

Day 51 — 6:21pm

Adam tried to control his breathing just enough to last him another thirty seconds. He wiped the sweat dripping down his forehead, but it did no good. He still felt the salt stinging the corners of his eyes. He rounded the halfway point of the four-hundred meter track as he neared the completion of his sixteenth lap. He knew he was alone so he didn't need to worry about anything in the world aside from staying somewhere within the confines of the small, metallic outer rim. His legs continued to rapidly move, but at this point Adam was convinced that the run was nothing more than a mechanic response. All he needed to do was send the signal to stop as soon as he passed the white line near the outer gate — about one-hundred meters to go. The outer rim of his field of vision was engulfed in a dark aura for a few minutes, but he forcefully closed his eyes momentarily. He opened his eyes back up and the black halo subsided.

"Five," he panted aloud. The last five seconds were always filled with the most intense feelings he considered himself capable of. He never remembered exactly what he thought about in this span.

"Three," he thought. His eyes burned as he focused on the white line a mere six strides ahead.

And he crossed the white line. He took a few more delayed strides as he slowed down beyond the gate, and he walked over to the fence which encased the track, and braced against it as he forced himself to breathe increasingly slower. He smiled and laughed aloud as he did this, the typical reaction he had after he successfully jogged the distance he set for himself beforehand. The worst moment of the run, he thought, was never the last or even the penultimate lap — it was the two which made-up the middle of it. It's all downhill from there; mentally, at least. Physically, the worst was the all-out sprint he took during the last two-three hundred meters... But Adam still considered it the greatest part of his day.

He caught his breath and walked a lap around the track, performing various stretches along the way. When he got back to the gate he grabbed his bag off of the bare flag pole and walked out. He took out one of the green apples from the bag and bit into it; there is no food which tastes better than this always does at this moment, he thought as he walked through the tunnel into Block B.

Adam got to his house and opened the door and was surprised when two distinctly different voices greeted him — a feeling he had yet to get used to. He looked at the living room and saw Pam and Jack watching... "Gilligan's Island? Come on, you guys can do way better than that," he said.

"Have him tell you his theory about the show, Pam," Jack said as he took a sip of, what looked like, his second bottle of beer. "Oh, fuck the judgmental glare. I brought my own this time."

"No he didn't," Pam piped up, then resumed what she was writing in a notebook that she had brought along with two suitcases of clothes, a pillow, a comforter, and a heavily worn stuffed bear.

Jack gave her a mock smile and took another drink. "Cute kid, really. When can we give her back to her fath—," Adam realized that Jack must have already talked to her for a while when he paused at his near-mistake, "—*guardian*, again?"

Pam stopped writing and looked over at Adam. "Either when she no longer tolerates you—or me I suppose, but namely you—or Councilman Towner demands her back." She smiled and went back to the notebook.

"So," Jack said before he paused for a moment until he had both Pam and Adam's attention, "When's this date?"

"What?" Pam asked, "What date?!" She looked back and forth from Adam to Jack. Then she clapped excitedly, "Oh! It's Ms. Smith! Right, Adam?"

Adam looked over to Jack. He shrugged. "How'd you even *guess* that, kid?"

Pam laughed, "I heard her talking to the history teacher about you." Adam noticed her analyzing him and then took a look around the base of Adam's bed and dresser. At the pile of clothes which he had meant to clean up before she got to his house but had never got around to actually doing. "So," she said looking back at him, "Where you going and what are are you wearing?"

He hadn't thought about either yet. Pam quickly realized this and she jumped up from the couch, put her notebook on the coffee table next to Jack's empty beer bottle, and ran over to Adam. "Alright, go clean yourself up and figure out a place where you can take her. Now—" She started to say, and then looked back at the mound of clothes. "Do you have anything... *Nice?*"

"Ouch, kid," he laughed. "As far as pants, I've got... Jeans?" She grimaced. "I do have some half-decent shirts, though."

She twisted her mouth to the side, looking from the mound of clothes to Adam and back. Eventually, she said: "Do you have anything in... Light blue?"

"The man has every shade of blue that ever existed, Pam. Of course he's got light blue," Jack said, his focus on the television unwavering. "Just check the second drawer of his dresser. That's all shirts. Third is jeans."

"I'm not sure whether I'm touched or... frightened that you know that," Adam said. "Yeah, more frightened I'd say."

"Okay, enough out of you. Go shower, you're disgusting," Pam said as she ushered him in the direction of the bathroom. Adam laughed and shut the door behind him as he walked in.

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March 15th (About Five and a Half Months Earlier)

Adam sat the chair in his study looking up at the ceiling. He slowly turned his chair left and right as he stared into the soft blue background of his computer. He just finished assembling a five hundred song playlist of any of his favorite singles which, although most likely greatly overplayed by him in the past, he hadn't heard in years. When some of the songs came on his mind was flooded with images and feelings from a point in time where he had listened to it before. It was occasionally the first time listening that the memory revolved around, but for the most part the events didn't stick themselves to a certain song for any real reason.

