

AFTERLIGHT

By

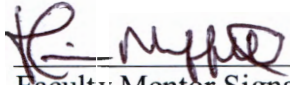
Steven Berry

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Master of Fine Arts Degree

MFA in Creative Writing
The University of Tampa

June 15, 2017

 6/20/17
Faculty Mentor Signature Date

Kevin Moffett
Faculty Mentor

 6-15-17
Second Reader Signature Date

Stefan Kiesbye
Second Reader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Object Memory	14
Dead Language	35
Hidden Track	41
Dealer	48
Code White	59
Mutt	61
Wardrobe	83
Intercept	88
Juice	94
Subject_0019	113
Prints.cxg	120
Candidate	121
Wrong Address	129
The Living Man	140
Last Words After Decapitation	156
A Scent of When	164
Splice	173

ABSTRACT

Afterlight is a modular work which utilizes 17 found artifacts from a collection of many objects discovered by the author. The author functions as a curator, presenting these artifacts to the reader. At the core of the work is a mystery: a town which has disappeared from both records and the physical world. Found items in *Afterlight* are presented in their original forms, both to preserve their integrity and to filter out narrator bias. The curator and reader investigate the artifacts together, piecing together evidence and making conclusions along the way. Instead of solely reading the book, the audience is expected to act as a co-investigator. The premise of *Afterlight* is an experiment in presenting a narrative that deviates from traditional structure and instead is meant to be experienced like an exhibit or case file.

Afterlight is a vehicle to explore motifs of secrecy, finding identity, the pliability of truth, the terrors of uncertainties and unknowns, coming of age, the illusion of innocence, and to what extent anything can truly be forgotten. The variety of source material utilized throughout the book provided ample opportunities to work in different modes and tones, resulting in a product that more closely resembles reality than a first- or third-person narrative method.

Most importantly, *Afterlight* was created as a record of a place with no record; it no longer exists outside of these pages. Therefore, preserving the memories and events of that place was a prime motivator in the creation of the book.

AFTERLIGHT

CURATED BY
STEVEN M BERRY

Introduction

When I first happened upon the town of Stillwater, Florida, it was sealed away in a briefcase hidden inside a hundred-year live oak. At the time, ten months ago, I was working on a manuscript for a novel called *Lensless*: a speculative alternate history story where humans never developed corrections for vision impairment. The society in the novel constructed assisted living facilities for those with vision loss and radio persisted as the primary source of entertainment and information. At the outset, I was interested in extrapolating the prospect of our understanding of the world gathered through fewer senses. In reflection, I suspect what I was truly seeking was an answer to why modern man is enslaved to written and visual media. Why seeing something had become a necessity of truth.

As a hobby, I often venture out Geocaching. Online regional searches reveal secret packages buried in beach sand, perched on lightpoles, or, sometimes, hidden in plain sight. The posting user provides coordinates, difficulty and terrain ratings, a description of the cache, and hints if they feel generous. By December of 2015, my “Caches Found” score on the site was up to 500, which seemed like enough of a round number to stop and focus on my novel. Three months later, with my inspiration toward *Lensless* already waning, I stumbled back onto the Geocaching website. There were mostly the usual caches—you were supposed to rehide the cache once you found it—in my region of Tampa Bay, so I widened the search. More of the same. Then again. Off in

the middle of nowhere, in the southwestern quadrant of Ocala National Forest, a cache posting caught my eye:

A Case I Should Not Have Opened

A cache by [merryweather](#)
Message this owner
Hidden: 09/01/2015

Difficulty: ★☆☆☆☆
Terrain: ★★★★★
Size: Other

Geocache Description:
Do not contact.

5 Logged Visits
😊 0 😞 5

[View Logbook](#)

PencilEraser Premium Member	😊 Didn't find it 07/22/2016 <hr/> Was out caching with 4 other 1000+ cachers. We found everything we set out for, including 3 5*s, but have to DNF this. Don't think it's here anymore. "Other" size category not helpful and owner won't reply for hints. Mod please close.
---------------------------------------	--

I sent a message to the commenter, PencilEraser, but did not receive a reply. In the meantime, I planned a day trip to the cache's location to see for myself how difficult and hidden it could be. By the end of October 2016, I had combed the area on four separate trips.

The cache's location was a heavily-wooded area where the trees wept spanish moss in curtains over moist overgrowth. Dozens of shallow, muddy holes dotted the place, each paired with eroding piles of mud. These were no doubt from other 'cachers, though the rules of hiding a cache explicitly stated that there should be no chopping, cutting, digging, or burrowing. Light from the sun rarely penetrated the canopy, no

matter the time of day, as I discovered in my eight-hour third visit. What stood out from the sand pines and saw palmettos in the area was a four-foot-wide oak whose trunk had been burned. Its bark in the area was mostly bare, and what remained was charred and peeling. There was an abrupt and distinct line where the fire had halted, just out of my reach, and the rest of the trunk and branches appeared to be in good health. Bits of a crystalline light blue powder had been scattered around its base, resembling a gem-like fertilizer. Of all the trees, holes, grasses, and shrubs, that oak was the only apparent landmark and would almost certainly be the location I would have hidden the cache—at least in the interest of being sporting. The diggers had excavated the dirt from all around and under the tree, leaving it to stand on exposed roots like a severed hand. An inverse moat of black soil circled the root system, left in its wrong place. I puzzled at why the holes and soil were left so. Perhaps the diggers would come back and didn't want to lose their place. Perhaps I would meet them. In either case, I appropriated their progress and determined that the cache was not in the ground.

On my fifth visit I brought an axe and handsaw. In each of my visits I parked my sedan in the visitors' area and hiked out to the coordinates. This time, I hired a car to drop off me and my camping bag an hour before sundown. The plan was to start from the top of the tree and move downward, lopping off limbs from narrowest to widest. When night fell and darkness crept up from the ground, I climbed into the canopy and began to dissect what must have been one of the oldest living things in the forest. It died slowly but quietly.

Halfway through the process, still with no discoveries aside from internal fungus and an abandoned bird's nest, I spotted a pair of light beams darting through the benighted wood. I dropped from my perch at fifteen feet to the dirt, dragged the leafiest branches around the trunk, scrambled into the tiny nook beneath the tree, and waited. Men's voices burbled from a distance, then became louder and clearer, remarking that "someone else after it" and "same idea, no balls." It was then that I realized at least ten tons of half-dead tree was balancing on its roots above me; any dramatic shift in its structure may collapse it straight down. The men started a chainsaw.

The rocking of tree as one of the men climbed it coursed through my body and my muscles seized in anticipation of being crushed. One man hollered from the ground level to throw down his rope, then the other began sawing a distant branch. Dirt shook off the vibrating roots around me and the earth gave way when large branches were hastily lowered. They were not taking their time. I tried to Google a number for the park ranger on my phone, but there was no service under the tree. I considered dialing 911 to seek emergency cell signal from the nearest tower, imagining what the two men might do with their tools if they found me, but hesitated when I reminded myself I could be arrested for destroying protected wildlife. Branch after branch toppled down, the roar and whine of the saw entering and exiting the tree, the smell of smoke and friction. The top man called down to fire up the other saw. Only the trunk remained. A second saw whirled to life and both men pressed their steel teeth into the thickness of the tree. Chunks of wood thumped at my eye level, and I could see through my hiding

branches that they had quickly advanced to the burnt portion of trunk. Then: a clanking, shearing of metal on metal, a cascade of sparks, a whoosh of ignition.

The men rolled on the forest floor, slapping at their flaming arms and chests, burying their hollering faces in their own muddy holes. Above me, fire danced around the trunk of the tree and lit the branches around me. I pushed my way out of the hole, pack in tow, and covered my nose and mouth with my sleeve. An inch-wide, vertical metal rod glinted in the firelight from within the tree trunk, resembling a frame that had been installed to secure the great oak. Neither of the burned men had made it to their feet and patted the forest floor to find one another; I never got a clear view of their faces. The fire hadn't yet spread to the branches the men had laid haphazardly where they now crawled. Pieces crumbled away from the trunk, exposing three more bars of metal framework and the deep brown corner of something. I dug into my pack and pulled out the axe. A ranger would arrive soon. I split the burning trunk below the object and between two of the rods. The axe-head stuck in the tree for a moment, but I tugged until it and a large wedge of wood came out. With the obstructing wood partially cleared, I could tell that the object in the tree was a leather briefcase. Somehow, this century-old oak had grown around it. I couldn't let it burn, too.

A week later, I read a news article online about two men who started a wildfire in Ocala National Forest. They would serve the time for the act we all three committed. In a way, I envy them.

It turned out the the briefcase was lined not with leather, but a dull shale sharkskin, and was sealed shut with a pair of three-digit, brass combination locks. A

knock on the case betrayed its metal siding, which deterred my impatient desire of forcible entry after what happened with the booby-trapped oak. I sent several messages to the cache owner, merryweather, and to administrators of Geocaching in futile efforts to obtain the combination to the case. I attempted various configurations of the coordinates, zip code, and nearest street address. Without success, I took to Google maps, looking for patterns in the cache's surroundings. The number of lakes surrounding the cache's location, five, the distance to the nearest town, 2 miles, and so on. Unfortunately, in life, we find patterns and significance where there often are none. This is one of many ways we can waste away our short time on this Earth.

On the next Monday morning, December 5th, I awoke to the case vibrating rhythmic triplets. My first instinct was it would explode in some last act of secrecy, but I soon concluded that the sound was being made by a cell phone—a cell phone in a case that a hundred-year-old tree grew around. The vibration stopped, but resumed every two hours to the minute. After the tenth hour, it stopped and I never heard it again. I used the date, frequency, and vibration pattern in a variety of combinations until one side unlocked with 253. The pattern of swirling circles embossed from the sharkskin were etched into my brain from staring at the case for so long, but I had not realized until then that the pattern did not match on either side of the case; it was mirrored. And so, upon entering 352 on the other combination lock, I opened the case at 11:33 PM that night.

Inside the case were the following: a black plastic cube the size of a quarter with a blinking green light, a white LG smartphone, and a red three-inch ringed binder with

the word **AFTERLIGHT** along its spine in white-out. Corners of copy paper, newsprint, yellow legal sheets, and glossy photo paper sprouted from the sides of the binder. Careful to avoid any tricks, I pulled the cube out of the case and slid off one of its sides to remove the battery powering it. The battery was a tiny, but thick disc which produced a faint whirring from the inside; I set it aside and did not proceed until it was silent. A press of the button on the side of the phone lit the display, bringing up a notification window reading, "5 missed calls - (352) 300-3253" and a critical battery warning. Simultaneously, the green light faded on the cube and the phone shut off. Only the binder remained. I turned the cover to reveal a beige divider and multi-colored organizing tabs with labels like "MILLER" and "THE CD" and "PROJ. MAYA" dividing hundreds of pages of various size, age, and condition. I removed a folded notepad sheet stained by dirty, grooveless fingerprints from the front pocket of the binder to find a note penned by merryweather (MW). In the spirit of MW's method of documentation, I have included his note in full on page 8.

I did not sleep that night, despite my wife's insistence. She had seen me struggle with the case for days until my eyes were bagged and dark, suggesting that perhaps I should return to my book project. I had assured her that I would, but knew that my true book project was whatever lay within the sharkskin briefcase. I pored over the pages of *Afterlight*, sometimes puzzling after the significance of a character or place, other times speculating why someone would go to such lengths to create a stratified and hyper-realistically rendered novel only to hide it. I couldn't imagine doing such a thing myself, but then we are all not coaxed by the same spirits or daemons.

BYSTANDER,

I'M SORRY. THAT'S HOW I'LL BEGIN. THIS BINDER REPRESENTS MY LIFE'S WORK. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE LIVES OF OVER 1000 PEOPLE AND 60 YEARS OF HISTORY SNUFFED OUT IN THE INTEREST OF PRESERVING SECRETS. THE ITEMS YOU WILL READ, HEAR, AND SEE SHOULD EXPLAIN ALL.

MUCH AS YOU MAY SEARCH FOR STILLWATER, YOU WILL ALWAYS FAIL TO FIND IT. ALL THAT REMAINS IS STAYING INSIDE THIS BINDER. A DANGER PERSISTS BECAUSE THEY WILL BE SEARCHING, TOO: FOR THIS AND, SO, YOU.

KEEP MOVING

MW

The binder contained the history of a small town called Stillwater, which was allegedly located in central Florida. Based on the details provided in survey documents and narratives, MW must not have cast it far from where I had found the cache in the National Forest. Stillwater was “born in 1952 and died in 2014,” a small town where a war was waged between the government, or a defunct off-shoot of it, and a rogue faction with transcendental powers of telepathy and possibly even immortality. Worldbuilding decisions like that are what made me initially question MW’s judgment in presenting *Afterlight* as a series of actual events, even in light of the unbelievable. I made it about halfway through the binder by the time the morning light crept through my blinds, and I had reached a stopping point: a compact disc in a hole-punched laminate sleeve.

Later that day, I scoured the internet for hours seeking mentions of Stillwater, Still Water, Stillwaters, and other permutations. There were towns with the name in Oklahoma, Minnesota, and elsewhere, a real southern rock band in the late 1970s, and, strangely, a fictional southern rock band in the film *Almost Famous*—but no Stillwater, Florida. My logic at the time dictated that, in our age of pervasive and even exhaustive information, if it didn’t exist in records online, it must not exist. But the voices, the characters, the places which haunted the binder—they spoke to me. Despite my best instincts, something about them felt real, or a version of real. Were the events true and Stillwater only served as a surrogate name, much like merryweather for the writer of *Afterlight*?

The compact disc was more of the same variety of uncanny artifacts of Stillwater: documents, antique photos, spliced audio from speeches and interviews, and chilling film clips. No matter how bizarre or terrifying or confusing the exhibits in the binder became, I pressed on, knowing that what I held was the culmination of hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of a man's life. Of the remaining pages, some were layered with notes from MW and unknown collaborators, others were covered in redactions demonstrating inconsistent levels of confidentiality. The events of Stillwater were obsessively researched and interpreted, depicted using real document formats such as police reports—which matched Marion County's typical appearance—and press releases and letters and magazine articles and newspaper columns and obituaries and wedding invitations. Based on the contents of *Afterlight*, the town was not only erased from digital and analog archives, but also was physically overwritten by a "regrading and accelerated regrowth protocol" and the establishment of the Juniper Springs Recreation Area near Lake George. MW provided a case of existence for a place that would be impossible to disprove. I came to a point where I had to see for myself, now mistrusting the mapping software I so relied upon when it came to my caching and researching. Somewhere out there, in the lost wilderness of the National Forest, was a place where people had lived, fought, and died. If it was real, there had to be remains.

I took my wife along for the road trip the first time. We borrowed her friend's four-wheel-drive Ford F-150 and drove through the few paved roads, dirt trails, and National Forest Service ways. December was surprisingly popular for camping in the Ocala National Forest, though it was off-season for bass fishing. We saw more families

than sportsmen, but did not speak to anyone. I recall her suggesting that “these people have probably been here more than you,” and so too do I recall having such difficulty explaining that if the things I’ve read were true, they wouldn’t know anything I’d be interested in. Instead we spent most of the drive taking photos from inside the truck, seeing only forest, ponds, wetland prairies, and creeks where I expected to find Stillwater, its abyssal and carnivorous swamp, its emptied buildings half-standing like kicked-over gravestones. In fact, we found exactly what MW suggested we would: anything but Stillwater.

The phone calls began a few days later—all from (352) 300-3253. Each time, after exactly 8 seconds of popping static, the line disconnected. First my phone, then my wife’s. She had no patience for the game, blocking the number after the second occurrence. However, I had received and missed a combined forty-four calls within two days. My instincts told me that MW was attempting to connect, or at the very least that he had set up some sort of message to fill in a gap his first draft of *Afterlight* had left. I let whoever was calling continue, and still receive them to this day—though less frequently.

As my investigation turned from weeks to months, I felt the obsession of MW rubbing off on my mind. I frequented the Forest, Juniper Springs, the landfills at DeLand and Cypress Acres and Huntington, spoke to locals from Yellow Bluff and Astor Park and Silver Springs, reviewed microfiche from cities and ranger stations within 20 miles. I visited the Forest’s ghost towns—Saint Francis, Kerr City, Eureka—all of which still present in some form, whether with complete buildings or overgrown

bridges or dulled plaques of memory. Stillwater was less than a ghost town. It was invisible. However, in what you might perceive as a contrary result, the lack of tangible evidence only further convinced me of *Afterlight*'s truth. That is, until the butterfly.

While unpacking my bag after a trip to the Forest on August 8th, a date central to the events of *Afterlight* on which I had made a point to visit, it appeared. It fluttered by my cheek and up toward the high ceiling corner of my living room. I had unknowingly smuggled the creature out of the forest. Its significance, however, was halting. The insect appeared exactly as described in the first entry of *Afterlight*: "deep blue [. . .] with patterns resembling black eyes in the middle of its wings surrounded by a pale yellow halo that branched outward into dozens of arcs meeting white tips." I had no doubt that this was the same butterfly that was eaten in Stillwater for decades, the product of organic psychotropic experimentation. My wife had not yet returned from work, so I made a solitary effort to trap it with a shoddy broom and bucket contraption. After three passes and many shavings of plaster off the ceiling and paint off the walls, the butterfly had vanished. I pulled the bucket closer; it was empty. The butterfly has never reappeared.

At this time, I must stop. The research, the trips, the worry. Our home has been visited, we are being followed. I have added what findings I could to the version of *Afterlight* you hold, including photos of the areas I've visited, descriptions of audio and video, and transcripts of phone calls and interviews during the curation of this book. And so, I leave this with you to make of it what you will. If you uncover new evidence

of Stillwater, I implore you to curate your own version of *Afterlight*. The more there are, the harder it will be for them to delete its contents, for the world to forget. If you don't feel up to the task, return this volume to where you found it.

I wouldn't fault you.

merryweather (b. unknown - ?)
c. 2008

As a narrative nonfiction written by the creator of the first version of *Afterlight*, “Object Memory” is merryweather’s way of setting the stage of Stillwater, Florida and its unique morass of complications. In the piece, merryweather takes steps to enter the mind of a young police officer, Eric Rollins, as he copes with a strange ability to link the physical and mental planes. merryweather passes no judgment on any of his subjects, as unbelievable as some of the statements which fuel the story may have seemed.

There is no trace of any individual depicted in “Object Memory,” therefore one may assume that merryweather lived in or was familiar with Stillwater at or near the time of the work’s dramatized events. No actual interview transcripts or recordings accompany the narrative, a result of either misplacement, destruction, or self-preservation.

The only artifact included in the work to corroborate its factuality is a police report which has been edited with redactions. It is unclear if the police department, merryweather, or a third party made these changes.

OBJECT MEMORY

A NOTE

The following work has been constructed using interviews with actual officers of the Stillwater Police Department and Marion County Sheriff's Office. It serves as your introduction to Stillwater and the tragic event which revealed an irreparable rot beneath its surface. Names and events have not been altered and are according to the best recollection of each interviewee (Rollins, Matthews, Darrow).

- MW

OBJECT MEMORY

I

Accidents are seldom entirely born of good or bad fortune. In fact, so often they are a symptom of a festering condition, one that has hidden under the skin for so long, undetected, until reaching its critical point. People and their things don't easily forget. In the small hours of August 8, 2008 in Stillwater, Florida, this vengeful remembrance was the case. The condition in question, the grudge of destruction, was not of a man whose hand had lit the fuse on his own home and family only to then vanish into thin air. The condition was Stillwater's. This was their receipt, at least the first. Over the decade prior, Stillwater had seen ebbs of loss and recovery, first with the series of three harsh winters which destroyed the majority of the orange crop—one of the town's oldest and most reliable sources of income—and a few years later when Stillwater's major business entity, a document security firm, moved its offices north where they were sure to find disloyal, yet significantly cheaper, employees. Even with a stacked deck and a belly-up economy, Stillwater's oldest

residents were convinced that the tenacity of the town's leadership would pull them through, but the youth was largely doubtful; many left for greener pastures, leaving in their paths a sealed fate they had created for the town. Since then, the powers that controlled Stillwater did whatever was necessary to pull the town out of its downward spiral.

Stillwater was a more complex town than it seemed at first glance: a place where a tourist would be shocked to learn that the number of streets exceeded three digits. The north side of town was home to the remaining business district which was struggling to stay afloat as people and, more importantly, their money hemorrhaged from the town. Unused since the company's departure, the brewery stood as a constant reminder of the security the town had lost, a fifty-foot-tall thumb in the eye; at least the ruined fields were a few miles out of town, out of sight. Downtown Stillwater was the home to the town's community college and low-cost housing. On all sides, the outskirts of town were largely uninhabited and remained under the rule of the Ocala National Forest. However, some families managed to buy up large plots of land and live a peaceful distance from the center of town. Daniel Miller's was one of these families.

II

The Marion County Fire Department had arrived at half-past five and was presently, an hour later, making its final pass of the smoldering heap as the sun crept over the trees. Silhouettes of trees and far-off buildings cut out sections from the sky, stolen fragments of night. But the neighborhood had already been alight on this day from the towering conflagration of the Millers' home.

Two local Stillwater police officers in plain clothes leaned on their cruiser, gazing at the corpse of the two story home, absorbing and reflecting on what was left of the hellish sight. The

officers had called in the fire and were standing alone in the street, waiting to hear if they were to expect jurisdictional override from the sheriff's office, state troopers, or otherwise. At last, one broke the unpleasant silence.

"Jesus," he shook his head. "Ever seen a fire like this?" Officer Matthews shivered and took a sip from his cold coffee. His skin shone with a day-and-a-half's grease and auburn hair sprouted from under his faded and bleach-stained Seminoles ball-cap.

The other officer, the taller of the two, took a drag from his cigarette, watching as the firemen secured what was left of the house for crime scene investigation. One of the younger firefighters had already informed the officers that his crew found three female bodies inside: two children and a middle-aged woman. "Dunno. Usually just see the inside wrecked, I guess. Maybe a wall caved in, you know, but," Officer Rollins tapped ash from his cigarette onto the ground near his sneakered feet, "haven't really been around many fires." His dark hair was slick with sweat. The summer had been unrelenting in its humidity even at night; the trees themselves seemed to droop at times.

Matthews sat his cup on the cruiser's hood, stepped away, and craned his neck, peering back and forth down the foggy, empty street. "Could be worse. See about those wildfires in the southwest?"

"Yeah, this summer's been pretty bad for 'em." Rollins grunted as he pushed himself off of the cruiser. He thought about the images he had seen of helicopters dropping cascades of thousands of gallons of water on walls of fire. "Thing is, those're usually accidents. But this. This is a friggin' disaster area. Can't tell me you think this was an accident. No? Then what?" He stomped out his cigarette on the pavement and motioned toward the scorched boards ornamenting the trees across the street, the mailbox which had been blown crooked, the cracks in the driveway and sidewalk

pavement which spiderwebbed out like arteries or choices. Rollins's tanned arms had smears of black from where he had wiped away fallen ash. His partner stared at the ground, unable to offer a reply. "Everyone knows Miller was strung-out. Ticking time bomb. He wore a bowtie." Rollins exhaled a chuckle. "Know what I mean?"

III

The radio crackled from inside the cruiser while Matthews drummed his fingers on the metal hood. Rollins told him to take the call, distracted by the firefighters filing out of the side door of the house. One of the men broke rank and approached him. Perhaps they had finally found Miller's body somewhere. Perhaps they could not clear the house for investigation due to extensive structural damage.

"Officer Rollins," the firefighter called over the breathing apparatus he had pulled down. "Lieutenant Scoville, Marion FD." Rollins could see that this man was older than the others, though his moustache was jet black. His eyes were cloudy and red, and the skin around them was puffy and gray. Scoville looked at the cigarette butt lying next to the cruiser and back at Rollins, his chin doubling even at the slight movements of his head. Rollins thought he looked a lot like a friend of his father's who used to work at the brewery, but the name escaped him. "Y'all are clear to enter the downstairs. Or whoever's going in there. Upstairs, another story. As you come up, the hall and rooms to the left are no-go. You'll see where the carpet sinks into a division in the floor. Like the house was being pulled apart. Past that point, I'd strongly recommend staying out. One of my guys, he's built like a rail, gave a quick look in the master bedroom and bath on that side. No victims visible, but he had to pull out. Floor cracked under him. No sign of a sinkhole, just structural damage. Anyway, we got it taped off for you. To the right of the stairs you got the kids'

rooms, victims in both. You get their names pulled up already? Good. Third victim, mom, is in the downstairs living room. Looks like she'd been sleeping on the couch."

