

Points of View

by jacob saul



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Illustrated by Sonny Layton

Each day starts with the same fiction. The fluffy grass weaved in between my toes with the bright green tips tickling up to my ankles in the swaying breeze. The golden sun caked us in a comforting warmth you only get on a perfect summer's day. It was just us, along with the bees and the birds, but we always came along as a pair. If something could be too perfect, it was this. I could feel the tingle on the side of my face that comes to surface when you feel someone looking at you, the glow of her smile normally left that impression. I found myself smiling too, it was irresistibly infectious. As I raised my hand towards my head in turn raising hers as her fingers slotted between mine like the perfect puzzle pieces. Pressing my lips on her hand my eyes trail down her arm. Almost snappingly the buzz of the bees and song of the birds drowns out to the rain patting on the window. This is always the worst bit. The heavy eyes labelled as mine don't feel as such, they keep skipping down like a scratched disc. Everytime I get to her neck, I want to see her rosy cheeks and that cheesy grin, but weights pull my eyes back down. I hold on so tight to her hand she could abseil with it. The rain edges louder, this is the part I fear. The cold rushes over my body. Please. I don't want her to go. I know that when I open my eyes it'll be over. I can't lose her. Not again.

Like a butterfly fluttering its wings, my eyelids open.

She's gone.

Again.

The warm sun is now replaced with the sterile blue lamp. It almost emits the cold. The blue striped pyjamas flow my line of sight down to my hands. Are these really mine? The loose

skin sags around my joints with any sign of colour being completely evacuated a long time ago. There was still some sign of life in them the last time she held them. Opening my palm the imprints from my nails almost look like deep red open brackets, suppose that's what happens when you try to hold a hand that isn't there.

Sometimes I'll forget she's gone and make two cups of tea. Four sugars, just how she likes (sorry, liked) it, no wonder her teeth fell out. It's only after I turn around with both mugs in hand I normally realise. One other time I took it all the way back upstairs to treat her to a morning brew only to open the door to a cold bed. Occasionally, I face the wall and talk to her as if she was behind me, it helps for a little while.

"Hello my love"

"Long time no see"

Both of my eyes relax, fixing onto a point neither here nor there. Everything slows down, my fingers dancing with my wedding ring to ease the anxiety. After all this time she still gives me butterflies.

"How've you been without me?"

I often lose track of who's talking. Did she say that or did I? It's stupid because at the end of the day I'm just talking to myself. In between sentences the room falls as silent as the night before Christmas. Even the Cat's purring ceases, I can tell he misses her too, she was a lot more lenient when measuring out his dinner.

"I'm scared of joining you"

I always felt selfish saying that bit. It fills my gut with that deep guilt that steals your appetite. I picture it like a clown car - 'sorry too many clowns inside' - can't fit any food in here.

Just as she inhales after pondering my statement the thin, soft and almost cowardly wheels of the Honda Civic outside don't screech but mildly cough to a halt. Son of the year has arrived, he knows I hate the bloody Honda, just give me a ride in your convertible! Roof down, music blasting, having a whale of a time! I still leave the second pillow out on the bed, I reach over to it and speak softly.

"Sorry my love, speak soon."

Glancing over to the clock face I couldn't quite believe it was already quarter to eleven. Time elapses differently as you age, not too different to gravity; it's stronger at certain points than others. It's odd though, how we see time. If you cast your mind back to a certain Sports Day at school or to when you wet yourself in class; it feels like nothing. An abridged story of your life. Like folding a piece of paper. Then to now, but it misses everything else out. Because it doesn't quite feel so long ago as when you factor in all the meals you've had, or the washing up since then, let alone how many times you've brushed your teeth. You have to manually

populate that into the forefront of your mind though, it doesn't just automatically appear. Well if it did our heads would be the size of hot air balloons. Imagine that, everyone floating around in the sky like a cartoon character. Would the head solely be the balloon and the basket the rest of the body or would it all be in the balloon and the basket would be where you store the baby balloons that can't quite fly yet, or your dog. I bet the sunsets would look stunning from up there, the dark blue filtering down in the warm deep red that blends together like a Van Gogh painting.

The front door knocked, well, nearly. He dropped his keys on the mat again, that mat makes me want to faint! A mumbled "bollocks" swiftly trailing behind. This was my queue. The door's a bit more stiff nowadays, not a sign of age; just lack of use. I have to bite my tongue to contain the laughter in anticipation. I love this bit, if I could get the bleeding thing to work I'd wink to a camera right about now.

"Hello my dear boy!"

"Oh for goodness sake Dad! Close the door, close the bloody door!"

"Good Morning to you too"

He puts the petrol station wine and tulips on the kitchen counter and spreads his arms across it like he's opening a map. He's facing away from me. A sigh so deep and so pained was all I could have hoped for in his reaction.

"Dad, would it kill you to wear some trousers? Imagine little old Mabel across the way, if she saw you like that she'd have a heart attack!"

Always gets him. He's always great to wind up as he's always been very serious, as a kid we told him we had a magical carpet that could fly away! Only to wake up the following morning to him having pritt stuck it to the floor and declaring in all sincerity that it couldn't fly because it didn't have a pilot's license.

As I head off towards the bedroom to retrieve some trousers my laugh silences as I realise we've already exchanged half of the words we'll share today. 'Talkative' is an adjective as misplaced on my son as jolly would be on Stalin. I wonder if he knew she hated Tulips.

The air of the Honda Civic was cold and fusty, it always was first thing in the morning. Not sure how and when it happens though. I've spent entire nights in my car and it seems to just suddenly switch like a new area in a video game popping in. After stuffing the wine I won in a raffle last year and a bouquet of tulips onto the back seat, my hands hesitated by the keys in the ignition as if touching them would be directly putting my hand in an open flame. I hate going back there. It's better out of sight out of mind as far as I'm concerned. He'll ask me the

same questions “You met a woman yet?”, “When will I be a Grandfather?”. The disappointment on his face is soul crushing, he’s sad enough as it is. I at least call him, Tuesday 5.13pm every week. We watch Pointless together over the phone. Enough time to say our pleasantries before it starts at quarter past. We don’t comment or say anything aloud to each other, it’s just comforting to know he’s still there. It almost brings me to tears each week in fear that one day that phone will keep ringing with no answer. It’s the same as when they finally disconnected Mum’s phone. Not that she knew how to use it in the first place. After three deep exhales I turn the key and get set on my way.

Arriving outside I slow down as gently as possible. I don’t want him to know I’ve arrived. I need a moment to compose myself. Forty-three years old and I’m stressing outside my parent’s house like a girl on prom night. The entire car falls silent. Just the ticking of the cooling metal leaves me looking out to the kitchen window in what sounds like clockwork. A timer for when I’ll actually get out. Even if she was standing right there I wouldn’t be able to see her, the tears seep into my vision like spilling a cup of tea over a newspaper. After my eyelids act as windscreen wipers I see my Dad by the bedroom window, talking to himself. It breaks my heart all over again. My mind stays in the car screaming as my body continues on autopilot towards the door. Finding myself on the welcome mat was too much, I remember the day we bought it in the garden centre, I knocked over a load of plant pots which in an unlucky turn of revenge cut my hand, leading me to bleed everywhere. Nowhere was safe from being stained by my open wound! Dad conveniently passed out, with perfect comic timing while Mum had to sort it all out, she was good like that. I’d bled too much onto the accompanying doormat stand which we were then forced to purchase... the whole lot. Everyone was getting doormats for Christmas for the next three years, much to Grandma’s dismay. It’s a tatty old thing by now and it’s jumped house to house with us ever since. For months Dad had to use the back door as it reminded him too much of the blood. I had my very first kiss on this mat. It’s all a bit much, my heart starts pounding so fast I can almost feel it leaping out of my throat. I haven’t knocked yet, he doesn’t know I’m here, I can just turn away and reschedule, like last time. The balancing act of the keys gripping onto my little finger like Mufasa did to the cliff, just as the wine bottle embodying Scar nudges them off.

“Bollocks”

I’ll just pick them up and leave, it’s fine. I’ll wipe my eyes and-

“Hello my dear boy!”

The door had already swung open and oh, oh no, oh god please no. Not again! My Father well into his senior years has a habit which I keep trying to crack. He stands there in a nice shirt, granted, but accompanied by a severe lack of trousers. He finds this funny for some reason.

“Oh for goodness sake Dad! Close the door, close the bloody door!”

His aged legs almost resemble tracing paper holding together a bag of bones. This is why I can’t visit, the view of him alone in this place tears me apart. It took me too long to realise

that we think they're the ones watching us grow up while we're just as much watching them grow old.

"Good Morning to you too" emits from a sarcastic grin.

I stride my way in and towards the Kitchen counter, almost dropping everything on the surface as my arms grow weak. With my back turned I sigh fighting back the tears. It doesn't sit right being back here without her, at least this way I can picture her with him. Again the autopilot kicks in with my mouth muttering something about the trousers, or lack thereof. I don't care about the trousers, well that much anyway. I care about him. I want to sit down with him, make sure he's okay. Have a cup of tea and celebrate the fact we still have each other. But we've never had that relationship. I was a Mummy's boy through and through, the difficulty was that I couldn't even tell him I love him. I turn around to him already headed to put some clothes on. I have the words on the tip of my tongue, pushing, almost screaming to burst their way out.