The current song being played, some kind of indie folk creation, reminded Adam of when he first started work on his second book. It happened five years ago. He was sitting at the desk in his apartment looking out the window as he tried to work out the specifics of his introduction and the song came on over his computer speakers. It didn't help him think of an idea at all, but that didn't matter. Whenever he heard even a part of the song, now, he always sees that moment as strong as if it happened just that morning.

Adam looked down to the open notebook in front of him and flipped through the thirty pages of thoughts and notes that he had scribbled down in the last week. He received a call that afternoon shortly after Rachel left for work that he would be picked

up around midnight that evening. He packed the few things (comparatively, anyway) that he was bringing with him — a few pictures, some books, and a variety of his clothes — a few days earlier, so he had nothing to do now but wait to get picked up. He looked at the time in the upper-right corner of his computer monitor, 11:47pm.

He was leaving. Maybe forever, maybe for less than a year. He didn't know, and he had no reason anymore to bother knowing. He told the person who called him the day before that he decided that he would no longer be going with them. The man on the phone remained silent for a few seconds after Adam had explained everything, and then he received the man's answer that he'd be going whether he wanted to or not. Adam at first assumed it was some kind of empty threat. There was no way that the man could force him to leave; Adam was not bound by any laws (that he was aware of, anyway), he had signed nothing, and if the whole ordeal actually was headed-up by some governmental entity he assumed they wouldn't really do anything drastic. He told all of this to the man and hung up the phone.

Twenty minutes later, the man called him back; he first asked whether Adam had "calmed down." Adam replied with, "Fuck off." In retrospect, he really wished he had been able to come up with someone better... But it didn't matter. The man gave up trying to convince Adam. The man hung up and Adam set the phone down on the table, relieved—he assumed he had succeeded. The victory was short-lived, though, as the man called back ten minutes later. This time he told Adam in a cool, calm tone that if he continued on his "current path of defiance" (the man's words) that he was putting Rachel's life in danger.

"You couldn't get away with something like that," he said solidly, his grip on the phone loosened within his sweaty hands.

"Under the circumstances, you'd be surprised," the man's voice came through the receiver as clear as though he had been standing right next to Adam.

Adam closed his eyes and sighed. "Fine," he said, resigned.

"Someone will contact you tomorrow," the man said and hung up.

11:59pm. Adam looked down at the blank page of the notebook in front of him. So many thoughts and memories flew through his head as he tried to think of what to say to conclude everything he had written for Rachel. Whenever he picked up his pen to write

what he had decided on, he set it back down again realizing that it wasn't what he was looking for.

Adam quickly looked back when he heard the door open behind him, "Hey Rae— Oh," the man who had delivered the letter walked through the opened door.

"It's time, Mr. Carlton," he said. Adam felt more comfortable hearing his voice, as it was far deeper, softer, even, than the man who he had talked to on the phone the day before. This man wasn't wearing the black suit that he had on when he came to the door a couple of weeks earlier. He was dressed in jeans and a plain brown t-shirt. He still had the cheap sunglasses on, despite the fact that it was midnight. And they were in Adam's house.

Adam turned his chair back to face his desk and looked down at the page in his notebook. Still blank. "How do I tell her I'm leaving?" He asked aloud.

"... What?" The man's voice said from behind the large back of his chair.

Adam picked up the notebook and turned around to face him. "I've... Been avoiding my wife for the last week," he said absently. "Instead of actually talking to her, I've been filling this—" he presented the notebook, flipping through the pages he had written, "—with anything that came to mind. I've said a lot, but it's still not enough...

"And I can't... I can't finish it."

The man removed his sunglasses, showing his light blue eyes. They were a brighter blue than he had ever seen on a person before—even the light blue eyes of the Husky he had for a year when he was growing up couldn't compare. "I told mine that I had an affair. Yesterday she took the kids, our seven-year-old twins, to her mother's house in Nevada. She's an incredibly committed person. Stubborn too. She'll wait for me to make the first move towards a make-up for a long while."

"At which point you'll be long gone, and she'll be angry, hurt, and the longer she waits for you to try contacting her, the easier it will be for her to get over the fact that you will have, basically, disappeared..." Adam said, finishing the man's explanation himself. The man nodded.

Adam turned back to his desk and set the notebook on its surface. He spent about a minute writing something on the blank page. Then he flipped it over and tore out the next empty page and shut the notebook. He wrote "Rachel," on it, and set the piece of

paper on top of the notebook. He looked at it, and he opened the center desk drawer, fumbled through some pens, papers, and pictures. Eventually he found a small box, opened it up, and took out the ring within. He took the one on his left ring finger off and set it down on the paper right next to Rachel's name. "She thinks I pawned my original wedding ring off five years ago so that we didn't have to worry about the rent on our apartment for the couple of months we needed to get money."