Rollins knew what it sounded like. Crazy son of a bitch snapped, burned his house down and everyone in it. Not the typical scene for his town, though. Stillwater was not the setting for a thrilling crime drama. Those places are far more interesting: everyone knows everyone's secrets, there's intrigue and clues hiding in plain sight, the first suspect is never the true criminal. But still, a house exploded. This he was sure of. And this was not the way that a day should begin in a normal town. It occurred to him that maybe all towns are like this, but no one realizes it until something like what lay before him happens. Maybe this is some kind of normal.

"I've got two questions, then, Lt. Scoville. You understand, of course, what our immediate suspicion is and who we need to find. Was there any sign of a man in the building?" Rollins asked. He unfolded a notepad he retrieved from his back pocket and scribbled the grit out of his pen tip, tapping it a few times to shake the ink loose.

Scoville looked back at the house. Two of his crew were walking back in, each with a bundle of yellow flags in hand. "You know what? Y'all have no goddamn idea what happened here. There wasn't just one source of ignition, here, officer. We're talking at least a half-dozen. Your department might not just be looking at arson or murder. Calculated explosions. See that big hole blown out the top, looking like a fresh-bloomed hollow point? And this ain't a gas house. Let me finish."¹ He licked his desiccated lips. "Anyway, we couldn't turn the place inside out looking for

¹ Scoville's monologues are detailed and include verbal flourishes because he was able to provide recordings of his interactions with the Stillwater Police. He stated that he "didn't trust no one from that backwards town," and "you gotta cover your ass when dealing with devils."

leads, or your guy, you know. Our job is to put out the fire and find out where it came from. Well, sir, it came from everywhere. They're in there flagging as much as they can now. Far as I'm concerned, condemn this place and the rest is up to your boss's boss's boss. Either way, it's all yours."

There was a pause as Rollins finished writing every word that came from Scoville's mouth. In the moment, he could hear the buzz of conversation between Matthews and dispatch coming from the cruiser. "I have a job to do as well, as you know. Just looking for some help. Since I have 'no goddamn idea' what happened, enlighten me. What set off so many ignition points?" Rollins readied his pen, then squinted up from the pad after Scoville hesitated. A warm breeze picked up for a moment, swirling smoke in the air. An ashen smell bit at their nostrils. "You said they were flagging the spots, right? What spots exactly?"

Scoville finally answered. "Best as we can tell, the walls were stuffed with . . . something. Looked like food scraps, fruit. Burned crisp now, of course. No, no idea what kind. Dining room wall's ruptured, you can see in there. That was the first and largest ignition point. As of now, that's what we know." He pressed his hands together and clasped them. He watched the pen, realizing the officer was writing down everything he said verbatim. "We bagged some of the fruit for you to take back, you know, in case we couldn't clear it."

With that, the cruiser door opened behind them. Matthews stepped out with his ball-cap off, wiping sweat out of his eyes and leaving a black streak across his cheek. He greeted Scoville and asked Rollins to speak privately for a moment at the cruiser door.

"That was Major Peters," Matthews started. "He said that someone from Marion should be here within the hour. Two deputies and their captain, a guy named Qualls." He grimaced. "Same guy who took over me and my partner's scene last year at the college when we found that haul of meth. Real asshole."

Rollins peered at Scoville, who was pointing back at his truck and slowly backpedaling; he nodded and the lieutenant turned to catch up with his crew. “So, we keep waiting?”

Matthews shook his head. “He said we need to ‘get a handle on the situation’ immediately so we are prepared with answers when the county shows. I sent him three photos of what we were dealing with—I don’t want to go in there, same as you—but he wouldn’t budge. He said we need to work with the fire department to ‘establish safe entry points, cordon off any unstable areas, collect information on how the fire was started,’ all that shit. By the looks of it, they’re ready to leave, though.”

Rollins smirked and told him that the firemen had already flagged and taped the critical points, in addition to identifying ignition sources and bagging some of the fruit. Matthews raised an eyebrow at ‘fruit.’ “Said it was packed in the walls where the explosions occurred. Yeah, explosions. I don’t know why; neither does he. Good to know since we have all we need from the fire department that we don’t have to go in, though. Let those pricks from county handle this mess.” Rollins kicked at a fragment of shingle on the pavement.

“He wants us, specifically, to verify and collect evidence. Said it would make us look better.”

“Then let his ass come out and do it,” Rollins mumbled, tapping a pack of cigarettes on his palm.

Matthews smiled and said, “I hear you. But this is coming from Chief Darrow, he said. I’m not really surprised, either. He’s got a hard-on for keeping the county out. Otherwise Major would’ve been happy to wait. Got him by the balls, man.” He opened the trunk of the cruiser and lifted out a navy duffel bag, then unzipped it and tossed a pair of latex gloves at Rollins, who fumbled his cigarette pack as he caught them. “Let’s not waste time bitching about it.”

An image came to Rollins of the man in his early twenties who, just last month, had stolen syringes and morphine bags from Abrams Medical Supply and tried to stow away in a UPS carrier truck; then another of the child who they had found abandoned with only a backpack full of canned food and water bottles; then another of the old woman who had died over the desk in her bedroom, pen in hand, mid-way through a letter to her ‘beloved sister.’ All of these were cases where he’d used gloves from the same box: a box with so many more gloves, so many more stories to unfold.

IV

Rollins treaded lightly into the Miller’s wreckage through the side entry, stepping over the splintered door, striped with the fire’s tracks. The air within felt empty. Matthews followed soon after and they found themselves in a carpeted den where the overturned furniture was a blend of woodcraft and upholstery, indicating that it was likely handed down from a relative or custom made at great expense. For a moment, a sizzle sounded from the blown-out television, now half-mounted to the stonework over the den’s fireplace. Ashes danced in the cross-breeze from holes blown out of the walls, then fell like snow on the thick-bladed grass outside.

“Check the walls for any signs of tampering. He said the fruit was stuffed in there, so maybe we can find the load point. It’s our best guess as to how this happened—for now, at least. Look out for wires, anything,” Rollins said. He thought about that sizzle. “In fact, could you double check that the fire crew cut off the main power? I didn’t think to ask.” Matthews suggested that the firemen would have definitely done so before hosing down the house, but shrugged with a cant of his head and left. Rollins had been hit once by a live wire when digging a drainage ditch in his yard. The rain had been particularly heavy that year, with three hurricanes passing over Marion County in the space of two months. His impetus for the ditch-digging was when an inch of water

had seeped into his house one night after 16 straight hours of downpour. In fact, Rollins thought as he inspected the walls of the Millers', he could see about an inch of slight mismatch of white all around the baseboards of the den walls.

Rollins examined the walls for any bulges or irregularities, careful not to lean against them. When he was satisfied, he crossed to the opening where the den met a short and wide hall. As he rounded the corner into the other living area, something flew into his face. He swatted wildly for a moment and then froze. The fire could have stirred a wasp nest or spiders who had taken up in the walls, or any number of other things.

"Should we call for backup?" Matthews said, watching his partner from the middle of the den. "Looks like it's friendly," he said, pointing at Rollins's left hand.

Perched atop his gloved hand was a deep blue butterfly² with patterns resembling black eyes in the middle of its wings surrounded by a pale yellow halo that branched outward into dozens of arcs meeting white tips.

² It's vital that you know this was not like any butterfly Rollins or you have seen, unless you have been to the Amazon River basin and been impossibly lucky. Even still, only one image of this species exists. The image was a crude oil painting attached to a letter dated March 3, 1925 from Private Henry Thrupp, a member of Percival Fawcett's expedition to find the lost city Z— in the mid-1920's.³ Historians consider the expedition, presumably with the aim of finding the city of El Dorado, to have come to a bloody end when the team was slaughtered by the indigenous people of the region, but it is equally possible something as innocuous as even a butterfly could have killed them in the heartless jungle.

³ Bernard, James. *Del Rio Perdido: Letters from the Amazon*. New York: Amulet Books, 1991.

Rollins turned his head and his hand, bringing the odd creature closer to his face. Suddenly, he knew this butterfly. He could see a room, a small room, dank and dim but for a lamp shining on a miniature tree. All along the tree were abyssal black cocoons with cones of pearly white where they connected to the branches. A butterfly, exactly like the one on his hand, fluttered in front of the lamp, casting waves of shadow through the room. There was, he thought, a table across from the tree. Yes, it was a table with stacks of binders of various color. On the ground in front of the table, a silhouette of a human body. Was it alive or dead? But wait, something else adorned the branches of the tree, behind the fat leaves. He could see a bright, warm color, but the object seemed to change, as though he was incapable of focusing on it.

The butterfly gently lifted itself off of Rollins's hand and flowed with the cross-breeze.

"Eric, you with me?" Matthews shined his flashlight into Rollins's face.

Rollins took a quick inventory of his surroundings and pushed the flashlight aside. "I'm good. I just got lost for a second there." Quickly looking back at the exterior doorway, he thought he saw the butterfly disappear, but couldn't be sure. Matthews patted his shoulder and insisted that they get moving, because the sheriff's boys would probably be here soon.

V

The partners inspected the living area where the adult female victim, presumably Mrs. Miller, had died. Much like the den, furniture was turned over, save for the couch where the unfortunate soul had been incinerated. Matthews remarked on the natural posture of the body, kneeling to take a closer survey if there was evidence of death before the fire. There were no signs of trauma of any sort, broken bones or punctures through the brittle, gray, bark-like skin. Rollins remarked that poisoning or sedation was on the table, that there was still a chance she did not suffer. Mat-

thews made the sign of the cross and stood up.⁴

Lieutenant Scoville had undersold the rupture in the dining room; the entirety of the burned and broken wall formed a prominent concave V. He had not undersold, however, that the wall was stuffed with fruit. The crevice at the apex of the V was filled from floor to ceiling with charred citrus fruit skins, to the point where Rollins thought it likely that the wall was being held together, just barely, by the wedged contents. Frayed and whole wires of white, yellow, red, and black protruded from the seam. Matthews assured that the fire crew had cut off the power, but suggested that they should move their inspection upstairs because he didn't trust the room. Rollins scanned the room then held up his right hand into a fist and crossed the cracked tile floor to a pantry between the dining room and kitchen. Lowering his left hand to rest on his firearm in its leather holster, Rollins put his shoulder next to the wooden-slatted pantry door and leaned his head close. He could hear air moving. Could it have been Miller, still alive, breathing on the other side? He nodded to Matthews to cover him with his own firearm, then took a slow breath.

Rollins swung the pantry open to see only shelves of canned food bathed in faint light streaming in from a gaping hole in the ceiling. He signaled with his index finger and holstered his weapon. "It's clear."

The stairs seemed sturdy enough. Matthews whispered from behind Rollins that Miller was probably long gone, to which he shrugged and replied that they couldn't be too careful. In the same

⁴ Matthews remarked in an interview that the position of the body and the circumstances of the scene reminded him of a willing human sacrifice. He feared that the woman was bound for hell and felt that he could have been standing in the presence of Satan at that very moment.

instant he had said 'careful,' one of the final stairs before the second floor gave way. Rollins was able to lurch forward and pull himself up with the brushed aluminum railing, applying a thick layer of ash to the palms of his gloves.

"Anyone still living in the house knows we're here, now," Matthews said. "You all right?" He noticed his partner was slow in recovering from what seemed a minor misstep at worst.

Rollins replied, "Fine. Look to the left. There's the tape Scoville had his guys put up. Let's watch our step." He dusted off his gloves on each other and limped to the right hall, leading to the two children's rooms.

The first room they came to belonged to the younger sister, who, records show, was named Elise. The walls of her room were still identifiable as peach, though they were ravaged by bursts of char in many areas like the rest of the house. Large mounds of ashen debris laid scattered throughout the room, with one pile topped by a clump of white wicker. Half of a shattered vanity mirror leaned under a Neon Genesis Evangelion poster print on the wall opposite the doorway; Rollins noticed a matching sketch of one of the characters transcribed almost identically onto the wall. Tiptoeing gingerly to the bed, Rollins surveyed the small girl's body which, like her mother's, looked quite peaceful. She was lying on her side and had one gray hand under her reddish-brown and hairless skull.

"It's a shame," Matthews said. "Girl had a lot going for her. Artistic, musical." He gestured toward a violin that was snapped in half next to the aluminum bi-fold closet door. It was, actually, in good condition apart from being in two pieces, bearing only flecks of burn marks.

Rollins turned his attention from the girl to her instrument and tilted his head, bending down and approaching it with his left hand outstretched. Each of his light steps produced tiny puffs of ash and creaks of weakened wood. Then, as Matthews switched places with him to examine the body

for any evidence of any wrongdoing prior to the fire, Rollins reached the violin, running one finger along the fractured neck. This violin had been played only a week ago, he knew at once. The Phillips Middle School orchestra held a recital in their new arts center donated by Mayor Barnes. During their performance of “Andante and Allegro,” the girl had popped a string, something she knew would happen on that night because it had been more than a year since her strings were replaced and something always went wrong when she tried to step up and make her family proud, especially her older sister. The dumpy boy next to her stopped playing to chortle as she winced from the laceration on her wrist. The orchestra director tapped his baton while staring death into Elise and the boy and carried on conducting. The violin whined crookedly when she put her bow back to its strings, either in apology or defiance. Rollins could hear the voice of her mother from downstairs on the next day, warning her to play softer or she would do more damage to her strings or bow. Rollins could clearly see the peach walls and white wicker chair, vanity, and nightstand, all in new condition. He also noticed something over the door frame: a circle, no bigger than a silver dollar, cut out from the wall and replaced with a mirrored glass. The father pushed the door open silently behind Elise as she hovered her bow over the strings, miming in half-hearted practice. Rollins could not make out his face, but he looked to be of average build and height, perhaps slightly on the thin side. He wore a pale blue dress shirt and khakis, a loosened striped tie, and still had on his leather shoes. Daniel leaned down and then, a whisper: “We love your music. Play.” Rollins could swear he heard more than one voice, as though in chorus, whisper those words.

The crunching of branches and debris from the front of the home removed Rollins from the memory. Matthews turned around and they met eyes. County had arrived.

VI

“Right. This is clearly out of your scope, boys,” Captain Qualls said to the circle of men he had called in a huddle in the driveway. Flanked by his deputies, both of whom were much taller and more muscular than him, Qualls had a Napoleonic stature and aura. Rollins and Matthews stole a glance at each other and the latter smirked, happy to relinquish the reins; on the other hand, Rollins pursed his lips in displeasure. Qualls continued, “Suppose it’s time for you to hit the station for some paperwork and call it a day. Been a long night, eh?”

“Hold on, we’ve secured this scene and already gathered important information,” Rollins said. He stepped up close to the Captain and locked eyes with him, ignoring his men. “You can’t show up two hours late and decide you’re ready to work. No, don’t interrupt me. You don’t know who lived here, what areas of the house are safe to enter, what the cause of the explosions—yes, explosions with an S—were, any of that. We do. I know you think because we’ve got less than fifty at the station that you think you can absorb the groundwork we did and take all the credit in the end, but in this case you’re mistaken. I don’t care if you do call Chief, you’re not sending us home. We haven’t done anything wrong, and we have all the information you’ll need if you work with us. If not, then you can wait to read it on my report tomorrow.”

Matthews’s widened his eyes in light of his partner’s hubris, but settled when he recognized that Rollins was willing to defend their territory. Unlike his old partner.

Qualls put a hand on his deputies’ shoulders and whooped. “Son, you got balls, I’ll admit. But let me tell you: do not fuck with me. I’ll have you working parking lots by noon. ‘Ma’am, you left your cart in the fire lane,’” he said. “Get your out-of-uniform tennis shoes to stepping, take yourself a little shower, and keep your stink out of our business.” His deputies did not sneer or guffaw or slap hands; they remained still with their brawny arms crossed and eyes obscured behind

opaque sunglasses.

With a wry smile, Rollins backed away from the huddle. “Fine, fine. Good luck finding the recordings of the homeowner. Probably show exactly what happened,” he said.

“We ain’t blind. We can find them good enough. I got the eyes of a gadfly, they say.”

Rollins nodded. “All well and good, sir. All due respect, you’ll need more than that,” he said. Matthews had stepped up to his side now. “Unless you want this case to go cold in a hurry, you’re going to need me.”

“Don’t bullshit me, son.” The Captain, now out of the joking mood he had been in since arriving, narrowed his eyes at the young officer. “I don’t have the time nor the tolerance for it.”

“No bullshit. You let us stay, I’ll show you.” Rollins assured his partner with a quick nod. “Deal?”

Inside the house, Rollins led the other four men through the den and into the cleft dining room. One of the deputies branched off into the living room to examine the mother’s body. Qualls held his position at the edge of the room, unwilling to move closer to the bowed-in wall, and signaled his remaining deputy to do the same. They watched the local officers enter without hesitation, and were both impressed enough to stand back and watch the promised demonstration. Qualls leaned and whispered something to his deputy, who then produced a flashlight and shined it on the V-wall.

Matthews followed Rollins close behind and to his right, careful to step over the jagged wood and glass debris scattered on the broken tile floor. He whispered, “You know what you’re doing?” but did not receive a reply. His partner had been demonstrating flashes of bizarre behavior lately. On the 31st, during monthly reviews with Major Peters, Matthews had voiced concerns that

Rollins was becoming increasingly attached to victims and even suspects since they had begun patrolling as partners in March. The major proposed that sympathy was far from the worst quality that an officer could possess, that perhaps he could pick up something from his new partner. Matthews remembered the feeling in that moment, not the burn of betrayal but the unease of realizing the truth. He had said that Rollins was returning to scenes, even after cases had been closed, to relive the moment, he guessed. Something was wrong. Rollins had no reason or right, even, to go to these places after their business was done. The major agreed that perhaps such behavior would suggest Rollins was taking matters too personally, and that he would speak with him in his monthly review. Matthews asked the major to please use discretion in mentioning it, as he didn't dislike Rollins; his attention to detail was uncanny and vital to closing cases. Slowly shaking his downward-tilted head, the major said that he couldn't beat around any psychological issues with his men, it was policy that came from the top, and he would have to speak not only to Rollins, but also Chief Darrow.

Rollins extended his hand toward the wall and caught one of the broken wires. Qualls flinched behind him and chuckled to himself. When they first came through the room earlier, Rollins thought this and the other wires had the appearance of audio-video cables and not CAT-5 or AC leads. He felt the touch of his partner's hand on his shoulder, but shrugged it off.

The cable was installed two years prior as part of a security or surveillance system; the purpose was unclear. Rollins knew that there was a bulky Latino man in blue coveralls with a drill and several spools of cable being supervised by a lean and neat man in a black three-piece suit. As he suspected, the cables were strung through the house to several cameras, including one in Elise's bedroom above her door; there was one hidden in plain sight in every room and three installed inside the casings of the motion-activated lights on the exterior of the home.

Swept up in the images passing through his mind, Rollins became lightheaded and his body tipped backward, still squeezing the cable which quickly unthreaded two feet from the wall until catching itself taut. The wall jostled and Matthews snatched Rollins's arm and pulled him ten feet toward the captain and his deputy, who had also leapt into action. The downed officer flailed out at the air, catching one of the hundreds of pieces of fruit which were tumbling out of the wall that was yawning open.

He saw it, now, in his mind's eye. Under the lamp, beside the cocoons, on the branch, was an unusual citrus fruit the color of an adolescent sunset. It was smoother than an orange or lemon, and it shined like an apple or other smooth, thin-skinned fruit. A butterfly, exotic and blue with haloed eyes like the one he'd seen before, was perched on one of the tree's juicy leaves, nibbling a hole in it. And, across the dimly-lit room, it could only be Daniel Miller's body sprawled on the floor before the desk. From outside the room, there was a low, muffled roar. The room shook, and dust rained down. Miller did not move.

Early morning light caused Rollins to squint and cover his face. He felt the painless stabbing of grass on the back of his head and the crispness of fresh summer air thinning the dullness of congesting debris in his lungs. Qualls and Matthews stood over him, brushing a dirty white powder off of their clothes and arms. When Matthews noticed his partner had come to, he shouted down at him that the walls had collapsed inward and the ceiling had caved in on one side. They were able to pull him away to safety, but the fire department would need to come back out to reassess the house's structural integrity. He said that he had already called the major to let him know, and that that the major was on the way to take Rollins home himself.

Captain Qualls let Matthews finish, then offered a hand to Rollins and said, "Time to go home, son. You're done here."

VII

Extracted from the case file of Stillwater Police Department Officer 51981, dated Eighth of August, Two-Thousand-and-Eight made available to public per The Florida Sunshine Law (Florida § 286.011-286.012).

STILLWATER POLICE DEPARTMENT – CRIME SCENE REPORT (rev. 2006)			
Property Owner's Name	Miller	Daniel	Raymond
Street Number	14	Street Name	Sunrise Circle
Victim(s) Involved:	Miller, Rachel A.; Miller, Elise C.; Miller, Danielle R. (all N.Y.I.)		
<p>Reason for dispatch: RO1 and RO2 observed fire and smoke from Sunrise Cir while on S1 patrol est. 0455 subject date. Upon arrival at est. 4:59, called in fire to Marion FD, who dispatched ladder 9 to subject address. FD arrived est. 0525 and extinguished majority of fire by est. 0630. RO1 spoke to Lt. Scoville who advised multiple ignition points of explosives, premeditated with a type of biofuel (fruit) in walls of home. Lt. also advised of one adult female victim (V1) and two female children (V2 est. 13 YO, V3 est. 17 YO). RO1 and RO2 entered house per request of Major Peters and [REDACTED] after MFD had flagged and taped home, following SPD handbook protocol 4.2(a). Confirmed status of V1, then V2. Marion Sheriff officers and Captain [REDACTED] arrived at est. 0750 and appropriated crime scene. Directed [REDACTED] to surveillance camera cables in DR. In process, there was an environmental near-injury incident (see incident report #ETR-2008-9). Significant compromise to scene. Reported back to station.</p> <p>. . .</p> <p>Addition by CO [REDACTED] ([REDACTED]): 8/14/2008 - Further investigation by Officer [REDACTED] resulted in discovery of a journal written by D. Miller which demonstrates unstable and dangerous mental state. Case MCDRM0808 has been issued by Marion County for the person of interest D. Miller accordingly. Further information to be filed in above noted case no. RO1 of this file has been debriefed and should not be questioned regarding 14 Sunrise Cir or D. Miller.</p>			
Responding Officer #1	Rollins, Eric Badge 51981	Responding Officer #2	Matthews, Lawrence Badge 51902

VIII

“The state was able to recover some footage from the DVR of one of the cameras you found,” Chief Darrow said across his desk to Rollins. His office was furnished in stained oak and leather, with a personal coffee machine and a wet bar tucked away in a corner. “It was from the night of the fire on Sunrise Circle. Before the fire, actually.”

“Good, good. Get any answers from it?” Rollins asked. “At least where Miller could be?”

“A question, actually. For your information, I am not typically kept close in the loop for in-progress cases once they have been turned over to county, let alone to state. Their idea of involvement in the past is to say that they’ll ‘let me know’ when I ‘need to know.’ In most cases, this is fine. However, your commanding officer, Major Peters, handed me an interesting file last week.” The chief opened one of his giant wooden drawers that rumbled under its own weight. He extracted a blue folder and skimmed the first pages. Rollins remained silent; he knew what was discussed during his monthly review and knew that the major was obligated. “Said you’ve been taking great interest in the people involved in your cases. Criminals, even. Returning to scenes after cases are closed. Any of this jarring your memory?” Rollins nodded, looking down, staring at nothing. “You know that doing so is strictly against protocol. We’ve discussed how important following protocol is several times in just the past couple of months. If you’re in the wrong place or doing the wrong thing, how can I protect you when the state comes to call?”