"I love you!"

I shout in my head as he closes the bedroom door. Scanning the room it all looks picturesque and tidy upon first glance. It's only when you look closer you see the damage. Suppose that's like asking someone 'Oh hey, how are you?' seeking just a 'yea alright mate' in response. What would happen if you actually stopped in the street and said 'You know what mate? I'm really really struggling', would they just want the Earth to open up and swallow them from the social pressure? Because I would. The plants littered around the room are as dry as astronaut food, the colour completely vacant. It's like a time capsule from the day she left, her shoes by the door, keys in the bowl and a message on the fridge that reads 'don't forget to take the bins out, remember to separate the recycling x'. I suppose for her it was just a regular Wednesday, or was the recycling a Tuesday? Inspecting the note closer you could see the blob of blue-tac keeping it attached and a faint shoe mark; it's certainly not there by mistake. The cat's bowl is still full of food, I think he forgets they're gone too. They didn't last much longer than Mum. Glancing over to the Television set, it'd be surprising if this model even has colour; it's that ancient, seeking the remote I clocked it pride of place on the mantelpiece under my sun faded school photo and sports participation trophy. The remote feels like a relic of the past, it should be in a museum, do they still make the right batteries for these things? It was as dusty as the rest of this place, as out of time as Dad.

Oh how much I hate this car, it's always too warm. Is this what jacket potatoes feel like while they're cooking? Complete with someone on the other side of the glass smiling at you thinking 'job done'. Tom helped me into the car of course, I gritted through the pain. He was courteous and didn't comment on my frailing legs just as I didn't comment on his balding hair looking like the grass near the goal post on a school field. He got that from me! After setting off I look around eagerly waiting for something to occupy my thoughts, the radio was set to a

classical station of course but turned right down to zero. He was always very particular and set in his ways. I always thought we should get him tested but she always protested saying her boy was perfect the way he was. I can't fault her really. Just thinking back to that was enough to motivate an unconditional smile, Tom turns and smiles back. I can't explain it because I don't know what he was smiling about but it was a sweet moment, I think almost in some way it was his way of affirming he's still here. Oh I love him, in moments it nearly slips out but the flashbacks of the parade he put on the last time I expressed it haunt me. Nothing has quite hurt more than trying to connect with your son at your Wife's funeral and for him to spit it in your face like you'd fed him dirt, in front of the surviving members of friends and distant relatives. 'You're not her!' rang around the church hall and to some extent still ring in my ears. I don't need an apology, I don't want one. I just can't help but think he, even if for a second, hoped that I'd gone and not her. I don't blame him, because in very specific, certain moments... me too.

The water on the windows and new found sun, which was teasing it's way out, left odd streaks of shadows throughout the vehicle, it brought my eyes back down to the radio. Set to a station but dialled down, is this what he normally does when he's by himself? or is he embarrassed of what he likes? He should know he can show me anything. Wouldn't mind rocking to some beethoven right about now. Does he change who he is around me? Is it something I've done? Is he as chatty as a radio host to everyone but me? Maybe he talks so much his throat needs a rest when he's with me. He certainly yells at the Television enough when we watch that game show he likes. Or more so I listen. I wonder if he knows I can't get the Telly to work but I still call just to hear him laugh. I turn my head slightly, not to raise suspicion but to look at him. My son. This boy who I raised into a man, not even three feet away. I look at the slight outbreak of eczema behind his ear, the small patch of beard he missed when shaving. I look at him and see her, the same eyes, ears and cute button nose as well as the rosiest cheeks. I find my eyes closing even though I'm still awake in here, hello? Body respond please. It's like when Tom bought me that computer that kept crashing. This tends to happen when I leave the house, it all gets a bit much and I need a bit of a lie down. Luckily I can have a kip, got another thirty-minutes to go. Why couldn't she be buried closer to me? She feels distant enough as it is.

After getting Dad into the car, it was a pleasant enough drive. I could feel him looking at my hair, he was polite and didn't comment on it but I couldn't help but think of how ghoulish his legs had become. A way into the journey he turned and smiled at me, I felt a wave of affirmation rush over as I knew bringing the Honda was a wise choice. I smiled back. It was Mum who loved the sports car, I wonder why he doesn't. The journey was fine, I got lost in my thoughts. My body seems to take over at points as I experience the world from almost a third perspective. It happens more often than I'd like to admit but it just leaves me headed in the right direction. Arriving at where Mum's buried always hits me like a thud in the chest that spreads throughout my entire body in a matter of seconds. I try to come up once a week, in my lunch breaks on Wednesday and tell her what happened on Pointless the night before. She helped me through a lot, as all great Mums do, when I was young I was diagnosed with

something that I still can't quite pronounce and it had a profound effect on me. Telling what was essentially a child, that at any minute they could drop down and die leaves you pretty vacant. At first the feeling of panic was overbearing and tears flooded my room but she always came in to pull the plug and subside the ten-foot waves. One time Dad came in but I kept screaming for Mum, I still need to apologise for that. The car jolted to a halt when we arrived but even that didn't wake him. It was nice revelling in the silence which was scored by his snoring. I never knew a human being could inhale so much air. The comfort of just having him there eased the hurt at least a bit.

The thick tiles on the path jolted Dad around like a ragdoll on each crevice and bump as they seemed to have just been placed by someone who got bored halfway through. I looked at his neck and hands as he bobbed along and there was nothing holding him together, I could almost see right through him. I think even he sensed that we slowed down as we got closer to her. You can see it coming a mile off as we were lucky enough to be right by a bench. As soon as you enter the grounds it's a visual pinpoint of where to head which is in some ways nice but others feels like an instant dark cloud that never lets you break free.

My hands automatically went to swing his legs out before he protested.

"I'm not completely useless yet, I can walk"

He stood up, walked two paces to sit on the bench but turned around too soon. He saw her name carved into the stone with the two dates beneath, the wind had vanished from his sails. He stood motionless, no response. Like that crap computer I meant to throw away but Dad thought I'd gifted to him, it's odd yet beautiful how memories like that have a habit of creeping up on you and making you laugh. Unfortunately, this was not the most opportune moment for it. A laugh seeps out of my throat and snaps Dad back into motion, he looks almost like a confused puppy before placing the tulips I'd given him down on the grave and retreating to the bench. I try folding the wheelchair shut but it doesn't budge.

"There's a small latch at the back" he mumbles.

It collapses like a crisp packet.

"You'd know that if you visited" he said with such sincerity in his voice.

A silence held, shared. I can't blame him, can you neglect a parent like you can a child? My eyes stay stationed forward, I feel guilty for how I treated him. It felt like something that could just be dealt with later and put on hold, just minimising the tab. After thinking for a number of minutes I realised I hadn't said a single word, the silence was still present. It's like he served but no one else was there to play.

"Do you visit her without me?"

He serves again and the tennis ball hits me in the chest leaving a gaping hole. How could I be so selfish? Thoughts rush through my mind at a million miles an hour before I responded how anyone else would.

“No.”

He finds a point in between me and the gravestone, still avoiding eye contact.

“You can come see her without me y’know? At some point you’ll be visiting the both of us”

It’s only now I notice the space for another name on the stone. It’s like my eyes opened and suddenly everything made sense in the most painful way. I’m not ready to lose him too. At the funeral, the Priest said he was with her in her last moments, that always scared me, how would he know the right thing to say? If he even said the right thing at all? How would he hold it together? He wasn’t the crying type. How was she? Was it peaceful? It’s only now my ears nudged me on the shoulder to tell me I’d just said that out loud. But which parts and how much of it came out? He turned to face me but looked like he regretted it instantly so continued to face front, he’d take a deep breath, ponder on it and then exhale with nothing said. I could see him fighting back the tears.

“Yes, I was with your Mother when she... erm, when she passed. I held her hand when it erm, *coughs* we told each other we loved them and she said how much you meant to her, before the tight grip on my hand weakened, as she smiled and drew her last breath”.

The compression of everything, burying it all down to the ground, six feet under like it didn’t exist bubbles up in a single instant.

“Thank you” I blubber out.

I couldn’t quite make out Dad’s reaction as everything looked like a before photo in a glasses advert.

“Hey, hey, hey. Don’t you dare thank me.”

He puts his skeletal hand on my shoulder, I almost feel like a child again. The washed-out view of the world hides his wrinkles and laughter lines and for now, he looks like my Dad again. Not an echo.

Dad said something that from the tone sounded comforting, I couldn’t actually hear what was said, let alone my reply. I just felt the bass of my voice bounce around my chest. Sorry, I couldn’t come to the phone right now. I was having a breakdown so if you could leave a message and I’ll be right back.