Adam stared at the ring, the man asked, "And... If you didn't, then how did you pay the rent?"

"I did," he smiled. "My finished my third book a few months later, and it was my first successful novel. I spent two months tracking down the ring with some of the, fairly extensive, profit from that."

Adam turned away from the notebook and said to the man, "... I never told her about that."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Carlton," he said.

Adam shrugged, "Just Adam, please. Carlton is Rachel's last name." As he and the man walked through the door, Adam looked back into his study, surveying it. He flicked the light off just as his computer started playing a song he didn't recognize.

Adam and the man, who revealed that his name was Gordon, were bringing the last of Adam's bags. He looked over his house for what seemed like it could actually be the very last time, shut the door behind him, and stopped as he started at an object in his hand. Gordon set the bags he was carrying on the ground. "What's up, Adam?"

Adam ignored it while he worked the off of his key-ring. Once he got it off he took the key in between his fingers and used it to lock the door of his house. He took the key in his right hand for a moment and scanned his surroundings. He then ran into the street, looked at the side gutters, and walked over to a storm drain. He dropped the key through the open vent, and walked back to the back of the car where Gordon was putting the bags into the back of the large SUV.

"Okay, I'm all set," Adam said as he lifted the last bag into the trunk.

Gordon nodded. He started to walk towards the driver's side door, but turned to say to Adam, "I should probably warn you that there's another guy in the car. I was

suppose to pick you up alone, was told that the solitude would be necessary, but there was a last-minute change and I had to grab this guy a few hours ago. The guy... Well, he's a *character*. That's for sure."

Adam nodded, and opened the backseat door. Sitting the seat was a man who appeared to be around his age. He had black hair, done in a style that best resembled that of someone who woke up, took a shower, and let their hair look as it may. He was dressed in light-blue jeans, torn and ragged at the bottom, and had a black button-up shirt on, the sleeves rolled-up a bit. "Hey, bro!" He said, undoing his seatbelt and scooting over to the other side of the car, "Come on in."

Adam stepped into the car and sat down. He looked over to his side to find a seatbelt, and when he looked back a bottle was dangling in front of his face. "Thirsty?" The guy asked.

"The bottle's empty," Adam replied.

"What? Really?" He brought it over and held the clear bottle, which was presumably once filled with Vodka, in front of his face, swirling it about. "So it is. Well, no problem."

Adam looked down to where the guy's feet were and saw an assortment of what looked like five-six bottles rolling around, clanking against one another. The guy set the empty aside and grabbed at a few of the bottles, looking at each for a moment, before apparently deciding. "Here we go—random bottle of scotch I grabbed from the cellar. Should be about sixty years old. Let's have a go at this, yeah?" He uncapped the bottle and drank a bit from the bottle. "*Tingly*," he said, passing it over to Adam who took a large drink from it, swallowed it, then took another. He felt the warmth spread throughout his chest. The guy vigorously pat Adam's left shoulder, "'Atta boy," he said, "What's your name?"

"Adam," he said, his throat felt numb. "You?"

"Jack," he said, then took another drink from the bottle. "Had I not finished that vodka off... And the whisky flask before that... And maybe that six-pack along the way, I'd say something like how we're on a one-way trip straight to Hell right now."

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Once he got dressed, Adam realized that Pam picking out his clothes was probably one of the better decisions he made throughout the day. He looked into the mirror and fixed the collar of the surprisingly unwrinkled sky blue button-up shirt. He adjusted the dark blue t-shirt which he was wearing underneath, and said a few generic greeting lines into the mirror.

"You better not use that one on her," Jack's muffled voice said. Adam opened the door and saw him at the refrigerator. He held up a sandwich wrapped in saran-wrap, "Can I have this?"

Adam just stared at him, and then walked back into the bathroom to grab his brown suede belt from the towel prongs along the wall. "Was that a yes?"

Adam walked out of the bathroom, looping the belt through the waist of his jeans. "Jack, man... You made that sandwich yesterday."

"I was drunk yesterday."

"I know; kind of why I recommend not eating that. Just make a new one." Adam looked around the living room to tell Pam she did a decent job with the clothing choice, but she wasn't there. "Where'd Pam go?"

"Oh, uh... She said she wanted to get you something for the date. Should be back any second."

"Good, do me a favor: keep an eye on her tonight," Adam said.

"Why? I mean, I know you said she was dealing with shit, but she looks fine. Well, I mean, not fine; looks like she could be a runway model for a concentration camp clothing line..." Jack laughed after saying this. He then grabbed some hot sauce to put on the sandwich; something the two of them realized compensated for the hideous meat they were rationed. "But she looks pretty happy."