Rollins scratched his nose and searched the air. “If you want me to drop cases and not talk about them once they’re out of my load, why are we even talking right now?” His brow furrowed as his face gained color and tightness. “Sir.”

“A fine question.” Chief Darrow pulled a click-pen from his pocket and flipped to another

page in the blue folder. “Please tell me, on the record, where you and Matthews were that night, before you found the fire? And, before you answer, remember protocol 1.3 from your handbook: as an officer of the Stillwater Police Department you serve Stillwater and its needs, not the other way around.”

Marilyn Kenny (b. 1888)

c. 1981

A series of journal entries by a woman in her 90s living in Stillwater among some unwelcome roommates. The woman, who can be assumed as Marilyn Kenny based on details gathered in a later *Afterlight* entry, touches briefly on the corruption which existed even in early Stillwater. It seems local law enforcement were answering to men in “suits” and had been involved in drug dealing of some nature for decades. Kenny also refers to eating bugs under orders of a doctor, which might indicate a connection to the ubiquitous butterflies of Stillwater. How she connects them to her good health in advanced age is unclear.

The journal pages are thin like those of a bible, but thick with a sour odor like that of rotting food. When I first removed them from their protective plastic binder sleeve and caught the smell, I fell into an intense and uncanny reverie. As a boy, my friend and I were being chased by some older children. To escape them, we hid in a dumpster at the end of the street, holding our breath as long as we could until we had to gulp in the foul air gallons at a time. Being exposed to that stench again, I felt I was back there, young and filthy. I even tricked myself into hearing my buddy’s voice say, “If we ever get out of here, I’m burning my nose hairs.” Unrelated, but I felt compelled to share for a reason I can’t quite explain.

DEAD LANGUAGE

12 August

Hearing things upstairs. A lot of people I cherish have come and gone in this house. My great granddaughter is moving out next week. Won't be much reason to stay. She says since there won't be no one to talk to, I should write to myself.

17 August

Sarah is gone, off to become a doctor. (Never cared much for doctors)
But voices are steady talking upstairs. She's up there, my love Dan, all the little ones... Can't get up there too easy anymore. I holler after them from time to time. Sometimes they hush up. Never used to, but about time they listen!

20 August

I had it. I just had it. Hauled up to the second floor tonight and what do you know but there was a middle aged woman sitting on the bed. She had on a canvas dress and all sorts of jewelry on her wrist and neck. There wasn't but any dip of the mattress under her

weight. She wouldn't turn or tell me where she come from or say anything at all. My old broken down 91... 93? self wasn't about to get in a ruckus with no strange weightless trespasser. No use calling in these crooked cops neither. Too busy peddling dope or whatever the black suits who own this town have them doing. We see them more than they think, I reckon. As for the woman, she can stay in there for all I care. Worst case is she puts me down in my sleep and I go see all my babies and grandbabies again... good Lord willing.

24 Aug

My memory comes and goes. Sarah's a smart girl. Said write down my thoughts. I can't remember names, sometimes faces. But I tell you what, from time to time the air handler pushes around some breeze, some whiff of smell from Dan or little Chuckie. For a moment, they're here again. What I'd give to bottle that feeling up, bring it up when I can't but stand being alone. Which I'm supposing is all the time.

1 Sept

Jojima, that's what I call the woman upstairs. She says it all night some nights. Sounds like she's praying. And I pray for her. To keep her space from me, to get whatever it is she's looking for, but mainly to plum go away. I never seen her eat or heard her use the bathroom. And I don't sleep much, so she must either have good timing or... well, hell, she might truly be a spirit among us. Me.

3 Sept

Jojima has a friend with her. I can't so much call him Jojima as well, but he chants it with her. I seen their faces. Resemble someone from the east or India. They look like they want to talk to me, but can't understand. I know how they feel! All that jonima stuff. Thought when a person's visited by spirits they're supposed to be able to talk with them, get a message from the afterlife, guardian angels, all that nonsense. These spirits ain't good for nothing but filling the silence of an empty house.

4 Sept

Well, they're saying new things today. Shouting, more like. I can't understand a word, of course. They yell, I yell back. They ain't mad, so much. Getting on my nerves though. 2 AM and still going... can't sleep with such a commotion.

6 Sept

I thought I heard Sarah upstairs. Just them goddam ghosts. Why'd they wait til she left to show up? Ain't no one going to believe me. Maybe my mind is starting to go, after all. My own son's did before mine, poor guy. Maybe that doctor what had me eating bugs was onto something. Besides my memory, I still feel right sharp.

9 Sept

Tojima and her friend came downstairs today. They ain't stopped shouting all week. Now they shout and point at the front door. Like they're kicking me out! I keep telling them this is my house, not theirs. Sarah hasn't written back yet. I wish she were here. Or anyone else.

I think I'll go for a long walk. Not that they win. I cursed them good that I'd be coming back.

10 Sept

Found a big hunk of metal box out in the swamp. Like a trailer. No idea where in the devil it came from so far from the roads and big rivers. Either way, it's nice and quiet. I'm sleeping here tonight.

Maybe those two roommates of mine gone and made me crazy. Top of that, I'm not sure I can find my way back home right now. Better to wait until I can. Getting lost out here's no way to heaven. In fact, why did I even wander out here...

12 Sept

Went back home today. Jojima and her manfriend are gone. So is most the house. Sinkhole took it away and all those memories with it. They tried to warn me, I swear it. What else were they trying to tell me? Where did they come from? Why did they want to save me? What did jojima mean? Even by grace of the Almighty Lord, I won't ever surely know. Alls I know is I have noplac and no one. At least for now.

Tomas Masquiera (b. ?)

c. 2012

This *Sounds of Shadows* webzine article published in 2012 documents one of the many horrific fire-related mass killings in the final years of Stillwater, Florida. The originator of these arsons, Daniel Miller, was long dead by this point, but his co-conspirators in the Nectar hivemind were almost certainly behind the tragedy described in Masquiera's article.

There is no trace on the internet or in print of the *Sounds of Shadows* webzine, any article published by Masquiera, the band Words as Dreams, nor the referenced GoFundMe page. merryweather must have saved and printed this article while it was still active—before Project MAYA's Erasure department found and deleted it and everything it connected to.

HIDDEN TRACK

HIDDEN TRACK

by tomas masquiera
contributing editor
indie, local
april 2 2012

Through the Narrow Eyes of Children Staring into the Setting Sun (2012) is the third album by post-rock band Words As Dreams. A departure from their previous 2010 effort, *Once When We Remembered*, the lads and ladies from the podunk town of Stillwater, Florida showcase drummer Aiden Helms's restraint and discipline, Dane Zenith's impossibly-broad vocal range, newcomer Eva Teller's furious and fearsome cello, and a bed of as many as four guitars to create layers of emotion and kinetic energy through the eight track album.

Previous albums have taken cues from post-rock icons Explosions in the Sky, Mogwai, and This Will Destroy You, relying on templates of quiet, echoing melodies to gradual builds to eruptions of sound to fadeouts. Instead, vocalist Zenith stated in a podcast interview with FarPastPost leading up to the album's release that the band, "wanted to create [their] own sound this time. There are more ways we have found to express a wide range of emotions from sublime joy to hollowing loss. The fact that we use the human voice as an instrument only of melody and not articulation allows me to explore the sounds of a person in those moments more than words can possibly do. Words have weight, connotations, reminders. It isn't simply that someone whispers 'I love you' for



the first time or screams for help. It's the way they sound in those times that can change your life." True to this, the band rides on the pipeline of melodies created by equal parts harmony and discord between Zenith and Teller, exemplifying the uncanny similarity of the cello to the human voice; in some moments, listeners may even become confused which is which.

The music of *Through the Narrow Eyes...* is dynamic, often frenetic, perhaps even schizophrenic at moments, and for the first time exposes listeners to the "Words As Dreams sound." Very seldom do they rely on slow drum brushing with a lazily strumming

“ It isn't simply that someone whispers 'I love you' for the first time or screams for help. It's the way they sound in those times that can change your life. ”

guitar, reverberating amplifier feedback, or a soothing piano—they don't use one at all on this album, in fact—melody repeating for minutes on end while the

“rhythm guitar section” drives forward from movement to movement like their predecessors. Words As Dreams instead focus on themes for each song and how their armory of instruments can best capture the continuums of expression and dimension within those themes. For instance, track five, “Yellow Woods on Ice, Don't Stray Far,” opens with moments of calm, uplifting melodies that are eventually overwhelmed by quickening, panicked guitars, reminiscent of a stroll through a forest turning into a pursuit by an unknown presence. There is fear and desperation in Zenith's hoarse “ohhs” and “ay-iis,” escalating and dropping off for moments where he gasps for a few deep breaths. Teller's cello follows the vocal patterns until Zenith drops out of the song for the last minute. At first, she plays a single note, then a higher note, then another, emulating a

curious sound, as though the cello is calling out for someone now lost. Suddenly, the cello's pace escalates, backed by Helm's aggressive and tribal-inspired tom-tom drums, and squeals at the song's conclusion for 20 seconds, followed by four quick arhythmic strokes to signal the end of the track. This is just one example of a multi-faceted, thematic story Words As Dreams paints, ironically, without words in their newfound style.

The most curious element in the album is the first phrase spoken in any of the band's recorded work: "Aiden, it's Ollie. We're okay." The phrase is interlaced as the shivering whisper of a young boy among the epic crescendo near the middle of in "Walks Like These Never End." The whisper is actually backmasked and quite challenging to isolate among the crashing of cymbals and bells. It even sounds as though Helms attempted to camouflage the voice of the boy. But why these words and why so secretive?

This is an aside, but one I felt compelled to explore explicitly beyond the music I am tasked to review. Upon further research on who Ollie could be, I found an archived GoFundMe page dedicated to Aiden's younger brother named Oliver, or "Ollie." However, Oliver cannot have spoken the words we hear in "Walks Like This Never End." This is because the boy, now age 9, has been in a vegetative state since 2009 in one of the most tragic incidents I can recall reading. According to the GoFundMe page, titled "Help Us Help Oliver":

For those who don't know, Oliver was in the school gymnasium on that awful day, February 20, 2009. The fire incapacitated many of the other children almost immediately, but Ollie was saved by a fallen support beam and a mound of insulation and ceiling debris. Marion County Fire Rescue was able to extract him

from the building before it had completely collapsed. Five children ultimately passed away in the incident and the fire was ruled as an accident. As far as our family and the families of those children are concerned, the true perpetrators are still unknown. Oliver is on constant life support and has been in a comatose state since that day, but doctors say he still shows healthy brain activity. The medical bills are piling up and we, his parents and brother, are asking for your help. Give whatever you can to keep our angel with us until he finds the strength to wake up.

I was unable to obtain comment from the band on this unfortunate event or the boy's voice on their new release. Referring to the band's touring history, however, I did find that the band canceled Alabama and Georgia dates for the last week of February 2009 due to "personal reasons," and then fulfilled their remaining March dates with a recorded drum track due to the absent Helms. It was rumored at this point that Helms had departed from the band, but made a surprise return at a charity festival at a campground in the Ocala National Forest that summer.

As for the album *Through the Narrow Eyes...* as a whole, Words As Dreams invites listeners into their laboratory as they experiment with sound using voices as a rhythm section in "Men Who Get Even Get Nothing At All," the cello as the percussive, driving force in the second movement of "Have You Lost This Way Before?," and using the studio itself as an instrument by pounding on the walls in the haunting closing moments of the final track, "The Sun Will Come and You Will Be Gone." At over 70 minutes for just eight tracks, the album does go long at moments, but the sonic palettes are so varied that the work does not blend together. Each song is its own strange beast. There are 100 BPM

excursions into dreamlike realms interrupted by 176 BPM panic attacks, jazz-like trading of solos followed by all instruments clawing at each other for space in the listener's ear, and creative use of space and physical alteration of instruments (the guitar being stretched until it breaks in "Men Who Get Even..." comes to mind) rather than relying on digital editing effects. Words As Dreams are working hard for it, and we as their audience reap the benefits for better or for worse.



Words As Dreams have found their voice and are willing to take risks to be heard.

Through the Narrow Eyes of Children Staring into the Setting Sun is available now via iTunes, Spotify, and Words As Dreams's Bandcamp page (www.wordsasdreams.bandcamp.com).

Tomas Masquiera has written for *Sounds of Shadows* webzine since 2008. His work has been published by FUSE, Ghost Cult, and Substream, among others. Tomas was born and raised in Bloomington, Indiana where he founded ...And My Axe!, a foundation that supplies electric instruments and promotes modern music education in Indiana schools.

edit - may 13 2012

I had the opportunity to speak with Gio Margolis, the mixing assistant for *Through the Narrow Eyes...*, yesterday and he gave this brief statement on the voice of "Ollie": "I never added in any sort of recording of a kid [. . .] that wasn't something the band would do either. Dane especially. He insists on 'no words' in session, and even if someone slips up during a track reel he will shut it down and start over. He's that serious. So, no, I can't

really say where that sound came from. I saw someone who isolated what you're talking about on YouTube. Sounds like a blend of feedback and vibration from the clashing instruments. Honestly, we would not exploit Aiden's family like that."

Scott de la Cruz (b. 1980 - d. 2012), **Tori Hudson** (b. 1980 - d. 2010)
c. 1999

A series of ten instant messenger conversations between two college students in Stillwater during their Spring 1999 semester. Scott and Tori came into contact with Dr. Truman Paulson, a central player in Project MAYA who wished to recruit them as street-level pawns. Their names appeared in the ledger of MAYA operatives recovered by merryweather and provided in his Appendix A.

These chat log screenshots were printed out onto standard white copy paper and remain in fair condition. While it is unfortunate that the full log files were not preserved to provide further context to the conversations, these excerpts still serve as a marker of Paulson's ongoing involvement with MAYA reaching from the late 1970's into the 1990's and, presumably, beyond.

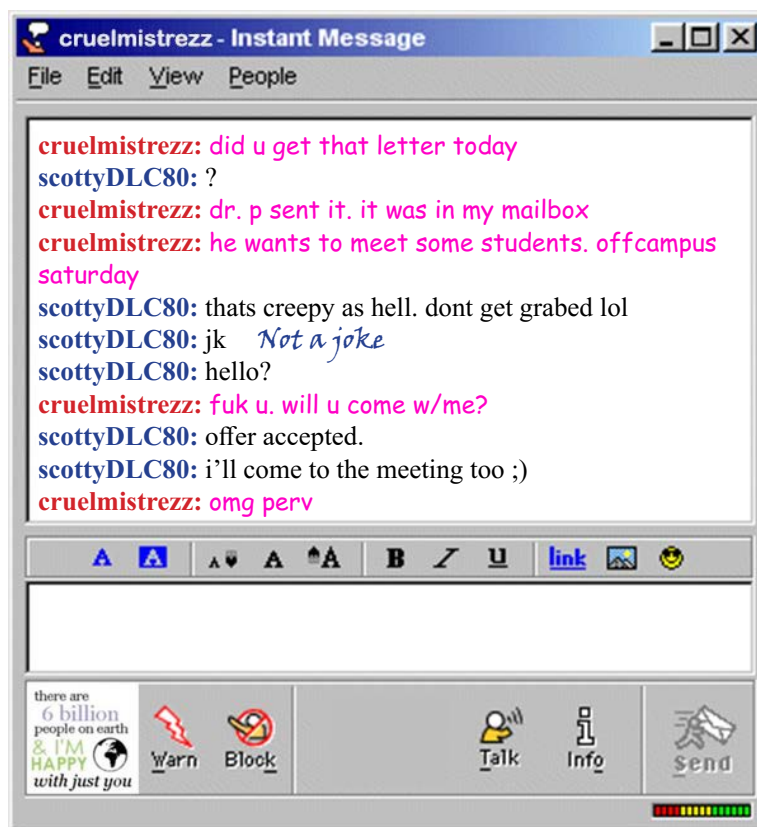
DEALER

Chatlog date: 3-15-99

Dr. P =
Truman Paulson

See: Daniel
Miller, Jackson --,
-- Richards, Emily
Sorenson, others

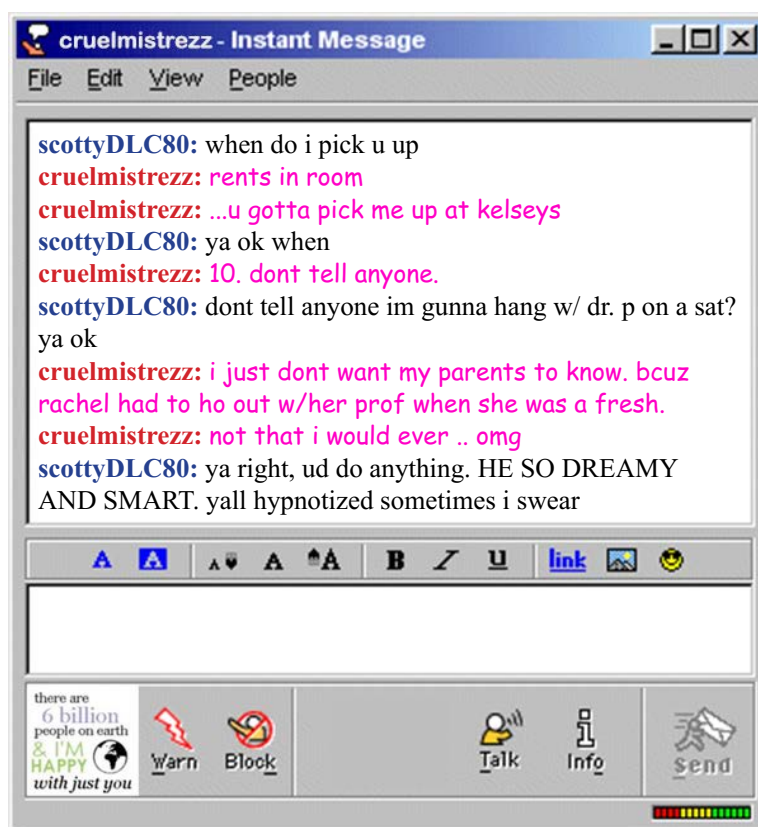
See:
Subject_0019,
Roads, Scent



If I were to
guess, I would
say that the
return ad-
dress on the
letter was
false.

Would be
typical.

Chatlog date: 3-19-99



Either poor or appropriate word choice from Scott re: "hypnotized."

Paulson seemed able to convince his patients, students, and employees to believe in almost anything.

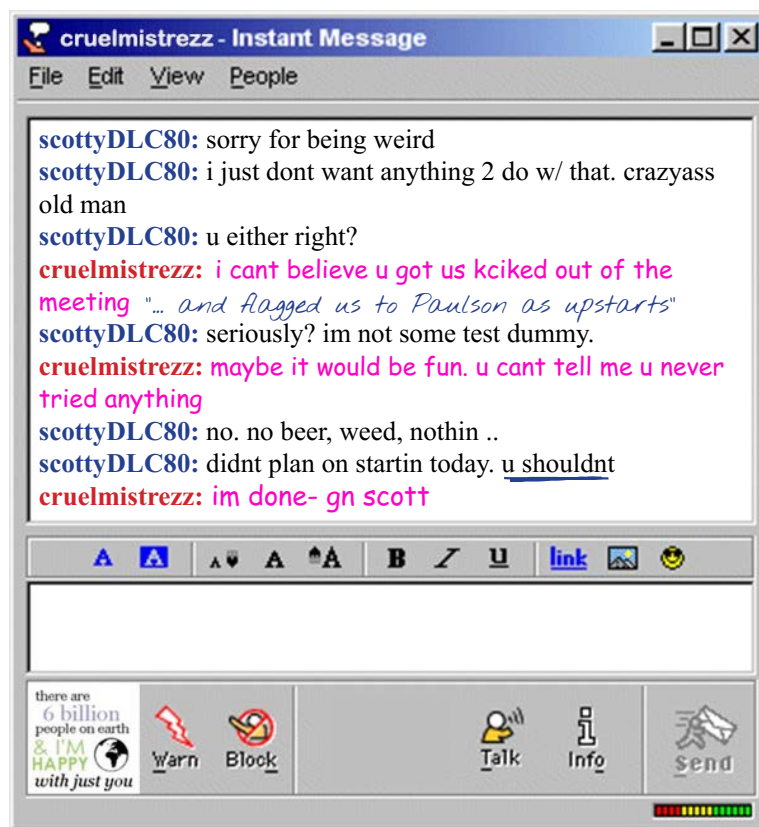


Hypnosis was an early marker of MKUltra and was abandoned in the transition to MAYA. In this way, Paulson fills a legacy role in the organization. While biology cannot fully explain his practice, there exists those with power over the mind.

Chatlog date: 3-20-99

Sorry, Scott.
Paulson is known
for testing people.
Never satisfied
with "yes."

He wants to
hear "please."

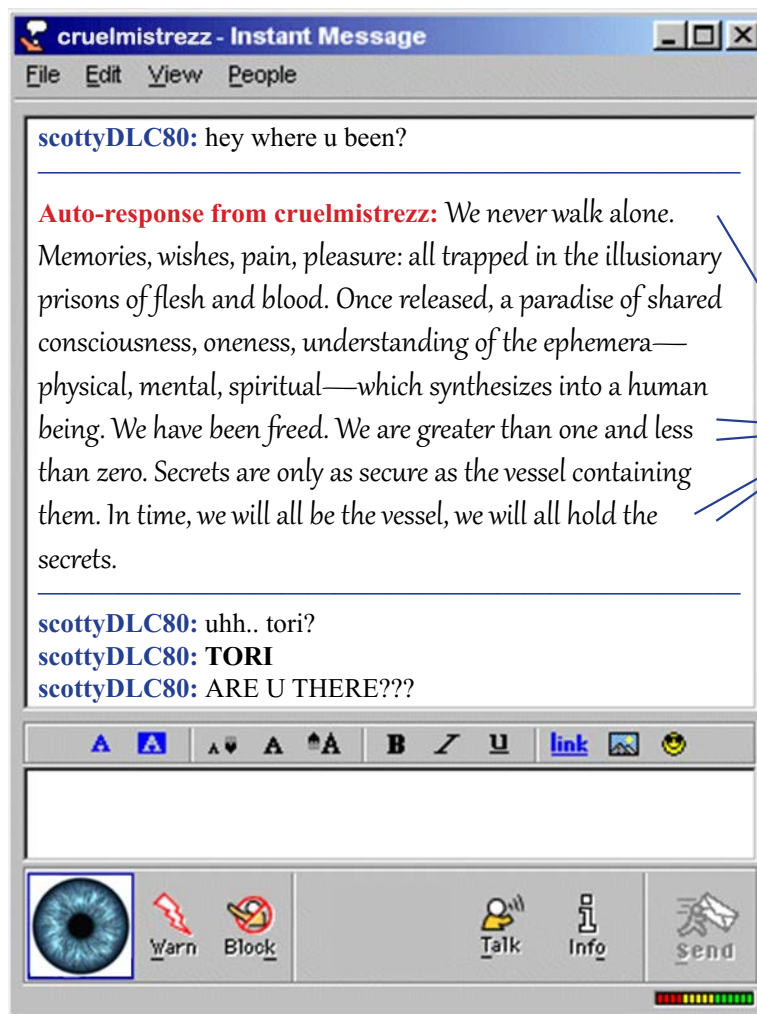


Curator's note: merryweather seems to know about Paulson in ways that the documents he gathered in *Afterlight* do not explicitly demonstrate. This may imply the two knew each other. Consider potential bias when reading further notes of MW.

Chatlog date: 3-29-99

Taller than rest. Who really took these screenshots?