It was fun bobbing around on the inconsistent tiles, I felt like a child speaking into a fan as I jumped here, there and everywhere. I couldn't see the fine details in the wood but could definitely make out the shape of the bench, the destination. Both hers and mine if given enough time. The tulips kept wanting to be shaken out of my hands, I knew the second I placed them down I'd have to share a little grin with her knowing full well she'd be rolling her eyes. It always feels surreal seeing her name in the stone, I get flashes of the drunken wine nights and petty fights. I go to tell Tom and to reminisce but the thoughts of her wearing just an apron while baking are all that flash through my head, best keep that to myself. They were good buns though. Seeing her as more than just a name on a stone wasn't difficult, but for all her neighbours of which she now spends eternity with, they were just that. Trying to attribute people to the stones was a challenge. I wonder how many people in here were a barman, lawyer or found love. I wonder how many people have been forgotten. It's like the way you feel embarrassed about all the small little things you've done. Even down to the awkward pauses in conversation when speaking to someone you fancied; chances are they've probably forgotten about you, let alone that moment, so live a little. Don't be so worried about what people think because you're the only one that cares if you're wearing the same shirt as yesterday. Tom's laugh brings me back to where I am, placing the new tulips down replacing the others. Not that those are doing too bad though, they feel more recent than when I've been here last. The clink of stubborn metal sounds all too familiar, a classic mistake.

"There's a small latch at the back"

He'd know how to collapse the wheelchair if he visited more often, why'm I keeping this remark to myself? It's not harsh, it's honest. So I let the little bird out of the cage, it is how I feel after all. The silence permeates like a bad fart in a lift of colleagues. Shit, maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I think back to the flowers, they're too recent, unless she led a secret double life who else would be visiting her? I thought him and I only came together. The curiosity wins me over.

"Do you visit her without me?"

I already knew the answer, I just wanted him to say it. I have no issue with him coming here, it's brilliant. But I'm still here. HELLO? Can you see me? Can you hear me?

"No." he replies.

I knew he was lying but it was comforting, all the same, there was something nice in the fact that even though it was a fallacy he needed me to be here just like I couldn't be here without him. It's odd what we tell ourselves to feel better. Gesturing my hand out on my leg I want him to reach out and hold it. I don't know if he even registers it's there.

"You can come see her without me y'know? At some point, you'll be visiting the both of us."

If there's anything I want for him, it's not to feel guilty that he still needs his Mum. No matter what I tell myself. Retreating my hand; mid-thought he interrupts me.

“At the funeral, the Priest said you were with her in her final moments, how was she? Was it peaceful?”

The question I'd been dreading. I can't tell him, surely. How do you tell your child that his Mother passed scared and crying? It was the longest I'd ever held someone's hand, let alone hers. With a sharp intake of cold air, I turn to look him in the eyes. It was too much. I can't. I think back to what she said to me when his childhood dog was put down. 'Sometimes it's better to tell people what they want to hear as long as it's not hurting them. Sometimes the truth's too much, you need a little fiction.' She gave a little grin and wink as she said it that even reassured me and I didn't even like the dog that much. What she said always stuck with me though, wise woman was my wife, couldn't be too smart if she stuck with me though.

Her eyes failed first, everything went black, so for ten minutes she had me looking in the mirror describing my face. I was never much of an author, left all the creative things to her, she was adamant that wherever she was going, she wouldn't forget me 'How could I forget you? Describe your smile one last time, I love your dimples'. She was staying brave, for me. Well at first. My hand almost popped she held it so tight, it's almost unbearable recalling the whole conversation as it was mainly said through tears. I honestly couldn't tell you if it lasted five minutes or three hours, any time with her had the magical habit of slipping away, there never seemed to be enough of it. As different parts of her body shut down like departments in a store, we said our final goodbyes and she shot me a look that haunts me to this day. She professed her fear of the dark with tears running down her cheeks and shaking frantically. They were her last words, nothing poetic or beautiful. Just the primal fear of what comes next. None of this could be said to Tom. I recalled an abridged version of events and stuck to the happier path, emphasising the whimsical imagery. His eyes flirted with tears before completely opening the tap. The only thing I want right now is a hug.

“Thank you” he blubbers through the tears.

He didn't need to thank me?! And I emphasised as such! What was he thanking me for? The silly sod! For comforting her as she passed? Him knowing I'd lied to comfort him? Finding my hand on his shoulder made me feel like my Father, he'd know something better to say right now than whatever was about to come out of my mouth.

“You don't ever need to thank me or apologise for anything ever. I love you no matter what, nothing will change that. And I'm sorry if you don't want me saying it but I do, I love you.”

“Okay” he says vacantly.

Fair enough, I know when he's off in his own thoughts. Typical, when I pluck up the courage, he's gone. The lights are on but no one's home. The silence permeated and was nice after a while, not scrounging for something to say or reduced to meaningless phatic talk. Just to be there with each other, it doesn't happen a lot so I wanted, no, needed to appreciate the moment.

We almost watched the seasons go by from that bench. I had to hide my smile when I could feel his hand work his way into mine.

Thank you.

I don't know which one of us needed it more. It felt so foreign yet homely to be experiencing this moment together. Our mouths remained zipped, we didn't need to say anything if he didn't want to. I could feel my feet in the worn leather shoes, and the light breeze which swayed the remnants of the rain off the tops of the trees. It was cold but the sun was doing it's best to battle the puddles and soggy tiles. It almost made the glossy gravestone look like it was crying too.

"Where do you think you go when you die?" exited Tom's mouth.

I didn't really need to think about what I wanted to say, it just flowed out of my mouth like the answer was there all along.

"Does it matter? We're so obsessed with what will or won't happen when we pass on that it takes up people's entire lives. The religions and the groups claiming they know the answers are just as wrong as each other; just as they're right. I think whatever comforts you is what happens. It may be different for you than it is for me, or it may be the same. Hopefully I'll see her again but you never know. What I do know however, is that I want my body to be next to your Mothers and the rest, the rest isn't up to me."

The silence resumed like it had just been on a coffee break.

I wonder what picture of me they'll use at my funeral. When did I look like me? You age constantly so at what point does someone sit back and say right, objectively that's when you looked like you. As a kid you're too small, not quite there yet. As an adult you fluctuate through a lot and then when you're old you look like an echo of your former self that's been left in the oven too long. I wonder what Tom thinks I look like, at what age was I the most me? More time passed, maybe the leaves fell, I'm not too sure.

It had been months since I'd finally plucked up the courage to see him again, we almost got into a routine of general chat on the way there and then radio silence for the rest of the day. Especially in the car on the journey home, but today Dad said something rather profound. Death has clearly been weighing on his mind, goodness knows how long he's been alone at his place thinking about it. I wonder how long it takes to come up with different ideas and jump from thought to thought. Is there an idea someone's destined to have if they spend a certain amount of time in a certain place? He stared at the road the entire time he said it, like a blank stare even with his head tilted towards mine.

“You know what I find odd?” he stopped to clear his throat before continuing.

“The fact that the older and older you get, the less people care. Especially in relation to death. I’m not saying it should be the vice versa, not in the slightest. It’s nice the way it is, I like to reserve my right to be forgotten. I hold that, I own that. It’s more an observation, I only bring it up because almost by definition, the younger you are, you’ve had less of an impact on the world and met less people. I mean it’s clearly the fact that those opportunities have been robbed from them. You’re more so mourning the person they could have been just as much as the person they are.”

It’ll play on my mind for years, what were the exact conditions which made him conjure up such a thought? Back at Mum and Dad’s place we cooked tea, or more aptly, Dad cooked it. I wonder if he knows I still can’t cook. While we ate I wanted to turn the television on but couldn’t get it to work, hopefully he can fix it before Tuesday.

“Leave the washing up, I’ll do it tomorrow” he said as he rubbed his hands together like a child about to get ice cream before he continued “Now let’s play some Poker!”

After an hour or so of playing, I was too scared to admit I didn’t know the rules but I’m starting to think he doesn’t either. Each time he questions one of my moves I calmly put it back on him.

“Are you sure you have played this before?”

The sweet temptation to crack a smile never gets the better of me, although it never subsides. He’s too scared of being proven wrong he simply goes along with it. All until he snapped.

“Tom, you can’t Go Fish in Poker.”

Oops. The mood softened again, in true British fashion I slapped my knees and declared my imminent departure. Dad looked shyly around the table, as if he had something to say but not quite the confidence to say it.

“Tom, please can you tuck me into bed?”

As I stepped in through the door a rush of clarity washed over me. Everything beforehand felt like it was already the past, even as I was living it, it was history. But in this little room, it felt current, in the moment. Even a room so lost in time made me completely present in my thoughts. Her dried out mug of tea and open crossword still sit on her bedside table. Her toothbrush is still in the ensuite, this is the impact of a life.

Dad is old fashioned so wears a nightcap with his striped pyjamas, all he needs now is a candle to light his way to bed. He tunnels himself into the duvet so snugly it almost looks sculpted as he fits perfectly into position. On the left side, I thought that he would have

retired to the middle of the bed by now. But no, he still leaves space for her. His arms lay either side of the sheets.