"Yeah, I've never seen her like this; it's... Fantastic," Adam said slowly. "I wasn't referring to that, though. You know that note I showed you? She gave it to me."

"No shit. I saw her name on the letter yesterday. You know, when you told me to *read* it." Jack had finished the sandwich and was just pushing it around in circles with his finger. "Adam something's fucked up around here."

"No need to fuck around, I'm serious here," Adam sighed. Jack turned around and looked at him; for what was only the second or third time since the two had met, Adam realized Jack was worried. "Ah, and you are too."

Jack nodded and then grabbed his sandwich, and took a bite out of it. "The joy about being widely regarded as scum is that people—say, hypothetically, a councilman or two—just forget you exist."

"Get to the point."

"One of them was Towner, the kid's dad... Not sure who the other one was," Adam walked over to the door and locked it. "The guy must've just gotten done beating the hell out of someone; the right cuff of his shirt was red. The cuff of his *white* shirt."

"Are you kidding me? That could mean anything. How the hell do you even come to a conclusion like that?"

Jack smiled. "I walked over to him and acted like I was so impressed to see him in person after hearing so many great things. I grabbed the guy's limp right hand—you know, the one with *blood* under the fingernails and the *blood*-soaked cuff—and gave it a good 'ol shake. Should've seen the fucker squirm," Jack laughed, then must have noticed that Adam was skeptical. "Anyway, I've worked a few jobs over at the Police Hall, so I went over there and, *surprise!*, no assault charges were filed at any point in the last three days."

"I never thought of Towner to be a fighting kind of guy."

Jack's eyes lit up. "Exactly! Why would someone like that get in a bloody fist-fight and then not try to raise shit about it. Not to mention try to pass what was, obviously, a recent excursion into violence off as nothing other than business as usual with the people he saw."

Adam told Jack to stop talking for a second. As much as he had heard about the oddities of the last week, he still couldn't believe that some major conspiracy was going on in the shelter. "So, what, you figure they're torturing people?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure that happened every day before all this; what matters is *why*."

Someone knocked on the door. "That's Jan, just... Don't say anything about this to her. She's knows something's up as it is, don't need her suspecting the step-dad she already hates," Adam walked over to the door to unlock it, but before he did, he turned to

Jack and said one more thing. "Though, at least now I know why you were here when I got back. You've been looking out for her since you saw her dad."

"Yeah, well..."

Adam opened the door and saw Pam, hiding something behind her back. "What's up, kid?"

"I just thought I'd do something for you since you're doing so much for me, it's, just. *Here*—" and she brought out a group of freshly-picked flowers out from behind her back. "For Ms. Smith, *obviously*."

Adam just smiled at her; it sounded like Jack tried to laugh, but it came out more like him choking on a piece of the sandwich he was trying to eat. "Thanks, Pam," he looked at the clock on the wall, "Alright, here it goes. Pam, take care of Jack for me."

"Hey, what's *that* sup—" Adam shut the door before Jack could finish the question. It was primarily aimed for Pam, anyway. He slipped on his flip-flops and walked out into the shelter. The array of fake sun was beginning to dim, but the lights weren't shut off completely until 10:00pm. Though the street lights are turned on from 7:00pm to 7:00am. Adam walked headed in the direction of the nearest entrance to the Block B apartment complex. He hummed an old song that he heard during college and used to listen to whenever he went out on dates. He missed being able to hear it while he was getting ready... But now he found that his memory of it did the job.

He heard a door behind him slam shut and he looked back to see Jack running barefoot towards him. Adam stopped and waited for Jack to catch up. "What's up?" He asked him.

"I probably don't need to point this out to you but... Well. If Towner is involved in shit, we could have two possibilities. It may not be what it seems like. Or it may be worse than we think." Adam nodded. Jack continued, "And if things are worse, and Towner has even the smallest shred of compassion for his kinda-daughter... Just watch your back, Adam."

Adam thanked Jack and then turned around to continue walking towards the apartment entrance. Jack was right, he thought to himself, he really didn't need to point that out.

When Adam found Marie's floor, he walked along the granite floor until he found her apartment number. He then stood next to the door of Marie's apartment, finishing what was, roughly, his fourth run through the song that he had been humming. If he timed it right, even with the brief interlude for Jack, he should have arrived right on time. He walked a couple of steps, turned, and brought up his right hand to knock on the door—

And it opened before he could. Adam stepped back a step, surprised. And judging by the gasp he heard, it's likely that the woman was too. He adjusted himself and checked to make sure that the woman was actually Marie, and then said, "So, hey, Marie."

She looked up, her face red. "Hey, Adam. So, yeah, sorry about that. Not the ideal way to start the evening."

He smiled, "I'm okay with it." He looked at her, about to say something and... Stopped. It appeared like she endured the same thing. Eventually, he decided to just say, "So... Ready to go?"