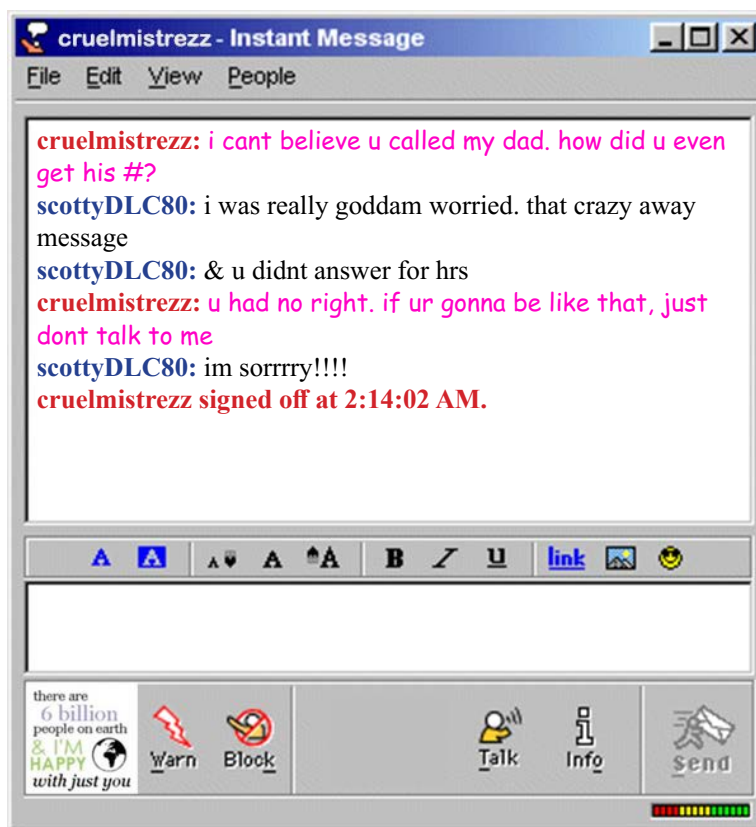
The proverbial third eye?



We + 5
Nectar language

Little Tori is not in control of her body at the time of this message. Scott is right to be concerned. Paulson has gotten to her. Sadly, this young girl is very likely paralyzed, terrified, and hallucinating.

Chatlog date: 3-30-99



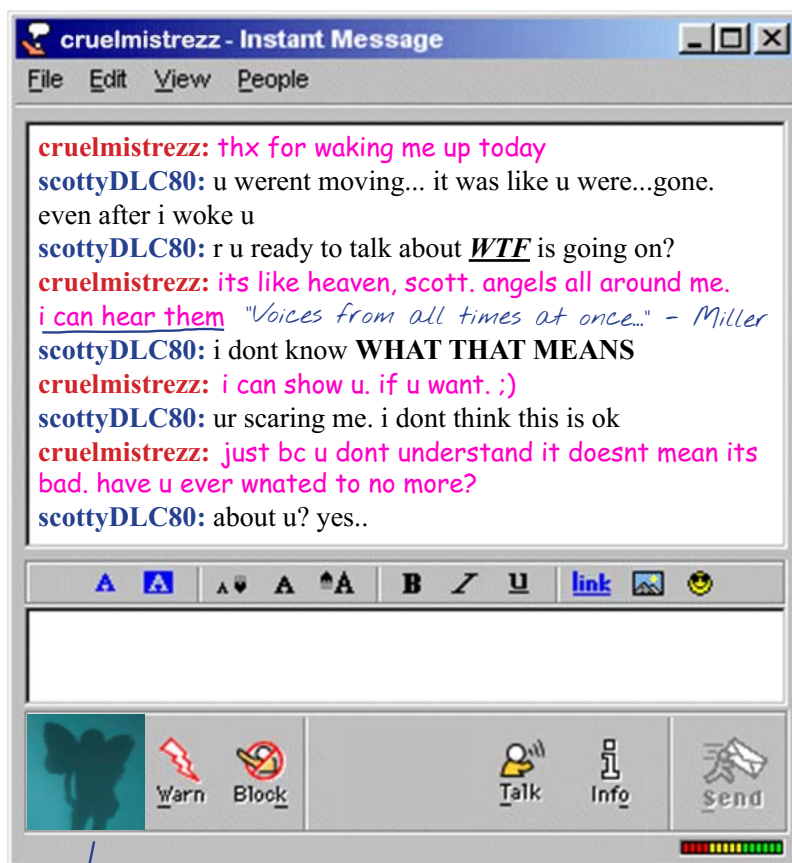
People, even Kids,
in SW seem to
have a Knack
for Knowing what
they should not.



Tori shows no memory of her trip on nectar here. This could be brief amnesia or evidence that one joins the hivemind gradually, not after a single dose. This conversation could not have been more than a couple of hours removed from the trip.

The question remains: in what state did her father find her? She is on her computer already after being found, meaning he could not have taken her to a hospital to be cleared. Almost certainly she was comatose, if not also contorted into an unnatural pose. Why is she even home? Or is it even her at all?

Chatlog date: 4-19-99



Taboo for nectar users to be specific in their accounts...

Would scare off new users.

butterfly girl

Tori's descent into the hivemind worsens each time she eats one of those butterflies.

Chatlog date: 5-2-99



Sickening to Know that Tori must have been coached to seduce Scott.

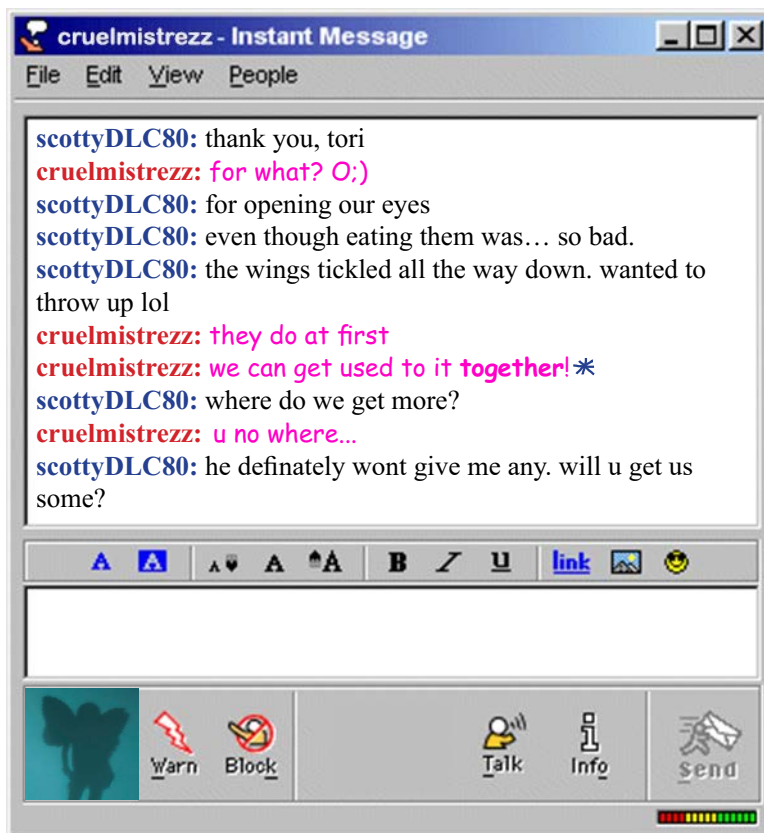
Paulson has done worse: threatening family members, termination from jobs (Miller), blackmail, bribery...

MKUltra relied on curiosity in most cases (At least for the college campuses. Prisons were another thing altogether). This is yet another distinction between it and MAYA: facilitators gladly used manipulation to secure subjects. The risk of a second failure was always hanging above them. Bastards would do anything to avoid that.

Chatlog date: 5-3-99

Scott's thank you
is programmed by
his experience.

Note the use of
"our" and "we"
and "us." His
journey has just
begun.



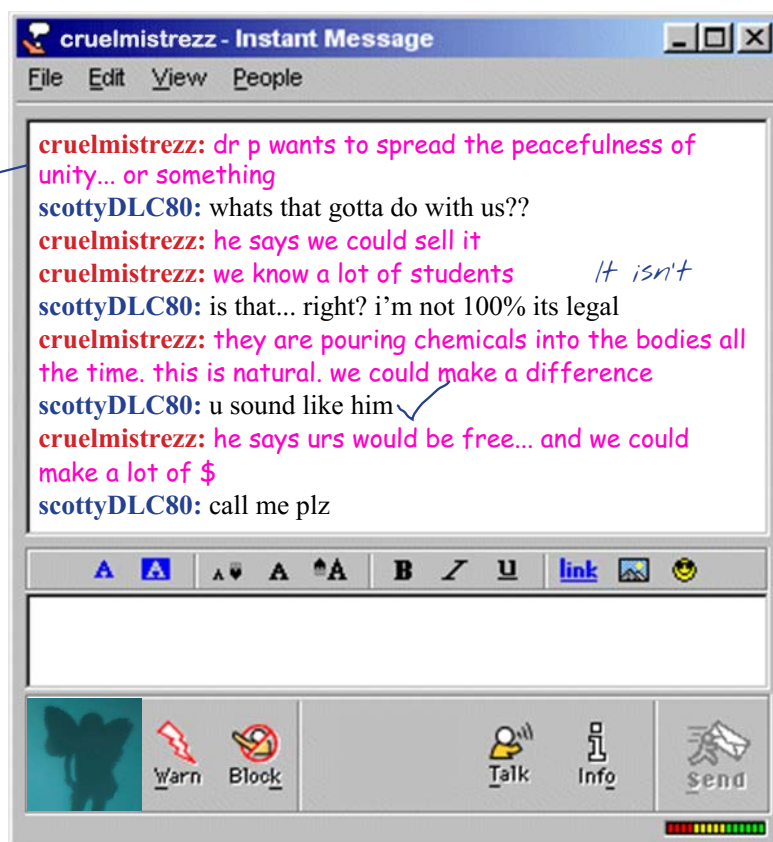
I'm not sure
what part of
the creature
causes such a
potent and im-
mediate addic-
tion. It may be
none.

Entirely possible
the addiction is
psychological (or
spiritual?) and
not physical
whatsoever...

Chatlog date: 5-11-99

Bullshit
language like
this is all part
of TP's hypnosis.

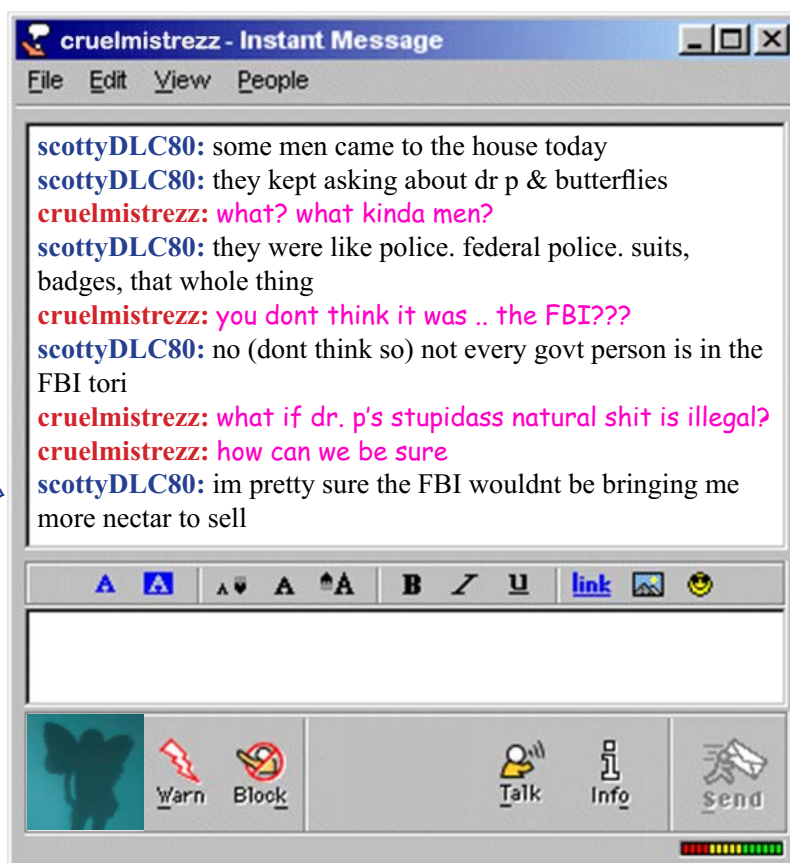
That \$ will
make its way
up and up the
chain. These
Kids have no
idea how high.



Of course he
does. His #1 pri-
ority
function in
MAYA is the
head-hunter of
SW.

Chatlog date: 6-1-99

Not FBI, but
damn close



There was only one chatlog after this one. It is my suspicion that Paulson encouraged or forced the two to take all of their communication offline where it could not be recorded. Note how the previous log ended: "call me plz"

Curator's note: Why would merriweather choose to omit the final log? Was he somehow implicated or his arguments disproven? That he would arbitrarily conceal it from his ultimate reader is troubling and compromises the integrity of his statements. The implication is that there may be a specific reason he chose to redact the log. What is he protecting?

Stillwater Chicken Society (est. 1962)

c. 2008

A flyer and invitation created for events hosted by the Stillwater Chicken Society. As evidenced in “Correspondence to Project MAYA Operatives,” the Society was a secret council with ties to the United States Government dating back as far as the inception of Stillwater, Florida. Based on the language used in their flyer and community outreach, their mission was to preserve the town of Stillwater: an ecosystem established and propped-up through residual funding via the CIA and their failed MKUltra program.

Notable members with materials in *Afterlight* included Truman Paulson, Daniel Miller, Paolo Ipema, Gregory and Madison Powell, and Cesar Castellanos. Not only was it a who’s-who of artifact creators, but it was also the middle of the conceptual venn diagram with Project MAYA and the Nectar resistance.

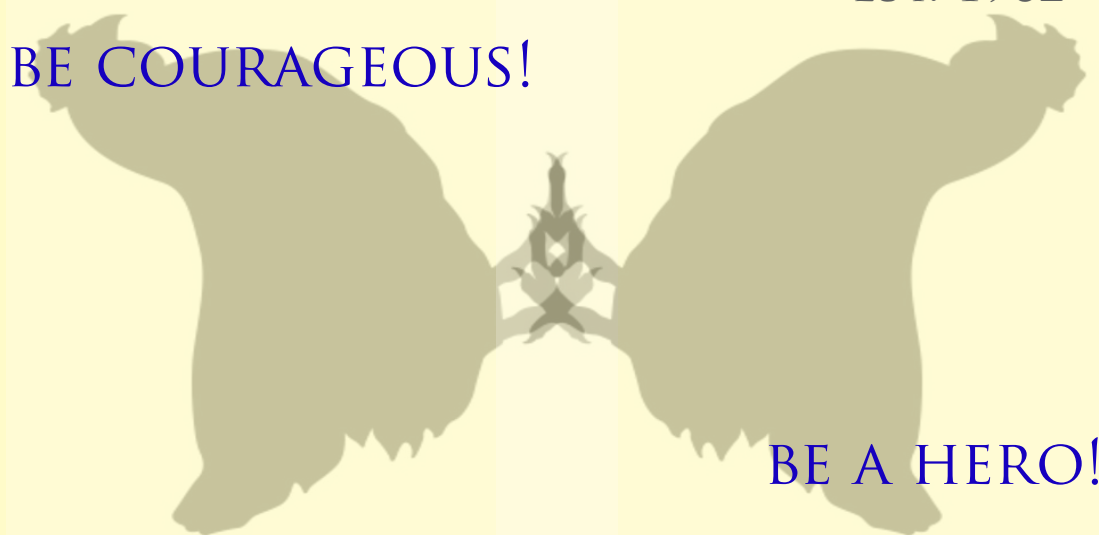
One can only infer what a code white represented to the Society. A call-to-arms, a cry for help, or perhaps a declaration of independence from the government’s oversight in the fallout of Daniel Miller’s arson? The world will never know for certain.

CODE WHITE

STILLWATER CHICKEN SOCIETY

EST. 1962

BE COURAGEOUS!



BE A HERO!

**This is a CODE WHITE.
Stillwater's chickens need you
now more than ever.**

OPEN RECRUITMENT

Sun. Aug 23
10 am - 6 pm

233 N. Walker Ave.
Next to The Good Life Outdoors

Welcoming Ceremony to Follow

**Are you OPEN-MINDED? Do you LOVE your city?
Will you preserve our FUTURE?**

Marta Lugo-Castellanos (b. ?)

c. 2013

This manuscript was included in full in the “Miller” section of the *Afterlight* binder. A story, possibly memoir, about a family who takes in a lost dog becomes a cautionary tale of what happens when the property of Daniel Miller touches another life. Lugo-Castellanos’s story is a rare glimpse into life of a typical Stillwater family in the months immediately following Miller’s arson, which should be considered the opening salvo in the war between Project MAYA and the Nectar resistance.

The writer provides a one-page foreword to her story, presumably as part of a submission packet or portfolio. All pages are printed one-sided and have full-length vertical grooves on the left, suggesting that they were once in a type of binding or crimped folder. A faint, floral aroma still haunts the paper, even after its time spent in a binder within a briefcase within a giant tree.

MUTT

I remember Raulito and Cesar every day. My boys. And, every day, I wish they were still here with me.

Cesar married me when I was 19. He was an older man, 25 then, and my parents were happy that I would find such a strong and industrious man. Cesar already had a real job—not like the neighborhood boys. He could protect me and we could start a family together. Times were happy. Then we moved to Stillwater in the fall of 1998.

Raul was born on the Friday after the millennium. Cesar's job at the document security firm seemed harder than it should be. I would lie to say he did not bring his stresses home and relieve them. My mother, when I confessed, said that this is part of a woman's duty. I found it so disgusting, but Raul needed two parents, especially with his condition.

Viviana was a miracle. This is a modern person's way to say "accident." She knows two things for sure: that she should not be here and that I love her more than anything, regardless. Vivi's troubles were always physical growing up, not mental like her older brother. She was so sick all the time. I could not work out of fear that something might happen out of my watch. It was always worth it.

This tale is painted as battle between father and son, my husband and my little boy. I would not say so much that it is Raul coming to his manhood or Cesar passing a torch or a showdown to be the ruler of a house. Instead I would say that my boys always wanted different things for each other. It is the most vivid memory I have of them, five years on now. I wish it were another. What I was not there for, they told me what they believed to be true.

And no, I never found out who did it.

MUTT

BY

MARTA LUGO-CASTELLANOS

Raul hid the dog's dull-green collar and tag under his wicker nightstand. He knew his father, Cesar, wouldn't allow him to keep someone else's dog, but this one was perfect to him: an adolescent retriever with a thick coat of amber fur, a long, alert ear, another floppy, lazy ear, and dark chocolate eyes. Raul already planned on pitching the dog to us as an early ninth birthday present so we wouldn't have to worry about spending money on a game or toys or clothes like we always tried to do.

The boy tucked a piece of jerky from his dresser-top into his jeans pocket and climbed back out of his window into the backyard, where he'd quietly led the stray to a line of water along the fence. Though the dog had appeared in good health, it gulped down the water, grass clippings, mosquito larvae, bits of mud, and what was either a lizard tail or a small piece of string. The dog was still there when Raul returned, now lying in the water, its fur clumped in muddy little locks. Raul bent down and extended his shaking fingers, which the stray sniffed, licked for a moment, then stopped with a whine.

"Pretty smart, aren't ya pup?" Raul asked. He reached into his pocket and offered the jerky to the dog, who snatched it out of his hand, nipping his middle finger in the process.

Cesar called out to him from the rear french doors of the house then into the house to me. "Get away from that thing, *mijo*. You don't know where it's been." When Raul didn't move and instead hugged the stray dog's neck with one arm, Cesar marched out onto the damp, deep green blades of St. Augustine.

"He's a nice dog, see?" Raul said. "Just thirsty and hungry."

"I see he's nice, but he could have fleas or disease, okay? Come on, Raulito," Cesar grabbed at Raul's free arm and pulled him off the dog. Cesar was stocky, but could still lift his son high enough in a bicep curl so that his feet didn't touch the ground. Raul usually latched on, laughing, for multiple reps, but this time he wriggled free and fell onto the springy grass.

"Cesar! I said he's too big. You can't play like this anymore," I said from behind them. "And you, boy, I told you too many times to close the gate. This is why. These animals get in and tear up the grass Daddy works so much on. You want to be the one to fix it? I swear you don't listen to me. Like I shouldn't even be here."

Raul scooted back to the dog, who was now standing on the grass beside the water, and pleaded with us to let him keep the stray, that he wasn't diseased and that he could give him a bath and show just how handsome he is. Cesar asked, Where's his tag? and Raul replied that he didn't have anything when he showed up in the backyard. Cesar scoffed and said he never saw this dog in the neighborhood, probably someone dropped it off because they didn't want it anymore.

I bent over the dog and looked him up and down. "Mira, he looks healthy, just messy." I pinched my crucifix pendant and ran it along the thin gold chain. "Raulito has been asking for a dog and his birthday is coming. It could be meant to be, this dog."

Raul smirked and checked Cesar's expression, which had not changed from squinting at the dog from a distance. Cesar's chapped lips curled on one side and he said, "Fine, you both think this dog is so nice? You clean him, then we will see. But I'm not paying for no vet or nothing. If he's sick or causes

problems, he goes for another ride." When Raul showed a toothy smile, Cesar continued, "And he lives out here, not in my house. Only family."

And so, after Raul washed the dog with my help, Friday was adopted. Raul's little sister, Viviana, wanted to pet and help and name the dog while we worked, but Raul scolded her and said she could go play with her stupid cat. Besides, he said, he had already decided on the name Friday. Viviana said Friday was a dumb name for a dog, but I disagreed and said it was unique and a perfectly fine name, though I did ask Raul why he chose it, since it was Sunday that day. I just like that name, he said. The dog seemed to like it as well because, from that moment on, it came every time someone called out the word Friday, whether it was Raul with a new toy, Cesar cherishing the last workday of the week over breakfast, the lady on the T.V. news talking about all the fun things to do at night, or Viviana coaxing the dog on purpose to come into the front yard where he was not allowed. Inevitably, despite Cesar's original protests against the dog's coming inside, Friday was sleeping on his lap in the living room within four days.

Before long, Friday developed a habit of digging holes in the backyard—holes much wider and deeper than the dog itself. The first time, Cesar thought that Friday had found a mole and was trying to get at it. He had had mole problems in the past and remarked that having a dog's sharp nose would help in his ongoing battle to secure his yard from the pests. On further inspection with the help of Raul, they found no tunnels or signs of them near Friday's three-foot long and two-foot deep trench.

"If there's no mole, why would a dog dig so . . . so much?"

"Not why, but how," Cesar said. "How does he do it?" They shared a puzzled glance, then Cesar continued, "I thought he was sleeping in your bed last night."

Raul nodded, adding that he let Friday out sometime in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and run around since he was whining and climbing all over him. It wasn't the first time since Friday had been sleeping with him that the dog's energy spiked at nighttime to a point where Raul had stayed awake with him until two, three, or even five A.M. The boy could tell from the redness in his father's cheeks that this explanation would not do. "But I meant to let him back in," he said. "I guess I fell back asleep."

"This dog is your responsibility," Cesar said. He adjusted his black *Reliant Securities* ballcap and stared into the middle distance. "Same as this hole. Fill it back up. I'll bring some sod home with me tonight and show you how to set it."

"I'm really sorry," Raul said. "It won't happen again, I promise."

Cesar knelt down, pulled a grass root from the side of the trench, and flipped it back and forth in front of his face. "Raulito, listen close. Don't make promises for someone else. They'll make you a liar every time. *Comprende?*"

With each new hole Friday dug, Raul heard a new conversation from inside between me and his father while he refilled the dirt. Why we should get rid of the dog, what effect it would have on our son, why it isn't fair that the dog digging up the lawn isn't the same as Viviana's cat vomiting on the carpet, why a husband who spends most of his time at work or out drinking should worry less about his yard and more about his family, why abandoning a dog is wrong, why we should put up posters seeing if anyone was looking for a missing dog, why it would be easier to make Friday an inside-only dog and take him for

walks to use the bathroom, why a wife who makes no money gets no say in what happens in *his* house, why Raul doesn't deserve a dog anyway because he is failing in school, why if he knew anything about his son he would know he doesn't learn right, why I should know the reason he spends his time out of the house as much as he can, why a dog might have been a bad idea.

The holes themselves became greater in surface area and depth each time, some large enough to fit a bicycle on its side (Raul measured it this way), others large enough to fit a couch or a grown man (Cesar had measured it this way by stumbling in one late at night). Raul's arms and back were always sore from shoveling heavy mounds of dirt and carrying sod from Cesar's pickup truck in the driveway to the patched-up holes in the back. "Make sure you water the new sod everyday before school and then before dinner," Cesar had told him, "for at least two weeks after you set it. Don't forget."