“You never used to let me tuck you into bed, there was nothing I wanted more than to read you a bedtime story as we both fell asleep. Oh, I had sleepless nights about it.”

I know his intention isn't to make me feel guilty, but it is a definite side effect.

I put my hand in his and hold it tight. I'd prepared what I was going to say for so long that I didn't even think now was the time to say it, but it was too late. Like pressing play on a pre-recorded message, it already started.

“Dad, I love you and I'm sorry I've never been good at saying that. I hate myself everytime I think of it, but I'm sorry I never had kids in time for Mum to meet them and I'm sorry that even now you're not a Grandad. And most of all I'm sor-”

He interrupts me, not with words but with a smile so infectious I already find it on my face. My arm feels weightless as he pulls it towards himself, after softly kissing it he speaks softer than he ever has before.

“I know about him, and I'm happy for you two.”

All I ever needed to hear distilled down into one sentence. After a moment he continued.

“And I love you too.”

We sit in the perfect silence, the arms on the clock continue, as did the cars outside. But we weren't paying attention to that, the world outside continued for hours while we sat there for what felt like minutes. We had our own little vacuum of time and space just for us.

Eventually, the time came. Like a butterfly's wings after landing on the perfect flower, his eyelids close.

His grip on my hand weakens.

Finally, he sleeps.



Illustrated by Jacob Saul

There's an eerie silence to every house at night. Everyone's still home, yet somewhere else. Vacant. I normally come in late as not only do I not want to cause a disturbance, the buses have always packed up by the time I've finished work. I remember as a kid thinking midnight seemed like an ungodly hour and why on earth would anyone need to be up later than 9 pm?! But naturally, as you get older, the dead of night gets pushed back and back and back, until it finds a happy medium right as the sun rises. Not quite sure why I'd always stay up so late. Always been a bit of a night owl, I even asked for the later shift at work.

After silently clicking the front door shut, it felt like I'd managed to mute the world around me. As silent as the whispers of the dead. The ceiling was lost to the dark, I couldn't quite make out its definition, it almost made the lampshade feel like it was floating in thin air with no real tether to the architecture. Right in front of the door are the stairs, leading to the big expanse of the first floor or alternatively you could turn right, to the kitchen and lounge, I was thirsty but had no real business on the ground floor. I was tired and didn't want to wake the dog. So, after plucking my shoes off like petals from a flower, I headed upwards. It seemed like each step on the staircase was as fine-tuned as a piano, I couldn't quite tell if it was rising in pitch with each step but my ears certainly deceived as such. Each creek of the floorboards felt avoidable but with any attempt to make them stop being squandered by their need to scream. My feet stepped on, well not even eggshells, but baby chicks, so faint it wouldn't even crush their skulls. Oh, think of how jagged the edges would be on your toes. By at least the eighth step I'd earned a cockiness not too misplaced until ooowwww, with the pain of one-thousand roman blades all concentrated into one square centimetre plastic brick. Fucking LEGO, always the LEGO. Leaking out a cry of pain that wouldn't be out of place if found on a little girl or dog, I deeply inhale as if it would retract the noise. I hold for a moment. Motionless, to check the damage. The silence was so loud it was piercing my ears just as the plastic was to my foot.

The coast seemed clear, oh the bollocking I'd get if I woke anyone up. The smile of reassurance radiated from my face and almost lit the way forward. In front of me was a cross-roads of sorts but before I could weigh up my options, I heard it. In a single moment my mind almost left my body and instantly threw itself in hundreds of directions to find the source of the noise before hearing the second part, the crying. Oh not the crying. I darted towards the baby's room, hopping along on the memorised safe and silent patches of floor until finally reaching it. The door was propped open like it always was and the decorations of rubber ducks plagued the walls. How hideous. You can see it from the outside with the large almost industrial windows. Even passers by see it and presumably vomit. I know I do everytime I go past. As I push in through the doorway and towards the little girl it feels like I'm Indiana Jones coming up to the treasure. She's such a sweet little thing, I love her, but admittedly I was scared of her mother. Especially given the time of night. Scooping her up like a cat's litter tray, I rock her back and forth. She starts to quiet down but the gasps and odd noises still remain a constant released in short sharp intervals. I'd made sure to support her head with one hand, just like WikiHow said. I'll drop a link in the description, was a thought that crossed my mind, I first pondered why but then found my answer in the flashbacks of those bloody vlogs I watch. The little baby Beth had started to calm down, her head fitting neatly into my palm. I could never get over the thought of at this age everything is still her first, her beady eyes dart around the room occasionally landing on mine. I wonder how much awareness she has. Do I feel homely or distant to her? I wish we spent more time together, just the two of us but the duty of work pulls me away. The movement of her wriggling arms almost resembles her doing backstroke, it'll be some years before she can swim by herself. I'll always be there to help her along. It flashes into my mind like a montage seeing her on her first day at school, learning to ride a bike... all the landmarks that at the time felt like natural progression but you can look back on with such fondness. She had all that yet to come, her arm stopped, leaving it pointing upward and a huge grin crossing her face, partnered with the most adorable little chuckle. I pull her in close for a cuddle, being careful not to hurt her. She's still fragile, vulnerable to the big bad world. 'Don't worry' I whispered under my breath. 'That's why I'm here'. Holding her like this felt like when you give an egg to a labrador. Her eyes peered out beyond my shoulder and she looked up at the tacky plastic glowing stars. It took me back a moment, it was like when you walk down the high street and one day stop to look at the buildings above the store fronts. Flats and lives lived entirely above where you perceive the everyday. These were her first stars.

Her lips dryly smacked together indicating her thirst, I pondered. Wandering towards the mini-fridge in the corner of the room which was stocked up exactly for moments like this. I always thought her Mother was silly pumping it like that, as she'd always be in earshot to her but in this moment I appreciated her for the genius she was. After placing the beautiful Beth back into her cot I continued to pursue the fridge, as it opened it almost blinded the both of us. Wish I had brought sunglasses now. Awh, just pictured her in sunglasses, adorable! As I picked up the breast milk from the fridge I couldn't remember if she'd have it hot or cold, the microwave led me to draw my own conclusion. Seeing it spin around for nearly a minute on that plate it looked like it was up for sale on one of those Telly adverts. Buy One Get One Free with this special offer! Little Beth's eyes were transfixed on the rotating milk like it was the only thing in the world. After pouring it into a bottle I checked it for temperature. Having

the cap between my lips I squeeze. Ooh, not too bad love! No wonder she was obsessed! I peer over to a large frown consuming Beth's entire face, oh if looks could kill!

Proceeding as normal she seemed to think it was the right temperature as it was being gulped down, meandering towards the window our reflections came into view.

"And who's that beautiful little girl right there?" I mouth to her. She doesn't respond, fair enough.

"And who's he? That's right that's Daddy!" I continue mouthing as if speaking to the deaf.

Being brutally honest, I was getting a little jealous she was having it all to herself. There was only a sip left so I thought, what was the harm? Snatched! Gulped! Gone!

As if each word had its own sentence, I recognised the voice behind me.

"Who, the *fuck*, are you?!"

The thuds in my chest could be felt on the richter scale. I turn around slowly, Beth and the bottle in either hand.

"Put down my Baby!" the voice continues.

I've been rumbled.

"Hey, hey, hey, I'll put her down. I'll put her down." I realise I'm in no position to bargain.

Beth smiles and almost appears to clap at the sight of her Mum. She stands in the doorway, visibly shaking in a thin grey dressing gown with exposed legs. She's just as stunning as the pictures, even in the flesh she only looks like the videos come to life. Not quite real. She holds her phone out like a knife, it offers the same threat as one.

"Please! Give me my Baby"

I start to hand her the sweet little girl, so oblivious to the current events. As she nearly reaches her hands she seeps out a cry for help.

"MARK! MARK!"

Big mistake. Now that's just bad etiquette. I snatch the baby back.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please just give her back and leave"

Following deep footsteps a well-built Father stands in the doorway accompanying the Mother. They almost look like a band. His muscular frame sure trumped my wiry build. Bollocks.

He outstretched his hand towards Beth and I took a step back. He moved slowly, one pace at a time, like a King in chess. Before I knew it the narrow shallow room had ended with my back up against the industrial window. What other options did I have left? The Father remained mute, it was admirable. Knowing words couldn't resolve this. The bottle crashed to the floor as my grip released. In an attempt to be subtle my hand crept behind my back and started to undo the latch on the window.

The gap between us was edging smaller, I angle myself away from him.

PING!

The window latch was anything but quiet. It flew upwards almost shattering the glass and the breeze dramatically blew his hair. Wow, he really did look like a movie star. I could feel the sharp windowsill digging into me as I pushed back further. Poor little Beth started to cry, look at the distress they'd caused her! We'll be waking up the whole street at this rate. The Mother was hysterical, still by the door. Crying so hard at points no noise even came out before inhaling half the air in the room. It dug sharply into my shoulder and just by natural reaction I adjusted my grip.

"Come on now" was said but I couldn't tell if it was one of their voices or mine.

My heart wasn't just skipping beats but entire verses.

Where can I go from here? Nowhere but down.