"Absolutely," she said, laughing. "One second, I just have to find some shoes." She walked back into the apartment as Adam remained standing in the door frame. He looked around the, relatively small, apartment. The apartment was one big room, reminiscent of Adam's living room, with the exception of a door which, Adam assumed, led to the bathroom. The apartment was clean and organized; the room smelled unlike any other part of the shelter he had ever been to. He couldn't determine what it was, but it actually did a fair job of helping him relax a bit.

Marie chose a pair of dark brown flip-flops from the array of six, maybe seven, pair of shoes which she had lined up underneath her bed frame. Adam looked down at his own pair, and tried to figure out whether or not she chose the same shoe type to go along with him or if it was a general preference. She stood up and slipped them on her feet; they went along surprisingly well with her straight-leg khakis. She had a dark blue dress shirt that changed into a shimmering shade of indigo when hit by the light from a nearby table lamp. Adam looked down at his own attire and sighed.

"So," Marie said, grinning, "Where are you taking me for a nice romantic night on the town?"

Adam froze. He never figured out where he could take her. He realized that there weren't exactly a staggering number of choices, but the shelter did have two decent restaurants, two fast-food places, and three coffee houses. He figured that he could just go in the general direction, take a look at each place, and see which one would better suit the evening. Unfortunately, though, he also now knew why he hadn't thought about the evening's locale: he had never been to either of the more conventional, sit-down restaurants. As he walked Marie out of her apartment building, holding the heavy glass-windowed door open for her as she walked out, all he could hope was that there wasn't some kind of asinine coat-and-tie requirement. Logically, in a place where need takes precedence over comfort and attire standards, there would never be such a thing... But he had been in the shelter long enough to conclude that logic rarely played a part in these matters.

"So..." Marie said. Adam was looking all around him, trying to think of something to say; at the very least, he wanted to appear as if he was taken a keen interest in his surroundings.

"Indeed," he said. And a subject appeared to him. "I can't even tell you how odd it is having Pam living with me; between her and Jack, I have enough going on my place to fill some kind of unspoken social quota for months."

"Yeah... How's that going, anyway?"

"Pretty well, actually. Pam seems to be doing way better; she's been laughing and smiling and seems to, actually, be enjoying herself," Adam smiled, thinking about the introduction between Pam and Jack the night before. "I figure it'll only be a matter of time before her dad actually wants to regain control of his daughter, but for the time being it's really nice seeing the kid... Happy? Or something."

She smiled at him. There was a fairly odd kind of feature to the expression that Adam hadn't seen on her before. It seemed to him that there was a hint of... Nah, he thought, there's nothing really different about it. The two walked in silence for a few minutes, before she asked, "So... Who is Jack, anyway? I've heard you talk about him a few times in the past, but I don't think I've ever met or seen him."

Adam couldn't resist laughing at her interest in him. Given the information from Jack's own stories, it wouldn't be a stretch for him to assume that he was the only person

in the shelter who thought well of the guy. "I'm fairly certain that you *have* seen the guy; he's one of the few people who were able to buy themselves a spot in the shelter. No specific talent or skill got him in here, just the money he won from a lottery a year ago. Or so he says." He didn't believe the story when it was told to him a few months earlier, but after reading the file that City Hall had, he learned that Jack definitely bought his way into the shelter. "But, anyway, he works as an upper-class temp or something. Apparently between the money and his... 'Well-rounded'—" Adam made some quotation marks with his fingers around the phrase, "—job experience made him a pretty decent everyman. Or every-employee, I suppose."

She shrugged, "I didn't even know we had those. I just thought that people were only brought due to influence, particular talent, or accomplishments... With a few average Joe families thrown in here or there."

Adam looked ahead and saw the food court. He had, roughly, another seven-eight minutes to talk to Marie as they walked to some unknown restaurant. He figured that now would probably be the best time to come clean. "So, out of some morbid curiosity, do you remember how I said I wasn't married yesterday?"

She turned to look at him, her green eyes glaring intensely into his own. He felt a sudden wave of heat run over his body. Then, for a reason Adam couldn't figure out, Marie started laughing; it wasn't a loud, haughty laugh, but a soft, pleasant one. "I know, you are."

"Huh," he said. Thoughts and possibilities about who she talked to in the last twenty-four hours, or what she already knew, or—never mind, he thought he'd just ask. "How'd you know?"

"You're entirely too good a guy to be single," she gave the same *off* smile that he had noticed earlier. "And you handle yourself in the same manner around everyone, whether it's an old man or, say, an attractive fellow teacher who has been trying to get your attention for weeks." She paused for a moment, looking at the ground; Adam thought she let the last part slip out and intended to say something to ease the mood, but she interrupted his attempt, "Though I didn't realize any of this until I noticed your wedding ring."

Adam smiled, and looked down at the ring on his right hand. He did his best to clean it every week, and the continually-dimming light bounced off the flawless gold band. The three diamonds sparkled under each street light that the pair passed.