The morning Cesar awoke to the eighteenth hole, not even a month after Friday's arrival, he stomped into Raul's bedroom and carried his half-sleeping body to the backyard.

"You see what your dog does?" Cesar asked as he plopped Raul into the new trench. Friday lay at the bottom, undisturbed in his sleep by the falling boy. "You see what you make me do?" Around Cesar, the yard was blanketed in large patches of dirt and of poorly-set sod, like a quilt of failures.

Raul flared his arms and legs, feeling for the edges of the pit and causing grassy clumps of dirt to fall on him. "Where . . . where am I?" Raul sobbed. Raul's heel slammed into Friday's ribs. The dog woke and snapped at the air around him. "Friday? Dad?" The boy inhaled low, short, loud breaths while he craned his neck to find his father. But Cesar's face had disappeared from the ledge of the pit. A moment later he returned, brandishing a thick chrome chain that gleamed in the early morning light and swayed like a string

of hanging lights. His scowl was narrow and flat as he looped the chain on itself and swung it down. The chain flopped down in the dirt between Raul and Friday, startling both of them; they scrambled to separate sides of the hole and made themselves as small as possible. After four failed attempts, Cesar lay on the ground and lowered himself halfway into the hole, then grabbed at Friday, caught him by one of his hind legs, and pulled him closer. The dog yelped and tried to pull back, thrashing with his other limbs, but Cesar had elevated him nearly out of the four-feet deep hole with one hand. Raul grabbed at his father's other trunk-like arm and cried out for him to stop, then fell after Cesar shook him off.

I came outside and shrieked, "Are you crazy?" and, "Can't you hear you're hurting him?" I was still in my pale yellow pajamas and my hair was wrapped in clear saran wrap from overnight treatment. Viviana followed soon after, but I sent her back inside to get bandages and alcohol. Cesar hadn't noticed yet, but Friday had opened wounds on his arm and shoulder. Blood trickled through his sweat and thick body hair and into the pit. Cesar tightened the loop of chain around Friday's neck and hauled his still-resisting body to a pine tree in the far corner of the yard. I extended my hand for Raul to grab, but he had collapsed, muddy tears trickling down his face. With one hand, Cesar secured the chain around the base of the tree while holding Friday down with the other; he gave a final tug on the slack of the chain and turned his back on the whimpering dog.

And that was the way it would be.

Three days later, Viviana and I were cleaning the house while Cesar worked his security job and Raul attended after-school tutoring. I wished to

clear up as much of the shedded fur as possible in the house, though in truth the house had been in need of cleaning long before Friday arrived.

"Now Vivi," I said, "you go clean your brother's room, top and bottom. Friday has been in there so much, he makes a big mess." Viviana nodded eagerly, and I added, "If you do a very good job, we go for ice cream after we pick up big brother. Then he will have two nice surprises today." With that, Viviana nodded again and scampered off with her child-sized dustbuster, spray bottle of all-purpose cleaner, and a steadily-unraveling roll of paper towels.

The little girl whizzed through the room, tossing dirty clothes, sheets, and pillowcases into the hallway for me to pick up for the laundry. Once everything was clear, she sprayed and wiped Raul's oak dresser, his convertible desk/vanity (which was always used as a desk), and matching tan wicker chair and nightstand. While she cleaned the wicker furniture, she saw a fully-grown wood spider frozen on the wall above Raul's bed. Without a moment's hesitation, she equipped herself with the dustbuster, climbed up on the unstable wicker nightstand, and sucked up the spider where it couldn't get her or her brother. She was always very protective of her brother. Viviana turned the dustbuster over, looking deep into the clear chamber on the back of the device until she could see the spider among the hair and clumps of lint. When the spider made a sudden lunge toward the wall of its prison, Viviana eeped, threw the dustbuster across the room, and teetered for a moment before falling along with the nightstand.

I rushed into the room after the clatter and picked up my little girl, whose giggles stretched a rosy carpet burn on her cheek. Viviana told me that she got a spider and pointed to the dustbuster on the floor, which was cracked open with its contents strewn across the carpet. We froze, our eyes darting across the carpet and floorboards, but seeing no spider. Then I saw the

dull-green collar in the light square of carpet where the tipped-over nightstand hand stood. The brushed metal tag attached to the collar read: MAYA - 4 SUNRISE CIR - STILLWATER, FL - 863-703-2365.

That evening, the family and Friday piled into our Ford Escape and drove across town to the address on Friday's—or "Maya's"—tag. Cesar had said nothing since he arrived home and I pulled him aside into our bedroom to talk for almost an hour. Raul had cried when I confronted him about the collar and said he knew Dad wouldn't let him keep if he saw the collar and he just wanted a dog and he didn't mean to hurt anybody but now the yard was ruined and Daddy had to go to the doctor for shots and Daddy hated him now because he hurt him and he lied and he broke his promise and he wanted to stay home while they took the dog back. But I insisted that he should come with us to see that Friday was safe with his old family so he wouldn't worry about him. As for his father, I assured Raul that he would get over being scratched by a little dog, but it might take a while for us to trust the boy again. "You understand," I said, "that you stole someone else's family member. It would be like if someone came and took Vivi away." Raul smiled, but wiped it away when he understood I was not trying to make him smile.

We stopped at the intersection of Sunrise Circle and Heron's Crest Drive. I peeked at Raul in the rearview mirror and asked if he was ready; Raul said nothing and continued staring out of his window. We turned down the gravel road and passed very few houses, #12 and #10 were side by side one-story ranch style homes, #8 looked to be a vacant lot overgrown with weeds and prickly bushes, then there was a long, winding corridor of oak and pine trees before we came to #6, a manufactured home with an old turquoise VW bus parked beside it. More trees, followed by the start of pavement, then a wooden mailbox with white block letters which read: MILLERS - 4 SUNRISE. The house on

this property was a blackened, half-collapsed catastrophe surrounded by yellow and black tape. It must have burned down only weeks prior.

Cesar finally spoke up and said, "Millers? This is the house where the man—do you remember?" I gave a slight nod while Viviana asked what, what.

"The man who lived here, he was a very bad man. He hurt his family, his own little girls, and ran away," I said. Viviana put her hands up to her mouth, something she had seen me do so many times. "They are trying to find him, still." I turned around in my seat and placed a hand on Raul's knee. I smiled, making sure to do so with my eyes, too, and patted him. "Now we know this: it's good, what you did."

Raul looked at me, glassy-eyed, and said, "Friday knew. He was afraid." He gulped, knowing what he would say could get him into trouble. "But still, he was their family. Maybe he should have stayed to be with them. Wherever they went."

"Mamá is right," Cesar said, turning back in his seat as well. He did not smile, nor frown, but nodded at something in the middle distance as though convincing himself. "He might not be alive if we hadn't taken him in. But, *mira*, that does not make your lie okay, understand?" He then bound his eyes to Raul's until the boy unfroze himself enough to make two tiny nods and let his eyes fall to his lap. Cesar turned back. We all sat there for a moment, looking at the remnants of Friday's old home. "*Vámonos*," he said. "This place, it makes me sick."

At school that next week, Raul's classmates began asking him questions: "So is your dog crazy?" and "Shouldn't you get rid of him?" and "Can he still fetch a ball?" and "Didn't he come from the guy who burned his house down and killed his family?" and "Can you bring him in so we can see him?" They asked

at recess while Raul leaned apathetically on a tree as the capture-the-flag guard; at lunch after they cut him in line and at his table and during their Principal's mandated clean-up time; at P.E. while they stretched as the coach droned on, counting the kids off while they all collectively tried to ignore the sour olfactory assault of fresh bleach and stale feet; and even during class time with notes passed by pretty girls, but written by ugly boys. They ignored his quiet dismissals and followed him whenever he walked away with his hands in his pockets, until he finally tackled a tall fifth grader (Chester, whose mama told me he should have been in sixth grade) at recess that Thursday. The boy wrapped his flabby, pale arms around Raul on the way down, grabbed his burnt orange #2 uniform shirt at the back, and flung Raul off of him and face-first into a metal soccer goal post. A dull bnnng sounded from the collision of his skull and the post, but the post didn't need to go to the nurse and wear a nose guard for the next "2-4 weeks, or as long as needed." What nurses they had at that school. Raul knew there was only one place the kids at school could have found out about his secret.

Three days prior, Raul had confided in his friend Christopher about the troubling sight of the charred timbers on Sunrise Circle. His reason hadn't been so much that he needed to get it off his chest, but that Christopher's father was a volunteer firefighter for Marion County. Sometimes Christopher would come to school and tell Raul about how his dad helped a family extinguish an out-of-control bonfire, or put out a tree ignited by homemade fireworks. Being a firefighter in this area sounded fun, not dangerous like T.V made it seem in the big city where people jumped out of 20-story burning buildings or got trapped in elevators. Raul wondered, too, if Christopher's dad was there that day at the Millers', if he would have been there to save Friday, or if it would have been too late.

"What did your dad tell you about that guy? Friday's owner?" Raul had asked.

Christopher shrugged without looking up from coloring in his map of the United States and said, "They don't know where he is. They just put out the fire. That's their job."

"That's all?"

"He told me he loved me and that he wants us to spend a week together during winter break, just the two of us."

"What does that have to do with the fire?"

Raul spent most of his afternoons in the following week at Friday's tree, rolling a new tennis ball back and forth with him, tightrope-walking on the narrow roots with the dirt dug out from beneath them, and taking short naps using Friday's soft belly as a pillow. Cesar had ignored Friday's digging around the tree, since the grass there was a low-light strain that didn't match his St. Augustine anyway. The thick chain, something that seemed more fit for tying down a boat than a dog, was also replaced with a thinner one linked to a sandy-yellow cloth collar; there was no tag. Raul was delighted at this compromise, since his dad had made it clear that the alternative was losing Friday altogether. He still worried, though.

"Why, pup? Why do you keep digging?" Raul asked Friday one afternoon. "There's nothing under here but mud and rocks and dinosaur bones and lava and China." He tossed a clump of dirt down into the empty moat Friday had created around the tree. "Unless there's a treasure! Is there a treasure?" Friday jumped down from Raul's side after the clump, which had broken apart on impact. He circled where it landed, sniffing and pawing at the damp soil. When he found nothing, he lay down and huffed, his lazy ear drooping over one eye. The retriever's neck had worn bald from fighting the thick chain, then collar,

exposing light pink skin and dark splotches of scabs. "If you stop, maybe Dad will let you back in the house," Raul said.

I joined Raul at the tree that day with a metal dish of brown and red kibble that sounded a tinny jingle with each of my steps. I gave it a shake and leaned down, setting it at the edge of Friday's hole.

"Vivi still has her fever. Did you see her today?" I asked.

Raul shook his head and said, "Please don't tell Dad." His shoulders tensed for a moment until I sat and rested an arm around him.

"Raulito, he knows you are sorry," I said. I ran my index finger over the bridge of his translucent nose guard. "For everything. You are just a boy, I tell him. His *papá* was not so nice as him, if you can believe." I craned my neck to look over the side of the hole at Friday. "Even this dog he treats better than he was. He remembers what it was like to be this way. Like you. He always wanted a boy, he said, so he could be a good daddy to him."

A drop of water or sweat ran down the edge of Raul's nose guard and dripped onto his hand. He was very hard to read at this time. Somehow he still had a bit of dirt under his fingernails, even though I was sure it had been more than two weeks since he last filled and resodded a hole. "He gave Friday a collar, at least. He cares a little."

I looked down, narrowing my eyes slightly, then patted Raul on the back. "He cares, *cariño*, he cares."

The next morning, Raul decided to find out for sure where his father stood, though my words seemed as genuine as always. He must have spent much of the night thinking about how much he wanted to keep Friday, all the things that had happened since the retriever's arrival, how everyone at school knew him now when they hadn't before, how I worried and brought him drinks and snacks everyday after school when he knew I hadn't done that since at least

second grade, how Viviana would sit in her father's lap while they watched T.V. after dinner now and he would tickle her until her olive skin blushed.

"Dad," Raul said, "if I ask you something, do you promise to tell the truth?" He lingered in the archway between the living room and dining room, still in his bedtime shorts and white undershirt which both bore sporadic holes where Friday's nails had caught in the middle of the night.

Cesar set down his fork with a clatter, took a gulp of coffee, and pushed out the wooden chair across from him at their square dining room table with his black-booted foot. "This I can do," he said. Cesar never watched T.V. or read a newspaper or listened to music during his breakfast. He had said there are enough distractions the rest of the day, and the morning was the only time he had for quiet.

Raul slid into the seat and ran one of his fingernails under another, producing a tiny pile of slate-colored grit. Interrupting Cesar's breakfast time was taboo in the household, even for me. I stayed in the bedroom watching the morning news until Cesar left for work, passing on any weather or traffic problems to make his day easier before kissing him goodbye. Viviana typically wasn't awake at this time of morning, though Raul said he heard her coughing when he first awoke. I had gone into her room earlier that morning, around two, to see how she was; she looked fine, but the skin on her face and hands felt like it might burn my hand.

"Well?" Cesar asked. He crossed his arms so that the thick, coarse hair on his bulging forearms made a net across his chest.

"My question," Raul started, "is about Friday." Cesar pursed his lips and cocked his head right, waiting. "I was wondering if you want to—do you want to take him away?"

Cesar straightened himself and leaned back in his chair with a squeak. His son's face was stern and narrow, like his own often was. "You want we should take him to the pound?" Cesar asked. "Why now? I thought this Friday was the perfect dog, eh?"

"Wherever you want. I'm asking if you want to take him away from here. Anywhere."

"But you love this dog, even though he ruins my yard and keeps you awake at night and makes a mess," Cesar uncrossed his arms and gestured haphazardly with his hands. "You still love him. That's what matters, *mijo*. Your mother and I want you to be a happy boy."

I interjected. "Raulito, we both know you love Friday."

Raul looked away, then only at his father, and leaned his elbows on the table. His soft, young face hardened under its partial mask. "Yes or no?"

"Raulito. What do you want me to say?"

"Okay." Raul returned to his room to dress for school.

I stood up from the table and started after him.

"No," Caesar said. "We answered his question. This house belongs to us. He must learn this."

"You do not answer for me." I turned and continued into the hallway.

Sometime that same day while Cesar was at work, Raul was at school, and I was at the doctor with Viviana, Friday slipped out of his collar and disappeared beyond the fence. I arrived home first and realized the dog was missing when I checked on his food. Two hours later, when we picked up Raul from school, I was unsure of what to say. Raul sagged in his newly-typical melancholy and took his time getting into the SUV.

"Raul," I said, "we need to drive around the neighborhood for a while." When he didn't ask why, I shared a glance with Viviana and continued, "Friday got off his leash and out of the fence while we were gone and I can't find him anywhere. The neighbors haven't seen him at all."

The boy scrambled into the front seat from the back, though I had constantly told him before that it wasn't safe. I'll be able to see better from up here, he said.

I paused and sighed. "Don't tell your daddy." Raul was already oscillating his head out of the passenger window, scanning the sides of the road but seeing only children with brightly-colored backpacks almost as big as their bodies.

Two more hours later, we had driven up and down every road within three miles of our home and knocked on the doors of at least twenty houses—but no help. We returned home after sundown to find that Cesar's white pick-up was already in the gravel driveway. I worried he would want an explanation for where we had been and told Raul to let me speak.

Cesar was seated in the dining room with a gray cordless phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His hair was still greasy and matted down, although his daily routine was to shower immediately upon arriving home. "No, sir. That's his name. Yes. A mutt—eh, mixed breed, I think part-retriever. Light brown, one floppy ear. Chip?" He noticed us coming in the front door and mouthed 'What?' at me. I pointed an index finger into my other palm and he rubbed his cigarette into a small dish. "I don't know. He was someone else's, we found him. Yes, sir. Okay, thank you."

Though I was clutching sleepy Viviana in one arm, I put my other hand on Raul's back and said, "We drove around and around, ay, but no Friday anywhere."

Cesar joined the family and knelt down to retie one of his boots near the door. "Sí, I understand." He produced Friday's yellow collar from his back pocket and held it out in front of his son. "Raul, don't lose this. It's important." Raul took the collar and balled it into his closed fist at his side. "Part of being a man is knowing what to let go and what to keep. Even if you never find your Friday, nothing can take away the memory and feeling he gave to you. Keep that reminder, *mijo*."

Raul scowled with his eyes alone and marched out of the french doors to the backyard without a word. Cesar stood to follow him, but I put my hand on his arm and asked him to help me put Viviana to bed.

Late that following Saturday night, our neighbor, Dade, rang the doorbell. He explained to me that his daughter said she heard some howling and yelps from the conservation land behind their houses. For the most part, he'd said, 'it's swamp and woods and bad, bad critters out there and nothing you'd wanna tangle with.' I called Cesar to the door relayed Dade's story. Cesar then asked if Dade had a pistol he could borrow. He remarked that he shouldn't discharge his security pistol while he was off-duty if he could help it.

"Raul?" Cesar called from outside the boy's bedroom, knocking. "I'm coming in." But the bed was made and the boy was not in it. He opened the closet, the bathroom, Viviana's room, checked the living room, laundry room—still nothing. He rushed through the house and out to the backyard, pulling at the gate and fence, even searching in Friday's moat around the pine tree. Still no Raul. Then, he heard a crash of metals in the garage.

In the side doorway to the garage, he met Raul, who was holding a keychain flashlight in one hand and a shovel in the other. The boy's eyes

widened; his father never let him use his tools without permission. He said, "I just wanted to cover—"

"No time, Raulito," Cesar said. "Put down your shovel. We grab my big flashlight and go out back."

"That's where I was going," Raul said.

"Not the backyard. The woods," Cesar said. "Mr. Dade said they heard a dog back there tonight. You cover the hole later, if you still have to." He pulled up his shirt, exposing a wood-handled revolver tucked into the front of his jeans. With his other hand, he unholstered a Glock from his hip and extended his hand to Raul in the same way he had done with Friday's newer collar. "There are scared, hungry animals there."

"Daddy . . ."

"No time for 'daddies,'" Cesar rasped. "This is the real thing this time. Tell me, is it worth going out there to find your Friday, then? To keep him?"

Raul, trembling, stared at the shovel on the floor, then the gun. His chest was a bellows, his eyes alight. Before he could reach out, Cesar clasped his hand around the slide of the Glock.

"Okay, then. Remember what we say on the range. You don't use this unless you must," Cesar said. "You never, ever point this at something unless you are prepared to destroy it. Understand?"

Raul and Cesar ventured out into the conservation land equipped with a spotlight from Cesar's truck. It seemed everything lived back there, everything they knew of and everything they had hoped wasn't so close to our home. They heard the low bellow of an alligator, the scatter of leaves from a deer—or was it a coyote?—the skitter of a lizard or insects on the low-hanging branches inches from their faces. The part of the land that was

dry wasn't so bad. The swamp smelled foul, like when the rat had died in their ventilation system, and the muck clung to their legs like plaster. At one point, after they had stepped into knee-deep water, Raul asked his father how he knew they were going the right way. Cesar responded to just keep going. Raul was sure he felt something's fin or paw or tail or fingers grasp wearily at his ankle from under the water, but swallowed hard and did not jump or shriek.

By the time the two found Friday, he was already burned at the bottom of a sedan-sized hole. Shriveled black and white charcoal skin stretched across his frail body where a thick amber coat had once gathered mud and leaves. Pinkness peeked through cracks where the skin had peeled away on his limbs, and a puddle of burgundy viscera lay beneath a larger opening on his torso where he had either been cut or popped. (These are the kinds of words Cesar used to describe this later on; I could tell image stayed with him. I cannot imagine the effect on poor Raul.) The thick chrome chain with which Friday had originally been fastened to the pine tree in the backyard wrung his neck while the other end coiled around the trunk of a thick cypress tree like a metallic python. The place smelled worse than the swamp.

"Raulito?" Cesar asked into the darkness. No response. "Did you see no one bring Friday into the woods?" Silence, or as much silence that could exist in a swamp at nighttime. "Raul?"

Behind him, Raul's white-knuckled hand squeezed the grip of his father's Glock, pointed downward. His eyes leapt and sank and his lips followed. His shoulders crept closer and closer to his ears and air and saliva sputtered from between his clenched teeth as he stepped up to the edge of the grave. He slowly and shakily raised the gun toward the dog.

"Raul, no," Cesar said, "He is already gone. Let him be."

Raul pulled the trigger and the gun clicked. He cried out, filling the quiet space where a bang was supposed to be, and fell into one of the enormous piles of rich, unearthed soil by the hole. Cesar pried the gun from Raul's hand and ejected the empty magazine. He lay by his son's side in the moist dirt, pounding his head rhythmically into the mound.

At home the next morning, Cesar awoke early and prepared two shovels in the backyard beside Friday's empty moat by the pine tree. The night prior, he was the only one to fill in Friday's grave in the swamp, figuring Raul was too distraught to help. Today he ate a waffle and orange juice breakfast at the table with me and Viviana, who was feeling better, and told us about the night before. For this telling, he left out the details of the chain and burning, allowing us to infer that an animal had gotten to him. It wasn't until later that next night that we talked about what actually happened.

When Raul finally came out of his room, we were silent until he spoke. "What time is it?" he asked. When I answered breakfast time, he claimed he wasn't hungry. His eyes were not droopy like they had been recently, though they were red and puffed at the eyelids.

"You ready, then? What we talked about on the way back?" Cesar asked, tilting his head toward the french doors.

"No."

Cesar asked this question each day, sometimes at breakfast, sometimes at dinner, for the next week. Then he asked two or three times a week for a month. Then once a month. No matter what, he told Raul that he should still do it. That he could help if his son wanted.

Finally, at my urging, Cesar went to the backyard after work one day the following December and began shoveling the dirt from the now-tamped pile into

the pine tree moat. I watched with Vivi from the back porch, comforting her even though she said she "hated that dumb dog." Cesar had been at it for ten minutes when Raul walked past us and waited for his father to recognize his presence. Cesar turned, smiled proudly, and said, "This, this is what a man does, *mijo*. You see this Marta? What a man!" He grabbed the second shovel that he'd brought just for this occasion and offered the handle to our boy. Raul shook his head and walked past him to the hole. He tossed Friday's yellow collar underhand into the dirt and walked back into the house.

Raul watched us, watched his father from his bedroom window. The hole was filled was done by sundown, just as a rare Florida cold snap whistled a frigid wind through the thick trees of the conservation land.

Rickey Powell (b. ?)

c. late 1990's

This series of diary entries serves as a list of clothing owned by a young man whose family is woven into the history of Stilwater, Florida as evidenced by the articles and their history. Rickey was unknowingly a subject of Project MAYA by extension. Not only were his parents were members of the Stillwater Chicken Society, the innocuous civilian front for the Project, his grandparents may have been founding members. This is suggested by the handed-down sharkskin boots in Rickey's closet. Bull shark skin was a constant symbol of MAYA and, later, the Nectar hivemind resistance.

It is uncertain why Rickey took down an inventory of his clothing or why he provided history for some of the items and not the rest. Like others who documented their lives in Stillwater, one might assume that the list was a subtle flag to a possible finder from the outside, a risk that led to the disappearance of others like Natalie Johannes of "Intercept." The list's lined notebook paper was folded into quarters and worn at its corners—perhaps once held for a long time in a pocket or wallet.

WARDROBE

The Chamber of the Noble Master Rickey of Powell

Camouflage? Jacket - 1

Still has crusty blood on the cuffs from field dressing deers with Dad last winter. Mom never wanted me to go but we went anyway. She liked the venison. That made it ok, in the end. At least that's what Dad said. As long as someone was happy with the result, you can bend the rules now and then. He didn't take it so great when I applied that to things HE didn't want me to do. Typical of adults around here. All about lessons that don't apply to them.

Blue Jeans - 2

Khaki Pants - 5

I prefer the jeans since you don't gotta wash them as often as the khakis. But we have to wear them for uniform. Lame...

Blackwater Bombers Jersey - 2

I didn't get to play much. My white away one has grass streaks from when I dove for the ball in rightfield. Missed the catch, but coach said my effort would be rewarded. On the Monday after I got a new seat at the center. Cushions and everything. I got to keep it

for the whole day, which was pretty long. Most of the rewards at the center are short ... ALOT shorter ...