Tears started to fill the eyes of the Dad. It was just as beautiful and poetic as you'd have hoped. He always had a quip and a joke in those videos but now he was silent. Who was I to interfere with this family? They didn't even recognise me.

The window frame digging deeper into my skin than a grave made me yell involuntarily. The Mother seemed to mimic that as she looked like she was going into labour on the floor. Not that she was pregnant of course, just that much sweat and hyperventilation just makes anyone look like that. The dog downstairs started to yell along with her. At this point I was almost hanging out of the window, goodness knows what was preventing me from falling, and with that; as if in a flash, the baby was out of my arms...

Even I wasn't sure as to where.

Everything seemed to move slowly as my eyes worked their way towards where she'd been.

Both of my hands, empty.

The window, open.

I blink my eyes to wipe away the tears and it feels like it lasts an eternity.

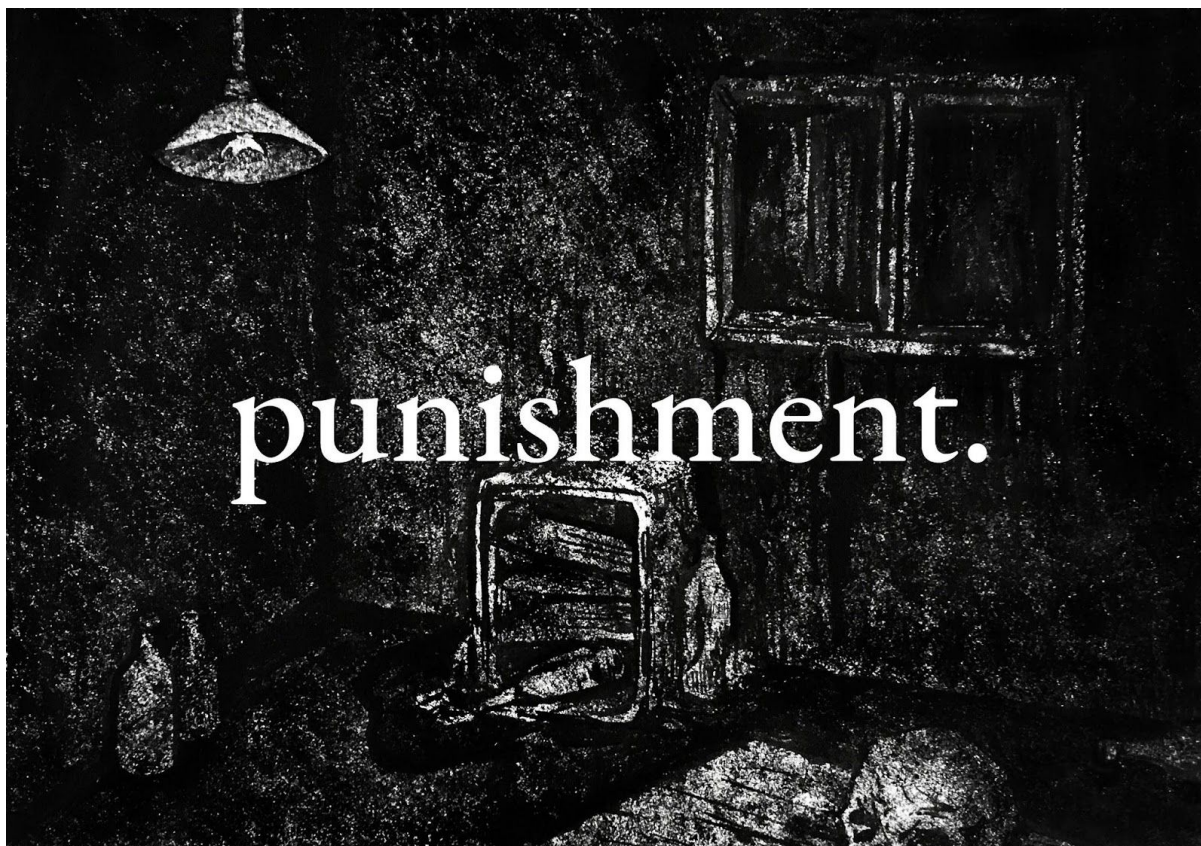
Beth is still screaming, almost harmonising with her Mother.

Looking down I see her in the arms of her Father. He passes her pack like a rugby ball at the start of a match.

Each blink almost acts as a slideshow for the current events. The Father heroically saving their baby. Then pinning me to the floor. Ooh he has a firm grip. As I become one with the carpet and have my ear blown off from the shouting. I smile, damn that milk has an aftertaste.

Description:

<https://www.wikihow.com/Hold-a-Baby>



Illustrated by Magda Líšková

The fungus has spread across the room like a cancer. Mutating, spreading, engulfing anything in its path. A long time ago, the mould once resembled poisoned bunting strung around all four walls, which has now evolved into thick veins of tar with thousands of arteries diverging off and multiplying. Nowhere is safe. A window that once offered a pleasant view of the park has been enveloped and consumed until even light has given up the futile venture of entering. I forget where the window was now, it's been that long. Certain edges of the room have been fully lost to the dark, but other parts still cling on like refugees. There's no apparent source of this light, pieces of the light bulb still litter the room from when it went off like a grenade. Thick glitter cascaded everywhere in a burst of light, shards are still dug deep into my skull, that's where I felt it... Elsewhere I accepted the punctures to my flesh, welcomed it. At first, even after the moss had started to grow over, upon a gentle touch there it was, like reading braille, a unique pleasure. Occasionally, albeit very rarely, a red light flickers and then whimpers from the corner of the room. As red as a sunset, oh it's gorgeous that red. It emits from the doorless fridge as it coughs to life every so often. The small little bulb inside I'd have suspected to be long gone, but here we are. Surviving. Out of the bulb, the light comes before having to battle through the bottles of blood that fill the unit. Well, I say blood. It's dried out into a powder now, but the stain in the glass persists with the stubborn red. I always thought of myself as a little photographer and here I am with my own little darkroom.

In this hellscape, I daren't even describe the smell. The years seeing the mould and the plants flirting and toying with getting ever closer to me were frustrating. At first, a branch tickled the top of my head at the same time the fluffy moss-filled the space in between my toes. That was back when I could have done something about it, but what would have been the point? If there's an eternity on its way then you best get on with it. I'd have liked to have said it was not long after but I reckon it was a decade or so of the branch circling my head and then popping my skull open like an easter egg. Only a few months after the fungal mushrooms pushed up through my toenails like opening a car bonnet. After that, the leaves tickled my moist brain before the mould got to it. Oh, that mould. The armchair. Me. When did that all become the same? I always wondered how the plants kept growing with no sun or water, but looking down at my arm wrapped up tight by a thick vine that has curled around my limb like a python, it's become clear. They live off of my life. It fuels them. No wonder my skin has sagged and rotted, exposing the bone and the dark puss that once lied within. I'm a compost heap. I haven't moved in centuries, I used to pray for my last breath and yet I drew that long ago. My body just remains, motionless, still. My eyelids rotted soon after that, I can't even blink. An eternity to be witnessed from the comfort of my own home. But this was all a part of the terms of course. This is all my punishment.

There are certain things you notice with time. At first, it was difficult to see, let alone believe. But, like everything, patience reveals all. What else is a man, who's trapped, no, entombed in one chair to do until the end of time? What else can he do than look? Bare witness. At first, it was at the children in the park, then the mould and then my eyes started to wander before all energy was lost and my eyes grew still. There was one point that I fixated on, it wasn't even worth describing, it was nothing. So boring I loathed myself for not landing on a better part of the room. But patience is the key here. After, at a guess, three hundred years? Of my unwavering, unflinching gaze; I started to see the outline. So faint at first it could be dismissed. But as another three hundred years came and went, details started to appear, only to the silhouette mind you. But gradually, the corner of the room wasn't as empty as it once was. After a century or so chugged along, a face as clear as my pale skin was right there in the corner of the room. A ghastly ghoulish looking creature, that was enough to make anyone weep, it made me cry tears of ivy vines. I'd been guaranteed eternity and if my body could move at all I would be shaking in fear. How long have I not been alone? I-i-it has eyes made of teeth and a screaming mouth full of bristles that look like they contain the light of a thousand s-

Suddenly, at that moment, mid-thought, the room around me snapped into another. Over the thousand years, my mind had quite literally turned to mush, it took me months to even think of a full thought, so in a flash, I was back to my old mouldy room. Alone. I was sure this time. I must've been in the other place for what? A day or so? I should have picked up more descriptors, why was I there? How was I there? Why am I back here?

Hundreds of years later, my friend in the corner had returned. My dried-out eyes started to see the detail in his coarse skin. As the years flicked by more and more details were coming to light. Was he a burn victim? In another flash, the room had snapped again. But it snapped back even quicker this time. It was another day, in another place, but now I see I must train my mind to be sharper. For an eternity, you allow yourself to slack, your mind slows so the

decades pass quicker but if I wanted to enjoy these little holidays of mine, then I best start taking the long way round.