"Sure, you can move the ring to a different finger, one not typically associated with marriage, but it was too beautiful a ring to be anything besides a wedding ring," she let out a soft sigh at this, one which Adam felt wasn't intended for dramatic effect.

"I'm still not entirely sure why I said I wasn't yesterday. I didn't mean to say what I did." And he meant it. He had thought about it as he tried to get to sleep the night before... But he was still clueless as to why he blurted it out to her. Oh well, at least now he was able to get it in the open before they had sat down for dinner. If she gets angry she can just turn around. All he'll have to deal with is the painfully awkward walks past each other in the halls of the school.

He wondered why he had even bothered with the evening at all.

"What happened?" Marie asked.

"What?" Adam asked; he had gotten lost in his own predictions of the kind of run-ins they'd have in his future where he screwed things up.

"What made you move the ring a hand over? I figure if it was an ugly end to a bad marriage that you wouldn't wear it at all, but the fact that you do tells me that's not the case."

"She... Couldn't come here with me," he said. His eyes stung for a moment, but he blinked rapidly a few times, and then tried to continue his explanation. "So when I got here, I kept it on in the hopes that we'd be able to leave a month or two later and none of the worries that got us here in the first place would come to pass."

He laughed, filled with a bitterness that he hadn't expressed aloud to anyone in any form for... Weeks. "Then they told us—remember that?—that if nothing happened in two weeks time, we'd all be allowed to go home," she nodded. It was great news for a lot of people, he recalled, but the people who he assumed burnt a lot of bridges on their way to the shelter, adamantly protested the declaration. "After the first bomb dropped, I remained hopeful. It dropped on LA, where we lived before, but it was a big place. I just hoped she'd be okay."

"But, nine days later, after the third reported barrage on LA alone... I just gave up. I had pretty much grown accustomed to the idea that I'd never see her again—" He thought for a moment. And then he felt a minor revelation, something he'd never thought of before this very moment. "—I'd grown accustomed to it about three or four days before I was even forced to leave her for this godforsaken place.

"Ha, can you believe that? The last few, nice days that I should've had with my wife were spent feeling apathetic," he let out a few successively somber grunts of laughter. "I suppose the ring thing was just the last step of something I started a long time ago... Long story short, I'm sorry I wasn't upfront about this."

Adam didn't look at her after he finished talking. He waited for her to say something. It didn't really matter whether it was encouraging or her announcing that she was going to just go home. Instead of trying to say anything, though, she grabbed Adam's hand. It felt to him that her touch sent a reassuring surge through him, and he and Marie walked the rest of the short distance to the restaurant that Adam had chosen in silence.

As Adam walked into the food court he was amazed by the colors that glowed in the dim evening street. The bright colors of the neon signs that accompanied each separate store melded together (they were, with one exception, all alongside one another) into the kind of aesthetic spectacle that he was unsure if he'd see again. Only the expensive sit-down place, The Huntington, was not in the block of food and coffee buildings. The very well-done ambient lighting and decorating of the place, one generally regarded as "high class," was very evident to Adam through the window. Although he hadn't paid much attention to it before, he now realized that the only people he'd ever seen going to and from The Huntington were of the variety that he typically avoided. This belief was reaffirmed by the look of the people he saw through the lightly tinted front windows.

So, he thought, Paradise Diner it is. It was the third in the line of six shops which, from his direction, went in a line: coffee, fast-food, Paradise Diner, coffee, fast-food, and last, but not least, another coffee house. He never really cared to learn any of the names of the places — he didn't even take note of the two restaurants until that moment. Whenever he was hungry for food he didn't have at his house, he just chose whichever place looked least crowded.

"So, how's Paradise Diner sound to you?" Adam asked, then added, "I'm not really a big fan of our upper-class citizens." The idea sounded ridiculous to him as he said it; he asked himself why a place like this should have any kind of class difference whatsoever. There wasn't one that he noticed when he arrived, but just something that seemed to evolve out of some unspoken need for conflict. Of course, making an addendum to his own ideas, maybe it was there when he arrived anyway.

"Whatever sounds good to you," she said, beaming one of her more commonly-shown smiles.

He led her towards the diner and opened up the front door for her, holding it as he waited for her to enter ahead of him. "I don't care what they say about you, Adam; you're a gentleman and a scholar."

The sole waitress of the diner led them to a booth near the back of the large room. The place was very well-lit and possessed a very apparent sense of warmth to it. The tables and seats were clean and sturdy, the menus were easy-to-read, and the background music was not only different from the outdoor music, a definite plus, but didn't drown out Marie's voice. The maroon booth cushion felt surprisingly comfortable as Adam sat down at their table, evidence that the Paradise Diner didn't receive many customers and was only about five months old. The waitress quickly excused herself after handing him and Marie each a menu.