- Annette's dress code exemption from winning the science fair lasted only through lunch. Afterward she had to go back to her locker and change.
- Ian was given a chance to speak about anything in front of class when he stood up for some younger kid at the city fair. It was supposed to be inspiring. That lasted about 10 seconds but it was mostly his fault. He sang the opening lines to Kyle's Mom's a Bitch from South Park. It got a big laugh but ... he was different when he came back from suspension.

The Sock - 1

Black Cargo Pants - 3


Asked for and received last XMAS. I stiched a patch with the blue darkwing moth on the back right pocket of one of them, just like the one I found half-eaten at the center.

These pants have regular side and back pockets, two pouch pockets on the legs, and an inside waist pocket. I keep flashlights in every pocket in all three of the pants. Just in case they turn off the lights again.

Frog Boots - 2

Good for swamping, also hilarious with googly eyes on the toe. They go up to my knees, but if water or mud gets in there it seems like it never gets out. Walking around outside of town near the creeks and stuff it feels like the land is sinking. It's probably just me.

Tally T - 1

Just a white t-shirt with the number 6 in red tally marks . It came like that. At least I think so. Sometimes I remember it having 7 tallies. I got it at the second-hand store because it looks cool. Who knows what the guy before me was keeping track of?

Worn-out Sharkskin Boots - 2

G-pa gave these to Dad before he went to sleep. They don't fit me yet.

Allen's Swimshorts - 1

It's kind of ... exciting to think that his bare thing touched these. Wearing them to bed is never a good idea if I want dry sheets. It's strange, sometimes when I put them on it's like I can see him wearing them, goofing off at the pool, laying out on an inflatable raft. And I can feel him, too. So what if I stole them? He can afford others.

Stillwater Academic Achievement Center Polo Shirts - 5

2 teal + white pocket logo, 2 vice versa, 1 black with white logo to wear on the 8th, 18th, and 28th every month. Instructor Rachel tells us this is to commemorate the special founding of the town decades ago. Ian: "Last guy who didn't wear his was sent home. He stayed home from then on. His friends went to visit but his parents wouldn't let anyone in."

Pilot's Goggles - 1

Dad and I found these out in the ONF near a concrete bunker along with a survival rifle and canteen full of some kind of citrus juice. It smelled way too bitter to taste, even though Dad insisted it was delicious.

Stillwater Chicken Society Ballcap - 1

9 white cartoon chicken pins in the bill. One for each year we volunteer at the city fair. Mom and Dad make me do it, so I'm not sure I deserve them. I'm no "volunteer." They want me to join when I'm of age, just like they did, but I think the CSS is stupid. If they wanted to farm so much, maybe find a place with actual land. A swamp is no place for chickens...

Natalie Johannes (b. 1968 - ?)

c. 1985-1987

A series of letters written by a young citizen of Stillwater to her friend in Jackson, Mississippi. The letters were intercepted by the Stillwater Post Office and never reached their destination.

Johannes was a young anarchist, a mischief-maker who habitually tested the tolerance of her parents and authorities. Records show many stays in the juvenile center and an eventual expulsion from Stillwater Secondary School. It was during her time serving community service hours at Sand Pine Children's Home in 1983 that she met Marcel, a boy whose parents abandoned him when he was a newborn. After Marcel's adoption by Abigail and Jacob Prince in 1984, the two adolescents kept in touch. Natalie went missing in February 1988 during a family camping trip in Ocala National Forest. Based on her history, her parents never ruled out that she ran away; in fact, they accept this rather than the alternative. Natalie has not been seen since.

INTERCEPT

INTERCEPTED BY POST
26 OCT 1985

Marcel,

It's been a while since we talked on the phone. I miss our long bedtime convos. I know Abby and Jacob are very strict. But it's good you to have them. My parents are still making me sleep in their bedroom closet. Which doesn't make sense. They're so CRAZY! They can't have their "grown-up" time, and I can't have my kid time. Everyone loses.

I've been working on my oil painting skills. I'd send you something but I don't think I'm ready yet. Hows your flute? My sister told me to tell ya a good way to get your lips stronger is only drink your drinks with a straw, no matter what. So, maybe try that?

A man came to visit yesterday. He said he would offer me a FULL SCHOLARSHIP to community college. Only if I participated in an "emergent student" study. They would do tests on my brain and keep track of what I do . . . creepy, right? I would have to take a bunch of medicine, too. My parents are thinking about it. I really don't wanna.

Hope to hear from you soon! Tell me all about Missississippii!

Sincerely,

Nattie



STILLWATER ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT CENTER
102 Deer Cay Blvd, Stillwater, FL 32703

Marcel,

I started at the Center this week. It's not super normal. We have classes for 3 hours a day and then these private 'consults' with neurologists and instructors for 1 hr each. My instructor is Mr. Dalton. He is kinda cute even though he has a HUGE beard. I think he's hiding his baby face. We work on recall exercises and stuff. It's boring so far.

They're making me take some kind of gross thing they call a supplement. It's like a pill but bigger and squishy and crunchy at the same time. Kind of like what I imagine it would be like to eat a bug. And it probably tastes just as good! (BLEH) It makes me pass out and see and hear a bunch of weird stuff, but the instructors say that it's my brain working harder than it normally would. Still, though . . .

I sent you a cassette with some cool songs you might like. Did you get it? I wonder if they have the same music where you live now. Or does everyone just listen to the banjo or something?

My sister asked how you're doing. I want to know too! I hope to hear from you again. Also I hope you didn't move...

Sincerely,

Nattie

INTERCEPTED BY POST
 2 AUG 1986



STILLWATER ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT CENTER
 102 Deer Cay Blvd, Stillwater, FL 32703

Marcel,

Why haven't you sent me anything or answered my calls? I think it's a bit RUDE, considering all I did for you at the Home! Mr. Dalton tells me that because you are outside you can't understand us. Maybe it's for the best.

Anyways, we had a session today that made me want to write to you. The doctors had me hooked up to a brain-reading-machine that can see waves or patterns in my thoughts. Like a pulse but in my head, I guess? So then they read off some words and show you pictures and play recordings and mostly just try to stir up your thinking. They say that a moving mind stays agile and it will help me learn faster. They played a recording of that song we both liked from the movie about the running guys. Remember we would race in slow motion, pretending we were in the olympics? When they played it (oh, by the way my head is in a box when they do this so it's pitch black) I could see you running beside me with your pointy knees and your floppy hair. We had fun times in that field. But then, I could hear YOUR VOICE. You shouted "And the winner-inner-inner . . . MARCELLL JOOOOSEPH!" It was so clear, like you were IN THE BOX with me. I said "I miss you" and you turned and laughed and smiled and I smiled back. I was just wondering (I know it's impossible), but did you hear me? It felt so real.

Write back,

Natalie

INTERCEPTED BY POST
10 DEC 1987

Marcel,

Do not come back. No matter what, you stay away from here. There are people here who are using us. I've seen it myself. Children, adults. They're asleep, in comas, but they can speak. The emergent student program at the Center is only a piece of whatever is going on. My parents knew about it. They might even be part of it. I don't know. I do know that I have to get out of here. I'm sorry to tell you that this will be my last letter.

Do not obey your parents. Do not have faith in the police or the government. Do not trust anyone but yourself. Do not tell anyone your fears. Do not ask for help. Do not get noticed. Do not try to become anything but you. Do not listen to the voices and their lies. Do not stop moving. Do not interpret your dreams to be anything but dreams. Do not trust the locks on your doors. Do not believe your teachers. Do not read history books, they are written by liars. Do not play fair. Do not hesitate. Do not miss me. Do not fear disappearing. Do not come back.

Have a wonderful life,

Nattie

Curator's note: The reverse side of this page had faint colors smeared on it. I can assume that Natalie had attached a painting for Marcel: perhaps a clue to where she would go, or perhaps something innocuous and private between the two. merryweather must not have been able to find the painting.

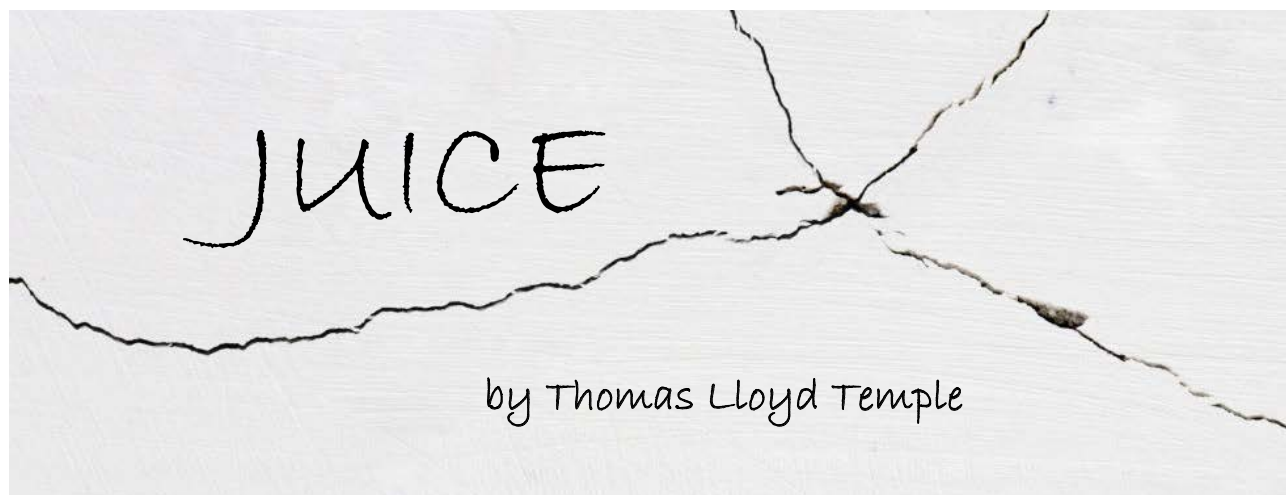


Thomas Lloyd Temple (b. ~1993)

c. 2008-2013

A non-fiction framed memoir written by the nephew of Quentin Temple, who seems to have lived in close proximity with a member of the Nectar hivemind as a child. The strange fruit which has appeared in other *Afterlight* entries returns and is finally named: strychnos nux-vomica. Clearly this overlaps with other homes littered with rinds or fruit, including Daniel Miller's, whose walls were packed with it in "Object Memory." How this connects with the other major evidenciary symbol of Nectar, the blue butterfly they purportedly ate, is unclear. One hypothesis is that the butterflies ate the fruit or its leaves before being consumed.

The disconnected addendum following the memoir-proper is also curious. I am unconvinced that Mr. Temple was the writer of the section. If not him, then who? The figure described in the section clearly purports to be a kind of father figure to Quentin and his sister, but they had no grown man in their life. At least, none that they knew of.



Every morning Uncle Q marks the juice and counts the eggs. He tapes the doors. I joke with him that he's lost it. He chuckles through curved lips. Mom tells me to let him be, invoking my full name in the process but wincing at the first name I share with my biological father. I don't know why she hurts herself like that to prove she's serious.

Before breakfast this morning, I realized that letting it be is no better than ignoring my uncle who, despite his eccentricities, has helped raise me. When I see he is up to his usual preoccupations, I press and ask what would happen if a juice mark were off or a door's tape was broken or hanging loose. He stops his newest project—threading cable through a hole in the hallway drywall for yet another camera—steps off the ladder, and puts down his drill. Uncle Q gets like this. Every so often, he just stares at the wall like a dog listening to another frequency. Sometimes he raises his hand to quiet the silence.

He answers with, "Don't think that's possible." That's all. His hands quiver while he changes the drill bit. I slink to the fridge with the requisite Sharpie™ and let it be, as Mom asked, because, honestly, I don't always have the patience to manage his sanity. He often told me a story about his beloved dog who died when he was ten. Apparently, a snake got into a door that was left cracked open, one that he said he'd forgotten to close after coming in from the rain. The dog was (allegedly)

napping in the puddle of water they both left when they sprung into the house. As he tells it, the snake came in and, after a struggle, swallowed the dog whole—a dog whose size changed each time he told the tale to emphasize how fearsome or innocent he wished it to seem. The puddle turning from clear to red in his story was always a “vivid, original, but ultimately misplaced attempt at symbolism,” as my freshman English teacher would probably say. Anyway, I’m pretty sure the story was his way of trying to teach me the importance of closing doors, or maybe the more general idea of security, which he spent most of his time wringing his hands over. If you ask me, he’s always felt it his duty as a man to hand over lessons like that because I need them. No matter how many “champ” talks he gives, how many power tools he uses, or how much time he spends glowering at appliance manuals and video recorder monitors in the back shed, calling my uncle a man is complicated because his talks are nearly all on some sort of paranoia, his tools are all used to protect himself from the bogeyman, and the shed is better described as a bunker.

By the way, I say he “told” the story about the dog-eating snake because he doesn’t tell it anymore. Last month, Mom explained that they never had a dog; their grandma would never have allowed it, not after her three cats were picked off one by one by the coyotes when she first moved to Florida. Mom’s version of the incident was: “Q left the door open and a stray dog got in the house. Tore up the carpet in the family room.” When I asked why she didn’t tell me sooner, she asked me if I love my uncle.¹

¹ Yes, but I’ve never loved him like Mom does/did. There’s something about the way they are together. It could be the dynamic of the one parent, one relative, one child household. When I was little, everyone including me thought Q was my dad. We did have the same eyes. Around the time I started middle school, that changed.^{1A}

Something is writhing on the other side of the dark, then is silent, then shrieking, then thudding. It's weird that Mom uses the word "spell" to describe Uncle Q's night terrors, but at the same time it's appropriate because it does seem like he has a curse or something on him. According to her, they don't hurt him no matter how agonizing he makes it sound. According to me, she's wrong. His right eye didn't claw itself out, after all.

Anyway, she's recently taken to wearing earplugs, leaving me to either ignore the shrieks or console my poor uncle. Picture a skinny-fat sophomore strapped into a fitted, ironic-sloganed shirt and tight $\frac{3}{4}$ khakis, shushing and patting a sobbing, but chiseled, grown man wearing an eyepatch and white, thick-padded headphones. This is my life. It's kind of pathetic, but it has lately led to him trusting me enough to tell me a new story, a real story.

He started with snippets about a week ago, after a particularly bad night when I found him with a damp handful of his hair. To put it bluntly, the story is creepy as hell. So now, whenever my uncle's spell takes hold of him and it's left to me to be his caretaker, I bring my phone to record our

^{1A} I'm re-editing this story now that my uncle, Quentin Arthur Temple, died on June 29, 2013, roughly five years after its original writing. He died only a few months after I moved out this past spring. You might guess how. I've been living in a much different place: central Ohio. My life since moving has primarily been comprised of plugging away and failing at both meaningful relationships and legitimate publication. Uncle Quentin's is the most important story I can think of, and the one I keep returning to. Since coming to Florida for the funeral and finding these old writings, I've stayed in a local campground to be engrossed in everything that is the shitshow of Stillwater, Florida. Brings back memories.

talks,² ensuring that he is freaked out just the right amount by what he is talking about. I want him to be somewhat freaked out because then it seems more real, but of course not too freaked out to the point where he might have a waking terror. I don't want to meet that Q—the one whose un/sub-conscious voice unintelligibly bores through the walls of our little house. Better that he stay trapped in a sleeping body.

Mom doesn't know that I am making these recordings, but one day she will when she reads what I am going to start writing: my uncle's story, in his words, handed over to me with trust and vulnerability in his times of abject panic and fear. Before you think it—no, I don't see it as a betrayal. Him and his problems being ignored by everyone (except those who Mom pays to pretend to worry) is the true betrayal. At worst, what I'm doing is just illegal. So, here's my crime:



Mel and Quentin spent most of the afternoons and nights of their childhood together. Their grandmother, whom they called Mayma, had recently started working the second shift at the locally-famous, 24-hour *Cypress Cafe*, so the responsibility was Mel's to watch Quentin and the house. Quentin loved his sister: that she laughed uncontrollably at her own jokes, which Quentin thought were stupid but laughed at along with her anyway; her droopy second-hand shirts from company retreats, failed softball teams, and family reunions; her meatloaf and mashed potatoes which was quite good for a teenager, or anyone for that matter; the way she tucked him in and warmed the bed

² Hidden in my pocket, of course. Uncle Q would probably have killed me if he knew. And not in the cliché “kill me” way. I imagined he would start with my eyes like he had done to himself. Even though I can hear my mother's “that's a horrible thing to say about your uncle!” in my head, no amount of repetition could change the truth of it.

lying next to him until he fell asleep; and the streaks of highlights in her brown hair that made his fluffy curls look all the darker.

One night, some time after Mel tucked in Quentin, he snapped out of half-sleep to a muffled rustling. Maybe it was a bush scraping against the house, the wind dragging its twiggy hands back and forth. Or maybe it was the neighbor's basset hound nudging at the screen door out back, silent after her throat had been cut months ago by an animal or an owner who had grown tired of her constant baying. But this came from inside, not outside. Maybe it was Mel or her boyfriend. She often had him over when Mayma was working. That had to be it. Quentin crept out of bed, tiptoed through their carpeted hallway, and opened the door to the garage. Mel would usually have her boyfriend park in there to hide his pale blue sedan from the neighbors, then she would kick him out an hour before the end of Mayma's shift. On that night, the garage was empty.

Quentin padded through the heavily-spackled laundry room and into the kitchen on the way toward his room, when he saw a note on the fridge:

WENT TO MOVIES
W/ TOMMY
BE BACK 1-ISH
LOVE YA KIDDO
MEL



The note was no surprise. Mayma encouraged the household to use notes to keep each other informed with their odd schedules, though Mel still yet forgetful. In this case, she was sure to remember because the note was making use of her once-per-week curfew break. She was allowed to stay out extra late one night a week as long as she made dinner for the family and ensured Quentin had fallen asleep before leaving. Quentin would usually fight sleep on those nights so she couldn't leave him. Tonight, she made him meatloaf as an offering, and in return he glued his eyes shut and snored like an asthmatic hog. The rustling sound he had heard must have been Mel and Tommy leaving the house. He noted the time of the kitchen clock: 10:15. If they left, it would have been nearly an hour ago.

Then he heard the deep, wheezing cough of a man.

There was only one, but he was sure it wasn't a bush or a dog or anything except a cough. He stood for a moment, frozen to the floor, waiting for a second chance to hear the sound, hoping that he could convince himself it was anything but. All he could hear was breathing, so he covered his mouth and nose with both hands, which were damp with sweat and slid along his face. He shut his eyes to focus on what he could hear. Air conditioning. A weak breeze outside. No man.

Quentin could not sleep that evening, though his body was sore and spent from pivoting and pushing the heavy dresser and wooden chest in front of his bedroom door. The shadows on Quentin's bedroom walls seemed to move, which seemed unusual because he didn't notice shadows at all before. He wondered why there are sometimes shadows and sometimes total darkness and why the shadows are more terrifying than the pitch black.³

³ While telling the story, Q says he now thinks it is this way because the shadows represented something, while the pitch black represented nothing. The psychologist he had up until 2005, Dr. Paulson,^{3A} had a way of convincing his patients to believe whatever he desired, which made me wonder if Q had been hypnotized or brainwashed.

^{3A} Dr. Paulson came to the funeral, which was impressive. Mom, however, didn't. I don't know what to make of that.

The road to the Uncle Q's childhood home is in total disrepair on the edge of town that the people here only use to take their dates at night or carry out drug or automatic weapon transactions—at least that's what the hick at the campground told me. Still, I was able to get inside through a broken window to have a look. Appropriately enough, there are grooves in the bedroom door frame where Q had barricaded himself. I left quickly because, like Q, I heard someone else in the house with me. I'm sure it was only a squatter.

Hours later, when the night was at its blackest blue, the thumping heartbeat in Quentin's skull was overtaken by the rattle of the door against his barricade. Then it stopped. Again, the door shook, this time urgently. A woman's weathered voice broke the quiet. "Quentin?! Are you in there? What've you done to the door?"

Quentin remained silent until the woman identified herself as Mayma. She didn't sound like herself, he thought. He shouted back, asked if she was alone. She said she was, but he replied that they were not the only two in the house. She told him that Mel left a note on the fridge and would be home soon. Quentin told her through the barricade that he didn't mean Mel. He described the cough he had heard and that she was not safe. She said to cut the shit right this minute and open the door. He spent the rest of the night in Mayma's bed with her.

The next morning, the family talked about the boy's crisis at the breakfast table. Mel told Quentin that the sound was probably just the house settling⁴ or something. She continued that she had heard plenty of weird sounds ever since they moved to Florida with Mayma last year.

A lot of the time, she said, it's just wind or an animal or something falling from a tree since the state is practically a colonized jungle. Quentin's shoulders were hunched up to his ears and his

⁴ The house is settling or being settled? When I re-read this phrasing, it's one of the few moments I felt a shiver, which is odd since that flippant combination of words is one of our commonest expressions to explain away the unknown in the place that should be our domain, like "it's the way things have always been" or "I'm sure it's nothing." So often, the "way things have always been" begs for a change, restrained only by inaction, and the "nothing" people are so sure of is precisely the thing they pretend they can hide from, because it's what they fear facing the very most.

hollow stare didn't deviate from the empty serving plate at the center of the table. Mayma interjected and said, first of all, there's nothing wrong with Florida and, second, that hearing things at night is normal, because part of us wants to get scared. It's fun to be afraid. She asked if a part of him had fun building his little fort.

On the Friday of Quentin's first week of fifth grade he walked home, alone. Not only was he at a new school, but for the first time Mayma had not arranged for an after-school care service or babysitter, even though Mel was working part-time at *Zapatos-A-Zillions* in the afternoons. The week before, Mayma gave him a gray and blue Batman keychain which held a house key, a compass, and a little glow-in-the-dark, neon green plastic rod.

When he arrived that day, he locked the front door, put down his books on the glass-top coffee table in the den, and went into the kitchen for a drink. As Quentin reached for the jug of apple juice tucked away on the bottom shelf, he noticed three plates in the counter drying rack from breakfast. But Mel had skipped breakfast that morning, he thought. His thinking switched grooves when he felt an unusual lightness from the juice jug; he had opened a new one at breakfast this morning and it was already down to half-full. He decided that Mayma had fixed herself a sandwich and some juice before going to work. Yes. That had to be what happened.

Even if there was a good explanation for the plate and juice, it wasn't the last time something was off in the house to Quentin. Once, when he was returning the favor to Mel for making him dinner all the time, Quentin ran out of bread for roast beef and swiss on rye—her favorite. The bizarre part was not that the bread ran out, but that he was left with an odd piece of bread. No one used the rye for toast or buttered bread or jelly. And Mayma had forced them to eat the butt of every loaf. Why would anyone toss out a single piece of bread? From then on, Quentin counted the slices of loaves when he went to the market; 16, 20, 24—always an even amount.

On another occasion, just days after the odd bread slice, Quentin was showering and felt a gentle scraping against his cheek from the soap bar. His eyes were closed and his face was covered in suds, so he rinsed himself and inspected the bar, turning it over and over like a rosetta stone. Nothing. At the bottom of the tub, near the drain, there wiggled what appeared to be a single blond hair. When he squatted to get a closer view, the change in water flow swept the hair away. No one who had stepped foot in the house, he had deduced, not even Mel's boyfriend, had hair that light.

During Christmas break of that school year, months after the juice disappearance, Mel was nursing Quentin who had fallen ill with a severe fever and body aches. She confided in him a story, one that he was forbidden to tell Mayma. Mel and Lexie, who Quentin knew as her best friend, had been caught trespassing in an orange grove across town by the cops the weekend prior. The trees, she said, were mostly still healthy and bore fruit, though they found one tree deep in the grove that was about half the size of the rest. Its leaves were fat and glossy like impossible plastic sponges, and the fruit on them were about the size of a billiard ball and of a deeper shade of orange. When Quentin asked why they were in the grove, Mel hesitated and replied that they just wanted to be alone.⁵

Mel changed the subject and said that Quentin had sweat too much on his top pillow and she would give him one of hers to put under his dry "backup" pillow, as he called it. When she left with the top pillow in hand and Quentin shifted his head on the backup, he felt as though his head

⁵ I tried to ask Mom about Lexie today—Who was she? Where was this grove?—but she dodged my questions. Q said she had moved away to college in Oregon, where she later married someone who sounded vaguely masculine, like a Clint or Bruce. As for the grove, he had actually wandered off one afternoon and looked for it, primarily for the mysterious tree, but never found it.

had sunk through the fluff and created a crater. He struggled upright and lifted the pillow to fluff it; it didn't feel like he remembered, like it had changed somehow. Then, in the dim light coming from under the door, he could see it: the plaid material of the pillow did not meet correctly at the seam on one of the short ends. It was his backup pillow, so he couldn't be certain, but was it always offset like that? Was it always so light and empty?

