview, he slipped out as usual, and didn't come back to bed.

Nor did he return that morning or afternoon. She bantered haltingly with two people in separate apartments working from home on the opposite coast. She felt confident about the questions they posed, but she craved nicotine. They said they'd call back that evening, or at latest the following morning, if she'd made it through to the next round.

They didn't call back that night, though, and he didn't make an appearance. His phone was still charging in the room where they slept.

The car was in the garage. A new coffee mug appeared in the sink, she thought, but then again, he'd been the one responsible for the dishes, when they'd worried more about the house's upkeep.

Neglect was starting to show. He'd said why put in the effort if they were just going to get kicked out. Perhaps the mug had been there the previous day.

She knew the one that cropped up bobbing in a puddle of burned grounds and soap scum the third morning had not been the night before. It twinkled in slanting sunbeams. The cat jumped out of the basin and hissed.

If he was around, why didn't he bother to check in?

She couldn't imagine what was keeping him occupied. They were the only people in walking distance over thirteen and under fifty years old. It wasn't as though the area offered much in the way of activities. He had two missed calls from the library. And he'd long ago mapped out every path from the forests to town.

She'd watched enough detective specials to feel certain he wasn't sleeping around. Not that they made love all that much themselves. Few couples did, given the plague. Human consummation was a pattern of departure and rejoinder, less clearly delineated after a year's worth of shelter in place.

So what drew him away?

She walked to the road with the dog and scoured the shoulder for cigarettes. The cat mewled at their side. They walked home.

On the fourth morning, she awoke to find him crouched by her side, inhaling her hair. He nuzzled her neck with his face and was burnished in a fine layer of filth. She opened her mouth.

—Look, he interrupted.

At first she didn't know where. Then her eyes fell on her once-naked hand. It was transformed with fresh weight. A simple gold band snugly fit her finger with a gleaming stone hemmed by four prongs. A diamond, she knew. Still, it took her a second to discern its context.

—What is it?

—Anna, he grinned. —Will you marry me?

—Yes, she said.

He explained he'd been in the city getting everything prepared. He said he'd been going back and forth to the Diamond District, meeting with a jeweler to get the engagement ring set.

—But how could you ever afford it?

—It's an old family heirloom. You mean I never mentioned it?

He rolled his eyes up, like he was trying to remember.

—My grandma had a gold necklace with a diamond. She gave it to my mom before she died. My mom gave me the necklace the last time we visited, so I could use the diamond for a ring. I sold the gold from the necklace, bought a band, and my mom's friend's son's wife recommended this guy, who set, cleaned, and polished everything at different little stations in his office. I learned how to test gold for purity. It was like that Adam Sandler movie we hated.

—But Andrew, she said.

—Yeah?

She breathed.

—Why didn't you mention any of this?

—Because, he monotoned.

She stroked his forearm.

—It was a secret?

He drove two hours up through the northernmost abutting state, and they camped in the woods and made ecstatic, unfamiliar love with the dog choking itself outside tied to a post.

—I'm so happy, she said.

—I knew you would be.

—I was worried. I had no idea. God, I've been so confused.

He smirked.

—I didn't get on the show, she admitted.

—What?

—The Quest.

He didn't remember. She dropped her head in his lap. He lifted her chin and kissed her eyelids.

—It's okay, he said.

—I'm embarrassed.

—What about?

—I want to do something for us. I mean for you. I want to find us somewhere to live that's more permanent. I want to get us a house.

—Definitely, he said.

—Don't be like that.

—Be like what?

—Do you doubt me?

—I know we can't afford property.

—Just leave it to me. You did this.

She gestured.

—Let me do that.

He nodded.

—We're partners now.

—We weren't before?

—Hey, she said. —I don't know. Like, the people. The producers, I mean. It was funny. I think you'd do good. They never called me back. But what if you tried?

—Uh...

He laughed.

—I don't want to?

—Will you try if I do everything else, though? I'll fill out your application, field any annoying emails. Let me be your agent. You know trivia. You've gotten so good at the crossword and playing along to Jeopardy. Better than I am at least. It can't hurt to try. For four hundred thousand...

—Dollars, he said.

—Will you let me? Can I sign you up for this show?

He shrugged.

She pouted.

He held her face in his hands and nodded it along with his until she wrinkled in giggles.

She drove out of the campground, parked at the side of the road, got out of the car, and switched places with him. He readjusted the mirrors. He drove back to the house.