"Red or white?" Adam asked.

"White wine, of course," she said, looking up from her menu at him and then staring around.

"Good choice," Adam figured out what he wanted fairly quickly and set the menu down. He didn't expect quite as many people to be at the diner as there were. It wasn't packed by any means, but at least half of the tables were occupied. Mostly by High School couples who, really, had nothing better to spend their credit on than a fresh-cooked meal and a drink or two. There were still a couple older couples and then a family of five as well, though. "I'm still surprised that the drinking age for these kids was set at sixteen," he mused as he scanned over the minimal decorations across the room.

"I think it makes sense. The amount of liquor that is available for a high school kid to drink hardly amounts to a beer per day, which means that there really isn't enough

alcohol to send a bunch of kids rampaging like jackasses through the streets. And the mayor constantly reminds us of our 'responsibility to procreate,' so what better way to accidentally have a baby than knocking up your girlfriend in a night of intoxicated lust?" Marie said casually.

"That's probably the most logical approach to the issue that I've heard," Adam said laughing. "And, just so you understand the strength of that statement: I was there when the councilmen all *debated* and *voted* on the issue."

She joined him in his laughter for a moment, but then Adam noticed an apparent change in her expression. Her disposition followed suit a moment later. They talked about what was on the menu for a few minutes before the waitress came back. Adam gave Marie the go-ahead to order before him. She asked for a turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy meal — referring to it afterwards to Adam as the "Marie Thanksgiving Special."

The waitress then looked to Adam. "I'll just have a Turkey Club Sandwich, please. Oh, and could you please bring out a bottle of white wine?"

"What kind would you like?" The waitress, Virginia according to the nametag, asked.

"Well, see, I don't really know what you guys have... So, do me a favor and pick your personal favorite out for us," he said, smiling at her. She nodded, seeming to already have an idea of what to get, and took the menus from the table and walked away.

"I bet that line is how you get all the girls," Marie said, winking her left eye quickly.

"Don't you know it! I'm also a big fan of the classic chloroform line." She asked what it was, and Adam prepped himself for an honest demonstration of the line in action. "Excuse me, miss, does rag smell like chloroform to you?"

She laughed and then gave a few slow, quiet claps, "Classy." Adam looked around the room again, glancing at a few of the people at other tables. He vaguely recognized a few members of the various couples as students of his, but did little more than exchange an acknowledging glance. He figured it was only a matter of time before a student who knew both Marie and him saw the pair and eagerly approached them. When Adam looked back to Marie, she seemed preoccupied again. She looked at him and,

almost nervously, asked, "What happened to her—I mean, sorry, why didn't she come along?"

Adam thought that he said the reasoning already, but also knew that Marie seemed to listen to him more carefully than he listened to himself. "I don't know the real reason why she couldn't come, but I have my ideas..."

"She couldn't have children. I mean, biologically. She loved kids. She was a pediatrician and, no matter what we tried, nothing worked. Eventually I was able to get her to a doctor—always makes me wonder when one doctor is apprehensive about seeing another one, but whatever—and we found that it simply wasn't going to happen," Adam relayed all the information in a far more factual manner than when he had previously talked about his wife—ex-wife, rather.

Marie looked at him, a soft look on her face. She started to speak a couple of times, but stopped short of saying any actual words. Adam looked away for a second, thinking he heard something, and then heard Marie's voice, "Sorry, I don't mean to pry, Adam... But is that why she wasn't allowed to come with you?"

Adam nodded. "As far as I can figure out, yes. She wasn't a very experienced or well-recognized doctor. She wasn't a mother. She couldn't ever be a mother in a biological sense. She was just the wife of a 'famous' author. Obviously that extra spot could be used for a better purpose," he didn't mean to come off as sarcastic, but he did. And bitterly so. After a few seconds of silence, he added, "Okay, yeah, I'm sorry about that; it wasn't aimed at you in the slightest."

Adam actually spoke without thinking; this wasn't something he planned to talk about and had never even thought about going into it. He intended to apologize for lying about to Marie about his marriage the day before, but he didn't think the conversation would go much further. He would have been lying to himself if he wasn't worried that all of what he had said would scare Marie off but, he figured, she asked. And as he calmly looked at Marie, he could tell that she was okay with it.

"Here's your wine," the waitress said as she placed a normal-sized green bottle of wine in a metallic bucket of ice on the table; the cork must've been taken out moments before as there was still a small amount of vapor flowing out of the top of the bottle. Adam looked at the label which said, simply: WINE. The waitress must have noticed his

look. "Ignore the label; every bottle of everything we have has, roughly, the same label. Don't worry; I think you'll like the wine."

"How do you tell the various types apart?" Marie asked.

"Oh, well, there's a shelter-wide format. There are variations amongst the similar labels as well, but those are more vendor-specific stuff. For the most part, the general face print is average quality, the standard face in italics is better, and the all-caps print is one of the best qualities," she said; she added that the food would be out in roughly fifteen minutes and walked away.