The next thousand years were painfully slow, if I still had hair then I'd have pulled it out. Each second that ticked by felt like a thud in my chest, an internal metronome, counting the hours, counting the minutes, counting the seconds. The Other had started to form sooner than before, frustratingly he was in the corner of my eye. Instead of being parallel to me, he was in the other corner of the room. As the months and years went on, I could see them slowly turning towards me. Wait, were they getting closer?

Snap. The room changes, but this time I'm ready. I absorb the details, revel in them. The mounds of mould and twisted plants were replaced with clean walls, littered instead with a string of fairy lights and a large tapestry or blanket of sorts above a bed. This wasn't my room, yet I remained married to the armchair. So, I just sit in the corner of this room and wait, for what I wasn't too sure. After some hours, movement from the bed shows that oh, this room is populated, but by whom? I tried calling out but my body remained uncooperative. As still as a corpse. It was only after the sun shone in through the window that they started to rise from their slumber. I was almost getting excited at the prospect of being seen or noticed. Hello! Remember me? But she just got dressed and left, not as much as a passing thought for the stranger in the corner. I couldn't overtly recognise who she was but it was definitely someone in their late teens, early twenties. The sun batted from one side of the room to the other and began sinking again. She hadn't returned. With another thousand-year wait ahead of me, the anxiety of it sinks into my shoulders. All before being lifted as the door swings open, she's returned with company. A rather strapping fellow. They're all around each other, connected at the lips. She rips off his shirt and my goodness gracious, I like where this is going. They almost dance around the room together, littering items of clothing behind them like a trail of breadcrumbs. Hello, my lovelies. Even though the sludge in my veins is stagnant, I've not felt this alive in a millennia. She sits on the desk with her legs wrapped around him as he fumbles for something in the draw. The heat and tension between them was palpable as he now struggled to unlatch her bra. Come on son, you've got this. Just as the latch came loose and he started to pull the supporting cup away from her breast the room snapped back to the status quo. Now that was a punishment. Send me back.

The centuries danced by as I was racing on the thought of them for longer than their lifetimes. That moment, probably so insignificant to them, they'll be dead and buried by now but that image still lives on in my mind. That's mine now. I feel like a child on the night before their birthday, so much so that I completely ignore the Other forming in the room.

It was only when the walls flipped again that I realised the last time was a fluke. The mould flips into a beige pattern as a double bed is presented with an old man sat bolt-upright, using the wall for support. Oh, how pitiful. For some time the man stares directly at me, yet looks through to the wall. Until his jaw opened and he looked shocked almost with a deep inhale, the door comes crashing open and in waddles, two toddlers and a woman who's age matches his.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY GRANDAD!”

They yell from their tiny mouths and he joins in with their celebrations and the cake, without even as much of a passing glance to me. Every thousand years like clockwork I get plonked into the corner of a room to observe for twenty-four hours. Yet every time I always return to the decay, there was once that I snapped back at a slightly different angle, only by a degree or so; but it brought something to light. How could I have been so foolish? I always did love souvenirs. Almost like an impact site, the thick vines of mould all sprouted from ground zero. On the edge of the now deflated and collapsed coffee table, a melted severed head sits, once pride of place but now rotted into black tar. It's somewhat poetic, with these dark vines weaving throughout the various cracks and holes in the skull. If I could have only lost my pride for one moment, my current situation may be a little more comfortable. He still looks just as gorgeous as the day I met him, he always had a way of putting a smile on my face. His once so well maintained skin has now charcoaled, resembling acidic leather more than anything. After a while the Other fades in, if you give them enough time, they selfishly block the view of my love. I've not seen him in centuries. Please, let me have this. Time slugged along and he was gone. Yet another thousand-year cycle later, I'm back to the original orientation, he's right there. Yet out of my grasp.

After goodness knows how many cycles, a thought popped into my mind. Why does patience allow me to see them? Then a red flash illuminated the room and they didn't have a shadow. It's been many turns since that fridge last flashed, a true dying whimper or maybe just a memory. But it reminded me of my little dark room, my bout at photography. It reminded me of how when you capture an image in the dark, the exposure needs to be extended. To let all of the information in. Thus creating my new hypothesis, there are creatures, beings, in every room, in every corner, but nobody has the patience to see. Some don't even have the lifetime to witness. Each blink could cancel it out, but maybe, just occasionally, people see glimpses of us, in the corner of their eye only to turn and we're gone but trust me, we're still there. We sit and we watch you live your life and you're none the wiser that we're watching. This is my punishment, to be forgotten. These plants and their vines are not my chains, they are not my shackles. It's the pain of knowing that no matter what I did to end up here, no matter the pain I caused my victims, no one will know. I do believe that this is hell. Not just any hell, but everyone's. We won't be thought of again. Not even an afterthought. I truly believe that this place is to demonstrate how futile it all is. If hell was a pit of eternal flame then at least there'd be something to do. I'd prefer to be burnt alive all day long if it meant I could be out of that wretched room. But then, just for twenty-four hours...

Can you see us? In the corner? Yes hello, that's where we are. You're looking, but do you see? Oh, I've waited such a long time for this.

the end of all things.

“Somebody stop that man!” I cry in the regional tongue.

It was no use, we'd already disappeared. One foot continually thrown in front of the other at a pace faster than my mind could conceive. If I stopped to think about it then I'd trip myself up. Time and time again they open rifts trying to shake me off. Luckily, I'm not far behind. We'd initially landed in 1930s New York, thus the trenchcoat and accompanying hat. My goodness, I felt like a running cliché. The thick sound of the boots meeting the concrete was satisfying at first, if not a little repetitive. I was as hot on his tail as a furnace, at times the tips of his trench coat tickled my fingers but never long enough to maintain a substantial grip. I wish he'd just settle on a century. My lungs struggle to keep up with the rapidly ever changing quality of inhalations. The clear carbon dioxide from the Jurassic period to the thick pollutant industrial fog of days yet to come, all within one breath, I'm almost anxious to exhale, carrying matter from before the birth of creation which could be lethal for whomever may take in this second-hand smoke. We were travelling and flipping through time like flicking through pages in a book. Years became streets and cities were centuries, a whole place seemingly built on time. After the initial jump we started in the Devonian era and by the end of the road we had cars flying above our heads. Occasionally it's hard to see him, even though he's right in front of me, as at points we don't stay in a place for longer than a single instant, not even long enough for light to find us. Ever felt like you're tripping over thin air? My Apologies. Our physical entities manifest like echoes or footprints on a beach, surviving only a moment longer. Clinging on to existence. But we're long gone.

He was trying to evade me through time, shake me off his back. But we were in the same bubble together at this point, a lift share, at times it feels like we're completely stationary and it's the Earth that turns beneath us. I've always felt like a tourist on this rock, so in some ways I'm glad that now it's official. The exhaustion started to plague my legs, you must forgive me for growing weary, I have been running since the creation of all things. His posture never changed though, fatigue seemingly couldn't touch him. Nor could I. It always hurt looking out at the glimpses of people in different times and places, everyone was a

ghost. Even the newborns aren't exempt. No matter where there is life, if you give it enough time, there will be death.

Death must be maintained. Death must be preserved.

I make a conscious effort to examine his attire, he has thick black boots and a trenchcoat flying in the wind. He has a matching fedora and come to think of it, we were wearing identical clothes. It was as I scanned down to look at his watch that a blue dash caught my eye, from his hand a periodic blue flash dropped out like morse code. It appears to be infrequent, I only knew it was a liquid from when I slipped on it, nearly making me miss the next rift rupture. Luckily I slipped through, but a piece of the heel of my shoe wasn't so lucky. So somewhere, from the birth to the death of the universe, there's a little rubber part of my shoe, sliced off from a collapsing rupture. At least I know what happens if I fall behind. After regaining my balance, the pursuit continues as normal. I can't afford to fall behind, there's a reason I'm using his ruptures. I only have enough energy for two jumps contrasting to his seemingly endless supply, I'm just waiting for the moment he slips up. That's all it takes. One moment, in the timeline of creation.

We landed in one particular single instant, with a man in between us. I didn't have time to observe the surroundings and identify a setting before the impact. The pain was like a bullet perfectly shaped and sculpted to your own silhouette. Every single part of your body, shot. I emitted a scream so loud it ricocheted through their entire timeline, birth to death, every single moment of their being now scored with my audible cry of pain. It was too much for one brain to comprehend, your entire life being rewritten, memories violated in a single instant. He himself now knew nothing but screaming. What was left of him after the impact was little, imagine a car impacting with a grape. Collections of flesh populated different parts of the street like a Jackson Pollock painting. I spat something out of my mouth which only upon further inspection was one of his teeth. By this time the man I was chasing was long gone, he could be witnessing the heat death of the universe by now and I'm lost to time. There was a moment of silence first, the calm before the storm. I needed for my presence not to be felt so I could slip away unnoticed. The poor man's bones smashed through store front windows like javelins, heads were already turning. My eye caught a loose pile of metal parts close to the paving slabs on the side of the road. A pool of blood tracked my eyes up to the remains of the man, the stranger, his exposed heart continues beating like a mutating tennis ball, as did his lungs. Connected by nothing more than loose flesh and appendages. He takes a deep inhale. Time slows. My mind demands my legs to charge forward but they're firmly on strike. What else is a man to do who has known nothing more than screaming pain? His lungs tense and force air up through his throat and do all he's ever known... he yells a blood curdling guttural howl.