The most unnerving of all the incidents came in the following February. Quentin had taken the bus home from school, and as he came up the gravel driveway he saw a note on the front door. He assumed, at first, that it was a shopping list that Mayma had left behind for Mel and him. Instead, when he reached the concrete steps leading to the door he saw a message which was scrawled in his favorite violet colored pencil and disturbingly matched his own handwriting.

want to talk about Lexie jealousy, or something else?^{5A} Even though at times I've been pretty sure I was adopted, I know that she's my real mother. But there's always been that question of who my father was, and why it hurt Mom so badly to even name the person she had presumably loved and then separated from. It became too disturbing to think about my own mother like that, so I followed her usual advice and "let it be."

^{5A} Of course it was something else. The Tuesday after the funeral, Mom sent a text asking me to call her when I had time. She was quiet, but direct. She needed help packing her things. She would be moving to Oregon that weekend. I was still processing her absence at Q's wake and funeral, so I bluntly asked her, "You're leaving your life here behind, then?" She hung up. That night, I sent her a text that I was leaving for Ohio in the morning. That's the last thing I've said to her. I hope she reads this and knows I still love her.



Quentin's eyes darted back and forth and up and down without moving his head. He turned and sprinted. He ran to the next street, and the next, and by the time his legs had turned to jelly, he was a block away from *Zapatos-A-Zillions*. Exhausted and trembling, he limped his flagging body on until he could see Mel through the store's window. He pressed his hands and body against the glass and the sweat made squeaking sounds. A tidy, bearded young man rushed outside and put his shoulder under Quentin's drooping little body and his hand on the boy's soaked back. Soon after, Mel was with Quentin in her car on the way home. What actually happened when they arrived horrified Quentin more than what he had imagined would happen: the note was gone.

Though Quentin could not produce the note, this incident was finally the one that forced Mayma to call the police after all of his erratic behavior, breakdowns, and insistence that the house was haunted, or that an actual person was living in the house without their knowing. However, the responding deputy said that there was no evidence that the note wasn't simply a cruel prank by a neighbor kid, or worse, that the boy had made the whole thing up.

That summer, Mayma phoned a mold inspector because a musty smell had been seeping through the vents in the walls and ceiling of the family room. She said it happened a lot down here, what with the humidity and all. By then, Quentin had given up hope of convincing her to call the police again, even though items continued appearing and disappearing, the house made human sounds, and he was positive they were being watched. He spent most of his nights in either Mel's

or Mayma's bed, both of which he had developed a habit of wetting. They truly, truly loved the boy. That said, Mel started making him sleep on the floor with a pillow and blanket if he insisted on being in her room.⁶

The mold inspector told Mayma that he had found significant amounts of black mold in the attic and inside two walls. Additionally, he had found mold coating the majority of a 2'x10' crawlspace between the walls. Inside the cavity were a pile of rotten fruit rinds, scratches on some of the nearby boards, and "waste" stains on the floor. A "raccoon or somesuch critter" probably brought fruit inside and ate it in there, he'd said. Mayma said she didn't even know about the crawlspace until then and told the kids she asked the inspector where the animal was. The man said he didn't see any sign of a dead animal and the family would have smelled it first given the vent coming from the crawlspace. Plus, the rinds and stains were likely a month or so old, so it must have been long gone. Quentin asked if the inspector said how the animal got in the crawlspace. Mayma said things have a way of getting into anyplace if they want it enough.⁷

While the house was being treated for the black mold, Quentin, Mel, and Mayma spent eight days in a hotel out of town—a mini-vacation they all needed. The mold treatment contractor

⁶ I'm not saying I don't believe his story, but since he tells me different parts every night, I am getting slightly different variations. It's like his snake-and-dog tale. In one version, the backup pillow was low on stuffing. In other versions, the pillow had vanished. One night he says he started wetting the bed, other nights he tells me he re-packed his clothes every night to run away.

Given his mental state when I've been recording him, I can't fault him for some mistakes, but they are becoming more frequent as the weeks go by. It's possible that all of these things happened and equally possible that none did.

was tearing down drywall in multiple areas at Mayma's house, including panels in the crawlspace and attic. The hotel room was small and ugly, or cozy and unique as Mayma spun it, and was furnished with carpet that was a gradient of cream to dark gray and two twin beds with tropical orange and lime bedsheets.

During the third night in the hotel, a Saturday, Mayma treated the kids to a late dinner with room service: juicy porkchops, crunchy corn on the cob, cinnamon applesauce, and fudge sundaes.

⁷ Today, the day after he told the part about the inspector finding the crawlspace, we were in the kitchen arguing about the trash. I'd forgotten to take it out, but he should have been used to it by now. Responsibility, "man of the house," and other tropes made their usual appearance. Luckily, just as I'd about reached the point where I would snap back, Q's eyebrows sprang up. He asked me if I heard something and looked up at the ceiling. Before I could answer, he had already clattered through the door to the garage. A minute later, I saw him lean the ladder outside the window against the house. This again.

When I heard the garage door close, I called out from the living room couch to ask Q what he was looking for. He rounded the furniture and stood between me and the TV, producing the shredded cardboard and paper shell of a firework. He said, "How do you explain this?" I shrugged and guessed people were setting off some leftover fireworks from July 4th. He said, "Don't you think this has to do with the fire at the Miller house? Couldn't this be the same way they started the fire there?" I told him that the police said that guy burned his own house down because he was insane and on drugs, not because he was inept in firework safety. Mom knows some people from Mrs. Miller's restaurant, and they said he was making some weird phone calls and once wrote a message in blood on the window of a restaurant.^{7A} I really hope Q doesn't get any ideas.

She said she was sorry that she had let the house get so bad and said the mold men told her they were lucky the family hadn't gotten sick. Mel and Quentin replied with lip-smiles, their mouths full of Mayma's treat. Then, there was a knock at the door.

"Who in the world . . . at," Mayma checked her watch, "quarter to midnight?"

Quentin scrambled into the bed he'd been sharing with Mel and buried himself in the sheets. Mel's fork clattered on the metal room service tray as she tried to keep up with the boy and sit next to him. Mayma cracked the door open and asked who was there. The kids heard only a low mumble

^{7A} Uncle Quentin was actually worrying himself over a rumor started by the patrons and staff of the restaurant. The message was written using the coagulated pulp of an exotic fruit imported from India. Nelly Lopez from NBC Channel 4 did a story on October 3, 2008 on the fruit, identified to come from the "strychnine tree": *strychnos nux-vomica*. Seeds, bark, and peel of the tree and its fruit had been found a month prior both in the Millers' burned-down house and in a boat along with "undisclosed Schedule 1 substances." It turned out that boat also belonged to Mr. Miller. You can watch the report at: [http://www.nbc4fl.com/nelly-field/2008/10/Poisonous Indian Fruit Found In Connection to Miller Murders](http://www.nbc4fl.com/nelly-field/2008/10/Poisonous_Indian_Fruit_Found_In_Connection_to_Miller_Murders).

It's too bad Uncle Quentin never got a look at the rinds the mold inspector found in the crawlspace. To this day, I wonder if there's an outside chance it was the same kind, or if they were from the odd, short tree from the center of Mom and Lexie's grove. When I tried to find any lasting evidence of the tree before leaving town—and I only had about an hour to do so before I was chased off by a shotgun-waving hick—I was unable to find anything but rows upon rows of regular orange trees. Not even a clearing where the strange tree could have been.

in response which inflected toward the end. Mayma told the stranger that he had the wrong room, there was no Sandy here. The stranger uttered something else and then coughed three phlegmy coughs as Mayma shut and locked the door.⁸

“What did that guy look like?” Quentin asked, still concealed in the fabric tropics.

“I don’t know. Short, skinny, blond. He didn’t look well,” she said. She came around to the side of the bed opposite Mel, flanking Quentin and putting her hand on the boy-shaped lump of sheets. Her voice was gentle and steady, like anesthesia: “Sweetie, you gotta stop this.”⁹

⁸ Q asked if I knew what was going through his mind when he heard the stranger cough. I knew he thought it was the same cough he thought he heard at his house that first night of his story. But you have to wonder what the odds would be that the man would be able to find them in a hotel, and why he would be so reckless to expose his face to the entire family. What if Q had managed to convince his family of his existence? Surely they would have called the police and he’d be arrested. While I know what Q was thinking, in this case I’m confident he was wrong.

⁹ I remember that Uncle Quentin stopped every time he reached this point in the story. Strangely, he quoted my mom and great grandma several times in his stories, but that last line is the only one where he imitated a voice. I have to wonder if these disturbing incidents continued after he returned home from the hotel and further justified his paranoia, or if they stopped and the ripples of those moments expanded through his mind, repelling off of each other and converging all at once. The way he stopped, I never dared to ask.

While driving back to Ohio, I received a call from a man who claimed he grew up with

my uncle and was sad to not have been invited to the services. We talked about Uncle Quentin and his unfortunate condition, how it controlled him, and how my mother helped him for so long before even she couldn't take it anymore. The man, who called himself Frank, said that he had seen how close they were as kids and knew that Quentin would be able to rely on her. "That's just how they were raised," he said. I mentioned to him that I was working on telling Uncle Quentin's story to a wider audience. Frank told me that, while Quentin's story was interesting, the true version would be a hard sell because of how unreliable his story had become over the years. Instead of a fearful victim, he'd become a neurotic worrier, and the world has plenty of those. He said, "You'll have to make your own version of it, if you want it to sell. Maybe one of those psychological horror stories."

I'm not sure that's what I want. I want to tell his story, but after this long, it has become just as much my own. What's true of it and what isn't is up to me at this point, right?

***Editor's note:** The following addendum was included as part of a second submission of "Juice" the staff received in January 2014 before the Spring 2014 publication cycle in which we had agreed to print the story. All other pages matched the first submission we received in October 2013 verbatim, with the exception of missing all Deja Vu Serif footnotes from Mr. Temple's 2014 revision. Although our staff was unable to reach Mr. Temple to verify the January submission was indeed the one he wished to have published, his signature on the second submission form was identical to the one on his first. With this in mind, we made the editorial decision to move forward with publishing a composite of the two submissions with both the Deja Vu Serif footnotes and this brief addendum.*

The nurse enters his room, 155. His body is sunken into the bed at the center of the white room, hands and feet peeking out of the sheets like snorkels. A drop of water falls onto sterile linoleum from a miniaturized tropical tree with fat leaves of an almost black-green on the right bedside table. The nurse begins to sweat as she always does in 155.

"Watching your favorite show, sweetie?"

He clears his throat and feebly says yes, and that Quentin had to take out the trash because Lloyd forgot again. Then he describes a scene after that in which Quentin's body locked, he looked up at the ceiling, then he left the frame for some time. Probably just a bird on the roof, but the poor guy spooks so easily, he says. The old man's sullen face is illuminated in a pale blue light from the monitor on his left bedside table. The screen is split into six sections, each one a window into a different room of an empty house. He says he wishes he could have been around more to influence

the boy, Lloyd, and that he's a good enough young man, but unmotivated and irresponsible. With no father, what could be expected of him? It's good, he says, that Quentin and Melanie stuck together as adults because it spoke volumes about the impact he had on them as children.

The nurse smears away a time on the whiteboard hanging on the backside of the door, pulls out a red marker, and writes a new time. She asks if he has spoken to anyone today and he replies they haven't been around lately, but he still misses them. The nurse exchanges her marker for a pen and scratches on her clipboard [9/7/08, day 82 of Tx: no internal voices]. She remarks that they have not spoken to him in nearly three months, that this is a good thing. His chest rises and sinks, quivering, laboring.

"It was nice to feel part of something," he says.

Creator unknown. Video description by Curator

c. 1975

One of several video files on the Afterlight CD, *subject_0019.avi* is evidence of Project MAYA's biomanipulation efforts in the 1970s. At this time, the Project was still focused on creating methods of mind control where MKUltra had failed. In *subject_0019.avi*, the Project's implementation of extended sensory deprivation and alternative life support are demonstrated with limited success. The clip contains graphic content unsuitable for viewers of any age. The following visual description of the file serves as a translation to text of the Project's induction of an unwilling test subject.

SUBJECT_0019

[A well-lit, white and silver tiled room. RICHARDS, approximately six feet tall, thin build, wearing a pale blue polo shirt and corduroys. He stands over a stainless steel rectangle resembling a casket in one corner of the room. Three others like it are visible. Next to each of the containers is a bulky, chest-high machine with a black and green screen. The one beside RICHARDS beeps a uneven rhythm.]

GLORIA [OFF CAMERA]: Paulson, what are the intervals at?

PAULSON [OFF CAMERA]: His last dose was ten hours ago. [Mumbling to himself.] He hasn't broken deprivation since his last exposure . . . only two weeks into this cycle. [RICHARDS bends at the waist and rests his ear and hands against the container. His back heaves slowly with deep breaths.]

RICHARDS: He's in pain.

GLORIA: Are you sure? We didn't hear anything over here.

RICHARDS [still listening to the casket]: He wants to know who they are. He keeps saying that. Do you think he means us?

PAULSON: They said he might be able to hear the subjects after he began the Nectar therapy.

RICHARDS: He's saying [unintelligible] like his skin is trapping him.

[RICHARDS stands up and faces the camera] Are we going to do something?

[The beeping machine stops. Then, quick bursts of beeps, pulsing flatlines, more bursts.

PAULSON and GLORIA, both in oxford gray shirts and slacks, enter the scene from behind the camera. They flank RICHARDS at the container.]

GLORIA: Open it. [She pushes RICHARDS out of the way.] He's dying.

RICHARDS: We were told not to interfere, no matter the outcome.

GLORIA: This isn't your call. [She kneels to the seam on the side of the metal container and begins pressing buttons on a black keypad.]

RICHARDS: I'm getting the director. [He attempts to leave, but GLORIA leaps to her feet and tosses him to the floor by his shirt collar. His head strikes the side of the container near her feet and makes a dull toll. PAULSON kneels next to him and rights his head.]

PAULSON: You knocked him out.

GLORIA: Hand over your key.

PAULSON: What about Richards?

GLORIA: We have to expose 18.

PAULSON: We need so much more data. At least three months. The director said the machines would read false mortalities. This is hardware—

GLORIA: The key. [GLORIA's shoulders rise with her sharp breaths. PAULSON remains tending to RICHARDS, facing away from her.]

PAULSON: Give it one more minute.

GLORIA: We don't have a minute. If he dies, we need a reading at that exact moment. [She reaches around and under PAULSON's left armpit for his shirt pocket. He swats her hand away.]

PAULSON: You're not thinking straight. Help me with Richards.

[GLORIA whirls PAULSON around by his shoulder, fixes her hand on his throat, and reaches again at his pocket. He grasps at her wrist with both hands, tears her grip from his neck. He wipes his throat and examines the blood in his palm.]

GLORIA: [Her voice is guttural] Give it to us.

PAULSON: This is—this is the acid talking.

GLORIA: [Unintelligible]

[GLORIA leaps on PAULSON, tackling him behind another casket and out of vision.

PAULSON hollers. There is a commotion of upended metal equipment and a crackle of electricity. The lights in the room flicker in and out and settle on a dimmer setting. Fourteen seconds later, she emerges with her shirt torn at the left shoulder seam, leaving her sleeve drooping over her hand. She returns to her position and inserts a finger-length green rod in a hole below the keypad. The container hisses. GLORIA stands and lifts the lid of the container. A bank of fog or steam unfurls.]

GLORIA: No. Not already.

[GLORIA steps back from the container for a moment, revealing an exsanguinated, pale human body floating in murky brown gravy. Torn black straps float near the subject's hands and feet. Skin has been peeled away from its face, torso, and pelvis. She returns, reaching into the pool and dragging the body out into the center of the room. A dark puddle seeps across the sterile floor and touches the leg of RICHARDS.]

GLORIA: 18, why? Why did you do this? [Her voice softens into a sob.] We needed you.

Curator's Note: The video feed is lost for 71 seconds. The audio feed is corrupted and scrambled static.

[GLORIA has collapsed beside the body and is cradling 0018's head with one hand while she uses the other to pull its face back across its skull. She softly kisses the subject's mouth twice and mounts the body. RICHARDS stirs. GLORIA, in her rapture, does not take notice of RICHARDS standing up behind her. He sneaks behind the container where PAULSON was tackled. Three minutes pass while GLORIA simulates intercourse with the subject's mangled genitals. The dark puddle has spread through most of the room. RICHARDS emerges with a belt pulled taut between his outstretched hands. He wraps the leather strap around GLORIA's neck. She thrashes her head about and digs her hands into the subject's chest to hang on. RICHARDS pulls hard. GLORIA falls backward with fistfuls of the subject's pectoral tissue. RICHARDS folds his legs around GLORIA's waist and continues choking her for another 32 seconds until her face is plum and her saliva has foamed at the corners of her mouth. Her body sags limp. RICHARDS surveys the room and lifts from under her arms in a heimlich position. Her head rocks back and rests on his shoulder, then forward when he doubles her over one of the closed containers. He loosens her belt and pulls her off shoes, slacks, and panties. Her legs are covered in stripes of recent, scabbed wounds. A clang reports from the area where PAULSON was attacked. RICHARDS quickly leans GLORIA back up against him and unbuttons and removes her shirt and bra. He pivots himself with one arm supporting her shoulders while the other lifts from under her knees. He carries her to

the open container and dunks her into the fluid. GLORIA disappears under the brown substance as RICHARDS holds her down. With both arms, he eases the lid of the container closed.]

PAULSON: Richards? [He cranes his neck over the container to take inventory of the room] Where is Gloria?

[RICHARDS is short of breath. His head hangs between his shoulders as he leans forward against the sealed container.]

PAULSON: Inside?

[RICHARDS nods without raising his head.]

PAULSON: Is that—is that 18? [He staggers to the center of the room and falls to his hands and knees, splashing into the puddle beside subject 0018.] What did you do?

RICHARDS: Nothing. I swear. Gloria must have. I woke up. She was . . . on top of him.

PAULSON: He's torn to pieces. [He cants his face near the subject's.]

RICHARDS: She was having sex. With the body.

[The men are silent and unmoving for 55 seconds. PAULSON stands and straightens his tousled clothing.]

PAULSON: This is what happened. Gloria was experiencing residual, acute adverse neurological effects from high-dosage LSD treatments. This has been documented. She attacked us both and compromised subject 18. When the director watches today's laboratory tape, he will be able to confirm this. You are with me so far, yes?

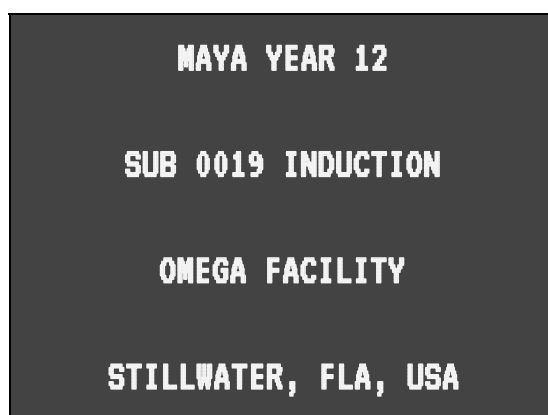
RICHARDS: Yes.

PAULSON: To preserve the early deprivation trials, you took it upon yourself to elect Gloria as a new subject. I was unconscious so you were unable to consult with me, otherwise you would have known you were slated to be subject 19. Because you did not already have knowledge of that, correct? Correct, Richards?

RICHARDS: Correct.

PAULSON: Director, as you view and review this footage, please bear in mind that our actions were in self-defense and in the best interests of the project.

Curator's Note: The video and audio feeds cut. However, the video file contains another eight minutes and ten seconds of blank footage capped by a the following title card:



merryweather (b. ?)

c. 2016

A file on the *Afterlight* CD which, despite all efforts, remains unopenable. The file is either corrupted or was physically written to the disc incorrectly. The filename “prints.cxg” could mean the file was created to record a multitude of data types: fingerprints, blueprints, plans for Project MAYA, or a digital database of all *Afterlight* artifacts.

The most remarkable fact about the file is its size: 808 megabytes. A standard compact disc, like the one included in the *Afterlight* binder, can only contain approximately 700 megabytes of information. Thus, it should be impossible to contain whatever “prints.cxg” is on a CD, not to mention all of the other files on the *Afterlight* disc. Every computer or device into which the disc is loaded reports the same name and size for “prints.cxg.” Somehow.

PRINTS.CXG

Trent L. Draimond (b. 1988), **Agent Horace Relihan** (b. ?)

c. 2012

This job application and interview packet represent Project MAYA's efforts to create and replace geographical records of the Ocala National Forest in central Florida. Draimond, presumably an innocent at the time of his application, likely was indoctrinated or brainwashed into aiding the Project's Records and Erasure department in their task. He is an archetypal good soldier: precisely the sort of person they sought.

Draimond's past entwinement with MAYA and possibly Nectar by way of his father creates troubling scenarios. In one possibility, Draimond was headhunted to be manipulated into a pawn of the Project partially because of his skills but mostly because of his family history. Another, perhaps more distressing, scenario is the reality that the touch of Nectar was so widespread in Stillwater that the odds were quite good that any random person in the town might have a similar scar or background. It's difficult to fathom that so many would be complicit in the hivemind/terrorist organization; however, it is much more difficult to imagine any situation where a destruction of an entire town and its population could be warranted by the United States government.

CANDIDATE

To Whom it May Concern:

I'm writing to apply for your Cartographic Revision position with the Marion County Department of Parks and Wildlife. I have been working with surveying and cartography for over six years both in the military and private sectors. This has trained me to have meticulous attention to detail in both the creation of my maps and the dissemination of revisions to overwrite obsolete information.

While in the U.S. Army, my skills were relied upon for knowledge, strategy, and survival. I believe there is no greater test when it comes to creating a visual representation of the world for others to use. However, the creation of an accurate map is no one man task. I have excelled at collaboration with other specialists to perfect both digital and analog maps, many times in an extreme time crunch. I see that you need results within weeks, not months, which makes me confident that I am a well-qualified candidate. I also understand from the job posting that you expect your hire to be self-sufficient while embedded in the wilderness of the Ocala National Forest. I have extensive experience in this area. I have taken personal survival trips and challenges and led multiple survival retreats which spanned months. These experiences have provided me with all the skills to do whatever is necessary to survive in remote environments.

I have enclosed my resume for your review and look forward to speaking with you to set up an interview soon. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Trent Draimond

Trent L. Draimond

92 Peninsula Circle, Stillwater, FL 32703 • (352) 901-0032 • draimondt@hotmail.com

Summary of Relevant Skills

Personnel Coordination:

- Supervised and led a team of tactical weapons specialists, including training safe operation and maintenance of equipment.
- Scheduled and managed foot patrols for day and night cycles and administered disciplinary actions for non-compliance.
- Completed an eighteen month deployment in Afghanistan and nine month deployment in Iraq as a part of Operation: Enduring Freedom. Awarded an Army Commendation Medal for exemplary performance during deployment.

Cartography:

- Paced out and collaborated with radio technicians to create perimeter maps of clear and live areas during deployment.
- Designed and redrew outpost orders for incoming infantry with increased success and fewer engagements.
- Volunteered and passed courses for PenMap and MILSketch software to enhance map quality and transmission.

Wilderness Survival:

- Provided training and field guidance on three “Great Life: Montana” excursions which consisted of two months removed from civilization, requiring establishment of shelter, foraging, hunting, and self-defense.