Adam poured each of them a glass of wine and set the bottle back in the ice bucket. He thought for a moment about proposing some kind of cheer, but it only took him a second to realize that it would be, for lack of a better word, lame. She brought the glass up to her lips and tipped it until a small amount of it flowed into her mouth. "Wow," she said, "this is the best thing I've had to drink since the stuff I had for my engagement dinner." Adam nodded and she took a far larger sip and set the glass back down.

"Now, to cover something that you haven't really given me any clues about despite my prodding," she said as she crossed her arms on the table and leaned in a bit to Adam. It was a mock serious pose that he'd seen her do before in one of her classes when she thought it would be fun to make all the students think that they had a large exam that day that no one remembered. He had, by no plan of his own, walked by her classroom when she did this. Pam later told him the story about it, calling it believable to the point of being "cruel and unusual torture."

"And now that you're in your teacher-scaring serious pose, should I just chug this class to prepare me for a full mental assault?" He asked, trying to match her grin with one of his own. He couldn't see the result of his attempt, but he felt that he failed. Miserably.

"Do you think you're actually ready to be with someone?" She asked, then quickly added, "I mean, I'm not implying anything. I just—" she sighed, "—want to know whether you think you're going to go home tonight and feel guilty for some kind of infidelity. Personally, I think you're making the right choice, but I'm biased on this particular subject."

"I'm ready. Yes," Adam said after only a brief hesitation. His answer sounded more confident than he ever thought he was on the matter, but he always trusted his intuition over his logic. So, that was that.

Adam was about to attempt to change the topic, but as he began to speak, he felt a slight tremor overtake the diner. And then, a moment later, the entire room shook violently. He heard a shattering sound and jerked his head to the side to see shards of glass falling to the ground from the diner window. The lights hung from the ceiling all fell to the ground one after another.

He heard a scream from his side, swung his head back to Marie; she was holding her arms up in an effort to shield her head from any potential debris that might fall on her. He glanced up at the ceiling above her, and — of course, he thought — she was sitting directly under one of the swinging lamps which seemed to fall just as he noticed it. He grabbed the bucket of ice that the wine had been setting in just a few minutes earlier, and stretched it out above Marie's head. The outer rim of the lamp crashed into the cover rim of the bucket.

The earthquake, which Adam had never thought possible in the shelter, was over in a matter of moments. He realized that, but the whole event still felt like an eternity.

"A-Adam... Your arm," Marie said, slowly.

Adam was still holding the metallic bucket of ice, and then saw droplets of blood trickling down his right forearm. He felt a sudden surge of pain flow along the top of his hand. "Shit," he said. He held the bottom of the bucket in his left hand, but he had his right hand holding it by the circular opening of the bucket. The thin, white metal that encased the light bulb had dug into the top of his hand, a centimeter or two below his knuckles. He brought the bucket back towards him and set it on the table in front of him. "This is going to feel fantastic," he said. He clenched his teeth and ripped the light encasing up with his left hand and threw it behind him. He felt a quick, torturous searing pain in his hand and then it disappeared, leaving him with a throbbing burning.

He got up out of his side of the booth, and then helped Marie up from hers. He looked around the dark diner, lit only by one dim lamp that fell a few feet from the ceiling but remained intact and hanging by a single, thin cable. One of the younger couples was motionless as they held each other in their booth.

"Is everyone alright?" Adam yelled, still surveying the room. The people he could see all nodded their heads. The only person he couldn't find in the area was the waitress who had served them. He looked behind the counter, saw nothing aside from a mess of fallen decorations and another lamp, and then ran to the back door where the waitress went after she delivered the wine. He pushed the swinging door open, and saw the waitress, pinned by a fallen rack and the supplies it was holding.

"Are you okay?" He asked as he pushed the rack off and back against the wall.

"I think so," she said, apprehensive.

Thankfully, he thought, the light in this room still worked. Adam cleared off some of the heavier bags which had buried all but the waitress' head and shoulders. After a couple minutes, he was able to help her out of the pile, and the two walked back out into the main room of the diner. The people who Adam had seen sitting in shock before had all left, Marie included. The only people left were the couple in the booth who were still embracing each other. The young man returned Adam's glance as he rubbed his girlfriend's arm.

Adam walked outside the diner and instantly figured out where everyone had gone. There was a big group of people, maybe thirty or forty, staring at The Huntington. Marie was in front of him, but her presence was overshadowed by what the group of people were staring at. "Holy shit," he said aloud at the realization of what caused what he thought to be an earthquake.

The Huntington was completely leveled. Amongst the pile of stone, glass, and wood were scattered shards of glass plates and a single spoon which reflected the nearby streetlight.

"Well then," was all he could think of to say before he walked Marie back to her apartment.