Defeat.

Attention begins to be drawn to the gore strewn across the road, I hardly appear innocent with my coat heavy in his blood. My eyes dart around, inhaling any parts of the scene in front of me that can indicate the time and place. Concrete. People in suits. Newspapers in hand, but no technology in sight. Not specific but definitely 20th Century. I need to get back to the

man I was chasing and there was little room for failure. He can't win. I stumble away to stay out of sight of the forming crowd, oh how they flock to disaster like a moth to flame. My body painfully throbs in protest while trying to fling one foot in front of the other, they're not responding.

After retreating to a tree, I collapse against it. It's only now I look back at the trail of blood I've left behind, like a tether to the collision. But that's not his blood, it's mine. Angling my head towards my leg, my eyes refuse and act like a repelled magnet. I give in and see the stranger's pelvic bone impaled into my thigh. Suddenly all feeling comes back, localised in the area of pain. One hand grips the bone tightly and holds it almost as a handle, with the other hand going round to inspect how bad the damage truly was. It was worse than I thought. I couldn't tell if the pelvic bone shot into me upon impact or if I phased into existence exactly where he was which fused the bones together. Although when I moved the top half, the bottom did wiggle, it relieved pressure on the ruptured arteries causing them to spew blood into the grass. On first instinct I put all my energy into trying to lift it out, but it wasn't a clean tear from his body. My hand slid with force along the moist meat still married to the bone right up to the snapped joint with a sharp almost scalpel-like tail that instantly slit right through the skin between my thumb and index finger. That piece that almost appears as webbing, now as deflated as a tent with no poles. The blood flocks to the wound, it was just another addition of problems on the to-do list. My eye catches the ominous green glow from the inside pocket of my trench coat, two rift jumps. Oh, this was going to hurt. Taking out one of the small containers proved more difficult than intended as no matter what, one hand always likes to hold the wound, like that would help anything. Blood trickled down and then through the lining of the coat until I managed to get a good hold and rip the container from the connected machine. Surviving on one less jump was easy, pressure makes you more perfect, right? I wish I could believe myself. The containers were like batteries, with enough energy in them to keep the sun burning for five years, may not sound that impressive until you think about it, this would have a field day with energy efficient light bulbs. The pulsing pain through my leg brought back my attention, I could feel my mind slipping. I used the sharp part of the bone to puncture the metal foil lid. A nuclear bomb couldn't open it, but organic matter can. Not sure what the thought-process of the design was with that. Pulsing pain, OW! Right, leg. I flipped the container, the thick liquid inside the capsule started to tease it's way out as it gave into gravity. Before oozing down the bone and upon impact rotting the flesh connected to it. I needed to be as precise as possible. I was going to have a hole punched into my leg but I didn't want it bigger than it had to be. It didn't even collect on my trousers like honey, it marched down through.

ARGH!

The burning was so hot that it felt like my leg was freezing. I could hear as the tendons and muscles snapped and retreated all with the sizzling that cooked the surrounding flesh. I could tell it had reached the other side as a rogue drip ran down my skin rotting it, in turn opening it up like a zip. But with that, the bone fell free and loose. It was like a pencil in a sharpener. By instinct I grabbed it, too soon with some residue surviving. My grasp opened just like my mouth as I let out another in a long series of screams.

When will the pain ever stop? But it's the pain that lets us know we're alive. My goodness, I was even more pretentious than I thought. Thank god I'm not writing this down.

Right, think! What exact time and place do I know where and when he was? We ran through the fourth world war, I can still feel the radiation thumping through my foot. But was that the trenches of Rome or the fall of Greece? Shit. Where did we stay for longer than a moment? I can't recall. I've all but forgotten life before the chase. Why was I after him in the first place? I knew he had to be stopped but why? The only two words that flash through my mind like bingo cards are 'Life' and 'Death'. Without the 'and' of course, that's three words. I remember flashes at points, like my mind took a moment to buffer, I know I need to maintain the sanctity of death. Was I chasing him? Or was he running from me? Did I threaten his life? The pain from my leg was almost acting like a mental block. Pushing a boulder up a hill while on crutches. No, I wouldn't threaten a life. But I would do what I must. I needed answers and I knew he was the only one that could give them to me. So where is he? Or more aptly, where was he?

I hear the sirens of the Ambulance and Police marking their presence by the collision site. OH!. The collision site. I push against the tree hoping it'll give me the strength and stability I need to stand. As I gain height, the bone completely falls through the vacant space in my leg. I hate that bloody thing, although I do turn around and pick it up. Survivor's instinct more than anything else, keep any asset to hand. I still had the broken contextual scanner that put me in these clothes in my pocket, that one was from a collision with a tree instead though. Contextual Scanner? Surprised there wasn't 'Quantum' in front of it, it always needs to sound 'spacey'. Retreating back to the collision was more a stumble than a walk, I certainly couldn't chase anyone in this state. Even with no spatial awareness I could find my way back from the screams of the man who was yet to die, poor thing. I am glad that his scream masked my own from my make-shift surgery. God forbid anyone witnessed that. Pushing through the crowd would have raised some challenges, but they parted like the red sea, suppose I do look and smell oddly suspicious.

"You can look but you can't touch" I whispered to a little girl in the crowd as she smiled to a friend through the hole in my leg.

It was like walking through a graveyard, I wondered what kind of life they'd have lived, what age will they reach? Well, how old are they now? Mark today's date people, the coroner's will need it.

The pieces are all there. There's a coffee table in that tree and god knows how many burgers in that cow. Everyone is just pending graves, the lump of rock that'll mark your existence on a gravestone is out there somewhere, right this second, before the rock is hacked and defiled, trapped and attached to you for an eternity. Well, until the twenty-second century and the graves start overflowing. "Reuse and Recycle" was the government's motto.

A Police Officer approached me steadily with one arm raised out as a shield. He muttered something but with the contextual scanner in pieces it was as helpful as if he said nothing at

all. He was nothing, a mild blip of inconvenience that would be forgotten as soon as the next one came along. Pushing past him and towards the impact victim was heart-breaking. His torso scattered, now unconnected. The Police cut all his tendons and joined flesh. His heart now in a box metres away from his lungs which were already being carted off. They're already harvesting his organs, or have they not invented that yet? The problem they didn't seem to realise though, was that his entire timeline was fractured. His life was being pulled from every moment of his existence, a heart beating from childhood pumped blood to the brain, the lungs of a twenty-something, breathing for his future self. His pelvic bone inches from his decapitated head, still, through all of this, screaming. With no body to call his own. Anyone got a lost property box? The least I could do was put him out of his misery, one drop from the energy capsule would be enough to finally collapse his existence. Sorry mate, I need the jump. I reassured myself that it wasn't my fault, it was an accident after all. The heat from where I landed was still melting the tar on the road. After noting the exact location, it was time to jump. I tried to disperse the crowd, but they weren't having any of it. I'm doing this to help them, so my conscience is clear. I pried the machine out of my coat and danced with the dials. To a novice it could almost appear like a classical film camera, complete with a separate handle for the bulb. Normally it doesn't use up this much energy but it was easier to jump further than it was only by an hour or so. A paradox would be less than ideal, so I need to be in and out of there. No seeing myself.

And with that, click.

A bright white light blinds me and in a wave the machine sucks the life out of the crowd like it was collecting for charity. Not all of them died however, the little girl became a frail old woman and stood among a sea of corpses and a severed head, still screaming. And like that, I was gone. From that moment anyway.

I appeared only moments before I had originally, I can smell it coming, just as you can before it rains. But there wasn't anyone in sight. There were a couple a little ways down the road but no one near. So, whom did I collide with? I knew there was less than a minute before impact. I started spinning on the spot, weighing up options. Only for it to click with less than thirty seconds left. There's nothing quite like that euphoric moment when the cogs in your mind slot together and work as one, your attention solely on one problem. And with that I was off with my plan, I was a fool for missing it when I saw it.

With a series of grunts and gestures I called over the polite couple with young love in their eyes and waved what looked like a camera at them. This must appear to them to be cutting edge technology, time distilled into a frozen moment, how comical. One of them pulled out a wallet but I shrugged it off and insisted it was free of charge through the universal language of a head shake. From what I could gather they were telling me their names, no time, I'll only get attached, grabbing both of their arms with some force, I apologised most sincerely. From the bottom of my heart, to theirs, which were about to be strewn across the road. Thus the two pelvic bones, I'm a fool for missing it. I force them in place, the *perfect* models and take a step back. The paving stones a few strides behind me start to shake, almost in anticipation. I pull up the now busted rift machine and they smile just before the first streak of lightning, for less than a moment he turns to her, scared and shaking. How beautiful.

I threw the machine behind me, like that would give me more momentum, as two men arrived in a flash of light and instantly pulverised the loving couple. The single instant stretched on like we were trapped in a painting. I waded through the splattering blood and almost swam towards the man at the front as by automation his next rift opened. His waist fitting nicely in my shoulder and I lunged into him. We take parts of her with us, such as the head and the ever so pretty legs but the parts he'd impacted with were already being scattered across the street and blending in a paste with her lover.

The rift rupture collapses behind us. And his machine smashes upon impact with the black and white marble floor now accented with her deep red blood. Her detached head, swam on top of the pool of blood. Her mouth was gaping open, almost like she was trying to drink it back up. It sat still, motionless. The room was almost a cylinder going straight up, the height of which was rather astounding. A fancy chandelier appeared to be miles above us. Eight long window panes gave a great view of the surrounding area, with joining walls covered in books. This appeared to be an office complete with a vintage wooden desk. Even with the views to look down the streets and all along the rooftops I couldn't pinpoint the time period until I saw a previous version of myself fleeing from a crowd and towards a tree. My mind flew back into the room and not from the views outside, we'd travelled in space but not time. I kept a tight grip of the other man in the trench coat as he was coming to terms with events. My hand gripped his arm and it appeared like he was a sum of parts. The sleeve felt more like two rats in a sock than an arm. After lifting him onto the desk I saw he was muttering something but I couldn't quite make out the words. His eyes were vacantly rolled back, only parts of his pupils teased their way into view; he never blinked. Even with blood splatter collected on his eyeballs to no reaction. His nose was deformed with one thick nostril. My current hypothesis was he was quite literally a bag of bones. Skin holding bones in place with muscle and organs completely absent. In some ways I thought it might be me I was chasing, but this puts that theory to rest. The constant chanting emitting from the hole in his face pierced my ears and attempted to ripple back through my life but I wouldn't let it.

"WE MUST SURVIVE. WE MUST SURVIVE. WE MUST SURVIVE."

Before I could even pose one of my questions his hand forcefully violated it's way into the hole in my leg. His sharp untrimmed nails did laps around the wound as I screeched out in pain. Exposing all the once sealed nerves, the blood started to pour, his fingers became limp like spaghetti and filled the hole like he was trying to plug it up. At this point my grip on him was lost as they were supporting me while my posture became flaccid. Even through this, his chanting maintained, I heard the same voice in my head.

"Who are you?" he thunderously demanded from an unknown source.

"Why were you running from me?" I thought. No air passed through my throat before they replied, I could almost taste the words.

"Running from you? Do you intend to mock me?"

He looked deflated and a remnant of their former self. It continued audibly chanting the words.

“WE MUST SURVIVE.”

All before they blasted in my mind again.

“You are nothing, no more than a parasite.”

“Then what were you running from?” I thought.

“Running from? I was running to. I’ve experienced all of creation. But there is nothing beyond death.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Three of those words actually exited my mouth but my body was shutting off.

“The distinction between life and death will be void. Different forms of life will no longer have prejudice and distinction from one another. There will only be life. We must survive. There is no difference between you and a beetle. You are life. They are life.”

My eyes were rolling to the back of my head, I could almost see inside my skull. At this point I could see both, like being half submerged in a body of water. The entire time I was in that room with him, I could feel it getting smaller, like the last bit of toothpaste in the tube. The ceiling was now hung to a point where the chandelier was tickling my head. Gravity was denser around him, to such a degree that any body part in contact started aging. They do say gravity affects time. I could feel my leg withering away and starting to frail, no matter how much I protested. Then I realised, I am nothing. He was right. He wasn’t running from me, I tagged on for the ride. Sucked in by his pronounced gravity, I didn’t even need to have moved my legs.

I gave myself importance and meaning. I had to chase the man. But there was nothing before. There will be nothing after.

“There will be everything” the voice thundered. I forgot he was reading my thoughts, speaking to me through the nerves in my leg.

“The time has come. But not here” it said

Time for what?

“Life” it concluded.

“WE MUST SURVIVE. WE MUST SURVIVE. WE MUST SURVIVE.” My senses started coming back to me as the chanting came slowly into focus and my eyes returned from

viewing the flesh in my skull. I saw the body retrieve the broken parts of the rift machine from their pocket.

“I need not the machine” and with one swipe of their hand the red blood splattered across the floor and the walls turned black and became itself a void. Her head fell through, into nothing. It was only now I noticed the wound on his hand, he was leaking the blue liquid.

“A part of me exists in every moment.” were the last of his words I heard in my head as he split from my fraying nerves and fully detached himself from me. He slipped through and into the void without objection. I followed. Not from a heroic gesture, but I couldn’t sustain my weight so collapsed down and into the pool of rift.

At first there was nothing but darkness. I couldn’t tell if this was the new location or my body failing me. Until drip by drip, it came back to me. What was on the other side was bright and before my eyes adjusted, my ears picked up the hustle and bustle of everyday life, as well as a deep whistle and his ever-continuing chanting.

“WE MUST SURVIVE.”

I look up from my hands pushing away from the cold harsh floor and examine the surroundings. The train in the distance contextualises the whistle and from all directions people are stepping over me in suits and dresses, coffee in one hand and a phone in the other. Lives being lived and experienced. But through the legs I saw him, a small gap had formed around his physical manifestation as well as a pool of his blue blood next to him. Nonchalantly he picked out the destroyed rift machine and detached two of the energy capsules, they were a deep red contrasting to the green of mine and they emitted such heat I could feel it through the crowd. I attempted to crawl towards him but this was futile. A larger vacant space of people was forming, still no attention being paid to him. But now I joined him in the empty space, he was still a good distance away from me though. It became apparent that he wanted to hurt himself when instead of finding another way to open the capsules, he repeatedly smashed it against his face until it had torn the skin away from his nose cavity and finally his bone cracked it open. Broken glass littered his face as each wound all started to drool blue blood.

Finally, he seemingly enveloped the capsules with his head as they fully disappeared. He turned to face me and nothing happened. Gradually different parts of his skin broke out with heated bubbling smoke forcing its way through. Until again, nothing.

It was the pool of blood next to him that started reacting first, before the rest of his body went into a frenzy. Oh how the blue liquid danced and dived like dangerous waves. The worst part was knowing that this was happening everywhere and everywhen. His body was shaking as he remained on his knees, all his clothing disappeared in a single instant and you could see the skeleton beneath his skin. His rolled back eyeballs started to melt out of the sockets like grilled cheese and he seemed to be retching like a dog attempting to throw up. The contortions worked it’s way all up and through his body, until his tongue spilled out. It looked swollen and injured and in a current up his body like a tidal wave in the ocean, it started to

inflate and fill his tongue with the muscles and organs which weren't from his body. I knew not the source, I just saw hair and bile all collecting within this sack for a tongue. Until I saw the pool of blood had vanished. It was off swallowing organic matter into the void like a portable manhole. Phones and clothes happily sat motionless on top of it, unable to enter the growing abyss below. While life fell into the pit, others in the crowd started mutating. There was no longer any distinction between life, so people's eyelashes crawled out like spiders and hands walked off from the arms. Everyone's hair started melting into a liquid and some eyes popped while others just sloshed and turned into gloop on the spot. This didn't just happen to people once, but at every single second of their being. All mounding and joining together in a unified entity. Birds flew directly into people's stomachs and stayed in the skin like it was melting into a stew. Some people's skin shrink wrapped around them, locking them in their own bodies. I saw someone who's teeth cracked into splinters and exploded through their lips and into another man's chest, puncturing his lung that enveloped him from the inside out. One woman had her entire body covered in her lip skin while others had their skin harden until they were all nail. Why was I left untouched? Life became one and death was killed for everyone and everything was alive. Tree bark started growing inside someone's throat while stinging nettles grew out of their ears. Eyelids melted shut, even bacon oinked again. A puddle collected in my pocket and after inspection I pulled out a jellied pelvic bone. As a woman ran past screaming, each part that individually made someone them started to fall away. They all were screaming after minutes, or was it hours? This was not just the end of all things, but the start of one.

"WE MUST SURVIVE."

Soon the sack filled with bile and life was larger than a city and then a nation. Earth crumbled around it, when it became larger than comprehension. Before I knew it, the sack sealed its way around itself. It was just life and I in the vacuum of space, it popped and started mutating and morphing into a singular gelatinous entity. Everything that ever lived or died would continue to do so, forever. It reached out to me like a loving hand before it forced its way through my mouth so hard I gagged but it had already filled me out to my toes before working upwards. I could feel the pressure mounding behind my eyes as the jelly form pushed harder and harder until, pop. My eyes sprung from their sockets but recoiled from the nerves. It started seeping into my brain as I, WE, thought about, MUST, for the last, SURVIVE, time. My life, WE, was over, MUST, and it was going to, SURVIVE, continue on the verge of this, WE, for all of time, MUST, as we are, SURVIVE, life. My skin, WE, jellied, MUST, and I, SURVIVED, joined, WE, them...life. MUST SURVIVE. WE MUST SURVIVE. WE SURVIVED.