Education and Work Experience

Edgeleaf High School, Diploma (Stillwater, FL)	2002-2006
Brakes Plus, Maintenance Technician (Heron Grove, FL)	2004-2006
United States Army, Corporal (Various)	2006-2009
The Good Life Outdoors LLC, Service Associate, (Stillwater, FL)	2010-Present

Testimonials

Corporal Draimond is to thank for many soldiers’ lives. As my squad leader, he consistently put the safety of his team and the entire post before his own. Without his courage, I would not be here today. SPC Devonte Wilcox, Former U.S. Army	Trent’s hard-working, get it done attitude is an asset to any team he is a part of. He came through for us more times than I can count during our outing in Montana last year (2010). Anders Villemos, General Manager, The Good Life Outdoors	The man has such an uncanny sixth sense of direction that I’m not even sure he needs a map! I asked for plot of my 5000-acre investment land and he produced a map exceeding even government standards within a week. Armando Olivero, CEO, Florida Power & Light
--	---	--

SCORING RUBRIC

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	?	1	2	3	4	5
REGIONAL KNOWLEDGE	?	1	2	3	4	5
PRIOR EXPERIENCE	?	1	2	3	4	5
LEADERSHIP	?	1	2	3	4	5
ETHICS	?	1	2	3	4	5
OTHER: <i>Subordination</i>	?	1	2	3	4	5

INTERVIEWER'S NOTES

** Pre-Int: Trent seems ideal candidate for position on paper. Probe for info on long-term isolation.*

*Eager to be back out in field. ** Call in DoD# for psychiatric records*

Football, track, rock climbing (Colorado) Good kid, gives appearance of honesty. Turned in a superior....

Disclosed illness linked to father, Percy Draimond. Refer to PROJECT records for inventory of Percy's treatment and any inflammatory incidents.

Mother out of picture after primary school. Do not assign female supervisor if hired

When asked for ?s, cand. asked: why do we need to create new maps? Informed him of new zoning proposition proposed by Governor Scott to local leadership. If later asked by the cand., support this line.

During phys exam observed butterfly-shaped scarification on inner posterior of right thigh. Candidate was under sedation and is unaware of our knowledge.

8 minutes. An exact blueprint of this level of our building. Contact security to review tapes -- how?

INTERVIEWER'S EVALUATION

I interviewed Mr. Trent Draidmond today, 05/19/2012. Mr. Draidmond is a well-mannered man with a composed demeanor and who I would qualify as wise beyond his years. Mr. Draidmond is a veteran of the United States Army whose valor in service resulted in his becoming a double leg amputee. Though he was once bound to wheelchair, he now walks on flexible titanium prosthetics and claims to be more agile than he ever was in the military. I presume he is in line to receive a Medal of Honor, though when pressed he ~~elen~~ requested me to change the subject. He is modest, but private and proud. Overall, I would deem him malleable given orders from the proper authority.

Mr. Draidmond has a strong background in topographical assessment and cartography from his field experience in the Un.S. Army in addition to private ventures, such as plotting out large parcels of land for investors and farmers. When asked to create a map of the building we met in, he drafted a product we could use as a fire evacuation map in approximately eight minutes. Per protocol, his visit at that point was contained only to the lobby, main hall, , and conference room. He has either seen the blueprints for our building or possesses some unnatural sense of space. There may be

deeper ramifications, so I advise remote monitoring if the candidate moves forward.

The longest period of time Mr. Draimond has spent isolated from any human contact is greater than the required period of two months by nearly double. When asked how he dealt with extended darkness and silence, his reply was that he fills the empty space with worlds of his own design. Mr. Draimond was able to identify consumable regional flora and fauna from our field guide with an error rate of 5%, placing him well above the next best candidate in terms of sustainability.

Mr. Draimond consented to the basic physical and social examinations. The ~~th~~two significant revelations of the procedures were his father's previous involvement with our program as a test subject in the mid-1980's and an abnormal scarification on his leg in the shape of what can be assumed a Nectar-related butterfly. This may be a relic of Mr. Draiman's father or something of his own doing, however finding candidates not marked in some way by the Project in Stillwater is becoming increasingly challenging. Conversely, bringing in external candidates has been prohibited by Project coordinators on the highest level due to the combined risk of leaks and need for briefing and contextual education. With this mandate in mind, Mr. Draimond remains a viable candidate despite his

potential secondary or tertiary involvement with the Project. I am pleased to offer my recommendation to fill the Cartographic Revision position within the Department.

Recommended next steps:

1. The "FRED" test
2. Review of Percival Draimond's Project file
3. Long-exposure MRI and CT Scans of candidate
4. Candidate thiopental sodium interrogation
5. Implant geopositioning chip
6. Briefing and introduction to Erasure initiative
7. Deployment



Agent Horace Relihan

Project [REDACTED], Department of Records and Erasure

Curator's note: At first this "FRED" test seems to be an acronym. On further investigation, it appears to have been a way for the Project to assess the deployment capabilities of their new agent's revisionist records. Look no further than aerial views of the Pinecastle Impact Range in Ocala National Forest, even

those which date back decades, to see for yourself. If MAYA's intent was to erase all record of Stillwater, though, there remains a question of why a FRED still remains on the map. Perhaps it is a code to another agency. Perhaps it was re-inserted by Trent as a distress call at the last moment, a warning or indicator of what was to come from the U.S. Naval base. In either case, the FRED remains one of the very few physical traces of *Afterlight's* presentation of Stillwater.

“Isaac” or Morgan (b. ?)
c. 2014

A romantic story of escape and wonder set mere days before the destruction of Stillwater, Florida. In the background, however, it poses an intriguing condition where the citizens of the town felt there was no way out. In an age of smartphones and electronic messaging, and older technologies such as cars and postal service, how could one feel so trapped within the limits of one town? What influence did the town’s “masters” have over their people?

Among its dreamlike adventure of the annual sleigh ride, “Wrong Address” also provided merryweather with an approximate date of death for Stillwater: December 13, 2014. Knowing what he knew from his investigation and the recovered documents and artifacts, he still seems to place blame with Nectar—including Morgan to his estimation—rather than Project Maya. While it is likely that the constant fires burning within Stillwater were the doing of the hivemind, the ultimate destruction and erasure were absolutely the product of the Project. One faction lit the fuse to the other’s bomb.

WRONG ADDRESS

WRONG ADDRESS

*(confession of a schizophrenic terrorist)**Why explain to the girl who already knows this?*

A letter from a psychiatrist was sent to the wrong address. That's what brought us to where we are today. The psychiatrist's address is in North Carolina, which made me think she might be new in town. I still wonder if the office sent it to someone living adjacent to her in some ploy to create an opportunity for interaction. The first time, I put her letter into the correct slot, 202, among the grid of 6"x6" aluminum mailboxes at our apartment complex. The next, two weeks later, I placed a post-it on top: "*I think they have the wrong address... — 204.*" When the third came within the same month, I paused before walking down to the mail center. Why would a doctor send a patient so many letters? Was something very wrong with her?

*Convincing self**Not me*

"'Excuse me'—I remember knocking hard—'I have your letter,' I said. Remember?"

"What did you hear? 'Go away?'" Morgan snorts a giggle into her navy sweater sleeve.

I nudge her arm so she rocks on the stone bench. "No, you said, '204?' You knew."

Just four days after our first face to face meeting, today we sit in front of the old library long enough for her to finish her hot chocolate, or at least until she reaches the gristle of unmixed cocoa powder at the bottom of the mug I brought with the candy cane handle. Her apartment window has always had Christmas lights in it, even back as far as September, and that's all I knew about her besides the letters until today. At least it seems she likes the hot chocolate, because the library was a bust. When we went around back, we found that the local police finally boarded up the hole left by a fire that forced it to shut down a couple years ago. Kids have been sneaking in and stealing the books that weren't destroyed for a while now. I even snuck in for a quiet place to read twice, so I thought it would be an unusual and memorable place to take a date.

*March
2012*

The next stop will go better, I tell her. She smiles and asks if we're going to find a boxcar to lie down for a nap, since this is apparently a hobo date.

On our way to the railway yard, she reclines in my Corolla's passenger seat and closes her eyes while a Christmas crooner's deep voice gently vibrates the old plastic cup in my door bin. The roads are empty, save for a parked car here and there in front of a house or some kids chasing butterflies with white grocery bags on sticks. The sun is bright and the air is clear, so there should be no problem with the rest of the date. Morgan's amber hair floats in the blast of the heater vent, incomplete spiderwebs on a breeze. She's beautiful like a memory; someday I'll notice her flaws, but for now she's perfect. I run my tongue along the edges of my teeth and create a suction until my dry mouth fills with spit. We come to Jeffries and Martin, one of the larger intersections in town, and I comment on the coffee house that is still open. She calls it the last remnant of her college life and we mock the typical patrons: fake poets wearing summer scarves, flop-sweating second-rate realtors meeting clients, old people who actually read the newspaper, not that the shop stocks anything but the local. She rhetorically asks why it seems all the other people there seem to be full of shit. I say that everyone is full of their own type of shit, that we're all lying about something to help us feel important, or even comfortable. After a pause she says, "Except us. We're cool." We share a laugh and she touches my leg for more than a second.

The song stops and following a beat of silence: *We interrupt this broadcast with a message from the Office of the Governor. Governor Scott has approved and signed Mayor Barnes's proposed curfew policy effective today. Therefore, a curfew of 8 PM is now in effect for the town of Stillwater until further notice. Individuals of any age found outdoors after this time may be detained and questioned by local and state officials.*

Tendency
of Nectar
users after
regaining
control of
their body
due to...

- dry body
cavities

- self-
inflicted
pain as
pleasure

- lack of
willpower

No such
broadcast

Curfew not
until
the last
days of
SW

Then it repeats. Morgan looking over without moving her head, wrinkling her face in worry. It's probably nothing, I tell her. I tell myself. A precaution. Parents wrangling their children from the streets and dried-up yards. Then it repeats. Business owners flipping door signs to CLOSED. Then it repeats. I turn off the radio, but it begins clicking in a pattern of long clicks, short clicks, and pauses. A palm strike to the dashboard yields no change. I slump back and wonder what is so wrong with Morgan, why her shrink writes her so often, if she is scared. The clicking doesn't stop.

"It's only 4," she says. "We have time." She's right. *"WE" again*

Beside the train station on the outside of town, a weedy field sprawls out into the treeline.

The station has been out of service for a couple of years, it seems, so all of the town's goods come in weekly on convoys of canvas-covered flatbed trucks and refrigerated vans. We park on a square of gravel away from the station alongside a dozen other cars and trucks. I turn off the car to stop the clicking; it continues. Morgan and I share a glance for a moment and she clenches her hand on mine. Her eyes speak words her mouth cannot. I squeeze back.

"This is it. Every year some guys put on a model airshow here the second Friday of the month," I say. She smiles a thin smile. "Not as much of a crowd as there used to be. Starts at sunset, supposed to be 5:30 today, so we have a while to sit if you want."

Some heads bob above the tide of high weeds in the field, no doubt the remote control aircraft pilots preparing their takeoff areas with scythes or weed whackers or machetes. Morgan whispers something to herself and I feel my first pang of regret for knocking at her door. If she has problems, maybe we can work through them. Doug was so sure I should 'steer clear of the trainwreck' and that I was asking for trouble. But she seems normal enough, if that's a thing.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Stillwater Model Air Show and Sleigh Ride - 2nd Friday of Dec. Annual

The rims of Morgan's eyelids are red, peeking from behind her thick black eyeliner. She looks into her lap and nods.

"I mean, really okay. With life." Life hangs in the air for a moment and time slows down. I'm not certain I'm okay with life, so why should I expect her to be?

"Rather we not live here anymore," she says. "It's become too much. That's all."

'We'? This is our first date. She can't mean me. *Not to worry. She doesn't*

Morgan mentions the Miller murders, the constantly rotating road closures and building quarantines, the onset of swarms of blue and black butterflies—not only the real ones but those in graffiti and in carvings on trees and in warning posters—and the fear that spread through Stillwater when the courthouse and police station were brought to ash earlier in the year. And now, the curfews, I add. We sit there, knowing we've made an incomplete list, knowing that we have not yet seen the end of the town's tribulations. These are all memories we share, even though we are basically strangers. More than that, we've both somehow learned to live with these things. Neither of us can afford to leave, at least on our own. She says she has family all over the country, but none of them can take her in. As for me, I keep hoping things will get better. Stillwater is the only home I've ever known.

*All over
the
world,
in fact*

"Home is a construct of the mind," Morgan says, certainly quoting her doctor. *CORRECT*

The rim of the sun glares through the window from behind the treeline and I check the dashboard. "Almost showtime. Let's get a good spot," I say. Not one car has parked since we arrived. *So many have left SN by this point, dead or alive. 6 years of fires...*

We hold hands and walk into the field until we can barely see our car. Gnats and the last surviving mosquitoes of the year flutter past our ears and the saturated ground gives way just a bit under our feet. Stillwater shrinks behind us and for now it seems we've left it behind. Finally we

reach the clearing where the men putting on the show have set up a dozen multi-colored lawn chairs on firmer ground flanked by citronella candles and styrofoam coolers. I breathe a heavy Hi to Morgan to watch the cloud of vapor roll out of my mouth. She laughs rapid-fire clouds out of her nose and mouth and tucks her arm under mine, then pulls us down into two chairs. We both pull out our smartphones to check the time and our empty inboxes. I send her a text: “I’m glad you came.” She doesn’t look up, but flurries her fingers across her touchscreen to send back: “Thanks. We should stay out past 8 ;)”

Need these phone logs

Buzzing in the air signaled the start of the air show, yet no one had joined us in the lawn chair clearing. Morgan asked how we were supposed to see the planes, and I told her to wait. From beyond our sight, a man on a megaphone calls out, “Welcome to the 8th annual Stillwater Air Show and Sleigh Ride! Sit back and enjoy the daring, dazzling, and not-so-death-defying exploits of the finest remote aircraft pilots in the Southeast. Plus, a surprise from the North Pole!”

Morgan on record Marion envy cir. 2013-14: Hill, Morales, Wilson Issues. None found

“If they have sleigh ride in the title, what else would the ‘surprise from the North Pole’ be?” Morgan asks.

This time is as good as any to reveal the truth

I shrug with a grin on my face and pat her on the hand, then point to the sky. There are five airplanes, all lined with red, green, and white lights, swirling through the air, diving past each other, and entering A and V formations. More airplanes join them—a lot more, actually. Maybe hundreds. Our heads swivel in unison as the lighted planes hypnotize us with their risk taking until we forget they are not manned. We gasp at near-collisions, clap after dives that pull up at the last moment before impact, and cheer at the disembodied voice as he calls out the names of the aircraft.

A man in pale blue coveralls emerges from the thick weeds with worn nylon straps, thick neon orange earmuffs, and clear aviation goggles in his hands. He leans his head back as his version of a greeting, not even a grunt, then hands each of us a pair of goggles. “You’ll wanna put them on. For the finale.” I survey Morgan’s reaction—her nostrils are flaring—and then slip on the goggles and fiddle with the straps. “Keep your arms up,” the gruntless man says. He wraps a nylon strap around my waist and back through the lawn chair while Morgan observes, raising her eyebrows like I’ve made a new special friend. I inspect my chair and notice bolts running through the horizontal bases of its legs. *“Morgan’s” fear of death is fear of discovery*

“You’re not gonna kill us, right?” Morgan asks. I muffle my laugh.

“Sure seems I could,” he says. His guffaw is electric on my spine. Morgan reaches under her sweater, but stops when he continues. “Sorry, shouldn’t joke like that. Apologize.” Once Morgan is calm, he straps her to her chair then vanishes back into the weeds. “Have fun,” his voice trails off in the darkness.

*shapes to
represent
what?*

*St. Thomas
burned
down soon
after this..*

We put on the earmuffs while the planes gather in the sky above us, forming vague shapes of crosses, crescent moons, and stars. Then, from the weeds all around us, fireworks shoot up among the aircraft, exploding into starbursts that light up the field. The fireworks don’t cover the spectrum of colors and shapes and styles like the ones I’ve seen on television, but they are impressive from directly below them. Dying sparks trickle down around us like snow and we blow them from our faces like flies. I follow Morgan’s finger as she tracks a plane falling out of the sky, its lights trailing in a line behind it until we lose it on the horizon. Our focus is broken by a deep, growing bellow behind us, pulling the weeds backward and blowing out the candles of the clearing. A buckling of metal beneath us and the ground lurches forward. Our hands are like vices on the thin metal arms of our chairs while the source of the bellow becomes clear: we’re on

*confession
here that
fires are
set by her
hand*

the front of a gigantic airboat. Morgan's mouth stretches open in a scream I can't hear, and might not even be able to without the earmuffs. Dirt and mud shifts off of red and white lights lining the deck of the boat, its outline now clear in the flashes of light from the fireworks. We're moving.

At first, it's slow. I feel the grinding of the hull against rocks and roots beneath us, rattling our chairs in place. The bow tips upward, knocking down the high weeds in front of us and allowing the boat to build speed. Morgan is thrashing about, digging her heels into the floor and clawing at her strap. I try to calm her down by waving my hands, but her eyes are sealed. I'm sure now that something has triggered in her brain, whatever sickness she has hidden for the whole day has risen to the surface. I've totally fucked up. In seconds, we are moving at a running pace, then a few more and I know we must be at full speed, whipping over sawgrass and brush. We leave the air show behind and I feel the gentle sting of water spraying on my face. Morgan feels it too, I know, because she has stopped struggling and is instead stiff.

"Y'all ready for the surprise?" a voice asks through the earmuffs. Morgan does not move, but I wave my hands in arcs above my head. "There's a button on the side of your muffs. Can press it to talk. Here it comes!" *Regret here? The deeds are done ... she wants out*

loves the idea of a world above and without SW As Morgan screams, "Let us off," a hatch opens in front of us, springing forth a series of hinged posts and a scarlet canvas that quickly catches wind and expands to a horizontal sail. The boat instantly lifts off the ground and my stomach bobs. The sky around us is dark now, except for the Christmas lights encircling us. I stretch my arms out to the sides and wiggle my fingers in the air. Morgan is silent, but when I look over, she is doing the same with a rapturous expression. I take a moment to look around at this contraption, realizing there is no one onboard but us.

I press the button on my earmuffs. "Who's driving this?"

“Don’t worry about it, we’ve got it under control. Just like the airplanes! How’s the little lady?”

Morgan doesn’t reply, but grasps my hand and points to the ground, now at least a hundred feet below. The illuminated buildings are few and small. We’re passing over Stillwater. I used to think of it as so big and strange and impossible, but from up here it’s just another ant colony. You could turn a hose on it and it would just be gone.

“We’re great,” Morgan says. “Keep going!”

“‘Bout time to turn it around. Glad you’re—”

“Please just keep going,” she says, looking into, or past, my eyes. Desperate.

The tiny lights of Stillwater are behind us now, the sky is black and vast, and I begin to wonder how far the pilot’s remote signal can reach.

Investigating the context of this story, there are several factors that initially lead me to believe that Isaac or Morgan were part of Project MAYA or the offshoot terrorist cell, "Nectar." Both of these factions were major players in the deletion of Stillwater.

Using clues left either intentionally or not by the writer, we can narrow down the date of this story to December 12, 2014—one day before the ring of fire was ignited around Stillwater to prepare for the bombing. The writer provides one major clue to aid with pinpointing the time of the story: the Stillwater Model Air Show and Sleigh Ride. I have previously uncovered a flyer for the 2009 installment of this airshow while sifting through the waste management facility. The Stillwater Library into which the couple attempted to trespass burned down

in March 2012 and Stillwater itself was leveled to dust in May 2015, leaving two possible years: 2013 and 2014. Upon review of the weather history for Marion County, it did not rain on the second Friday in 2013, the 13th, but did rain on December 12, 2014. If we are to take the events of the story as fact, always a risk, then the story occurred on that date and has been recorded or staged this way for a reason.

Furthermore, there is no public record of Florida Governor Rick Scott signing a curfew for Stillwater, so this is one of several possibilities: a) the curfew was not made public for some reason, b) the powers that be in Stillwater at the time lied about the Governor's mandate and set it themselves, which was the case near the town's end, or c) the writer of the story fabricated the radio announcement and clicking. Based on other recordings and photographs from Stillwater between 2008 and 2015, I do believe that something may have come out of the radio, but remain unconvinced that Florida government was involved.

As for Morgan's "psychiatrist" who sent her letters from out of state in rapid succession seeming to follow sessions, this insinuates that the letters may have had a return address that did not match the postage (the writer did not provide this detail). Dr. Truman Paulson, which I have proven to be a member of Project MAYA by way of video evidence, has used this misdirection on several documented occasions to throw off his location for those in search of him. He was a known recruiter of MAYA and distributor of Nectar before the test subjects went rogue in 2008, which could be why he was following up with Morgan

so frequently: to keep her under his sway rather than allowing her to fall in with the terrorist cell. Notice that Morgan in the story never refers to herself with an "I" or "me," instead only using the pronouns "we" or "us." This falls in line with the hivemind alleged to exist within the subjects of Nectar that allows them to experience all connected lives simultaneously.

With these revelations in mind, my working theory is that Morgan is the writer of the story "Wrong Address" as a tacit admission of involvement with the events of the following day, perhaps using Isaac as the narrator in an effort to disassociate herself with the crimes she committed. It is entirely possible Isaac is an invented persona existing only in Morgan's mind. Based on the events of the very near future beyond this story, I cannot understand how or where this story would have been written.

— M.W.

Luis Ipema (b. ?), Kyle Ipema (b. 2001), Unknown Project MAYA Agent

c. 2011, 2012, 2014

A three-part entry gathered by merryweather comprised of a published personal account of supernatural events by Luis Ipema, an interview he requested a year later, and a transcript of an interview with his son, Kyle, two years after that. For the work he did in gathering these related artifacts, merryweather left no notation. In fact, it appears that the documents were never touched after being printed. This could imply that merryweather grew tired or even hesitant of interacting with the text. It might also suggest that these documents were collected by someone else entirely and that I did not receive the true “first edition” of *Afterlight*.

The titular Living Man is without a doubt a member of Nectar hivemind, holding to his “we” and “us” point of view when he speaks. His dark and prophetic words are chilling in retrospect from a post-Stillwater world.

Kyle’s fate in the Project Maya facility brings to bear the reality of the collective’s continued efforts, even in the wake of mass destruction in Stillwater, to harvest the products of their decades-long experiment. This would also indicate that the project believe that Nectar was not a “poisoning” of only one body and mind, but that it might be passed on genetically.

THE LIVING MAN

THE LIVING MAN

Contributed by Luis Ipema

The man we found in the hole was not breathing, but I could hear him. My son, 10 at the time, was afraid for him and threw himself at my waist, quivering and panting. A glistening, dark shale cocoon, not of cloth but of some creature's skin, enveloped and protected the man's body in his shallow grave. A smell of fish, not rotten or decomposed. A few inches of black water in the bottom. A tiny mountain of mud and soil to the side, where I'd unearthed this thing. Certainly this was not my father's intention when he drew the map to this place, or so I hoped.

You've found us, a voice said.

Stole a glance at my son to ensure that the words, like those I had heard moments before, were in my head alone; he did not flinch. A hawk's call from above the cypresses and pines and he tightened his grasp on my belt.

I thought as hard as I could at the cocoon, *Who are you?*

Cut us out, will you?

Can you hear me?

Go on, then, cut us out.

We rode back to the hole the next morning with a torn blue tarp I found beside a burned down restaurant near our hotel; the owners had since abandoned their business and the town of Stillwater altogether, like we had. Told my son to stay in the truck, but he insisted he would be braver this time and that he could help. The man looked tall, he said. I let him carry the tarp.

The mud was thick and clung to our ankles like drowning hands. Why bury a man in such a

way? My son never reached for my hand, even my sleeve, the whole way. I recognized the pile of rotted tires, part of my father's map, as the place I first heard the voice the day before. We passed and there was nothing, kept going. Slogged another half-mile, then stopped at once on seeing a huddle of vultures perched on and around the gravesite. A black arc of jagged wings flashed from the hole, then another.

'Ey! my son hollered. He dropped the tarp and picked up a broken branch, thick as his arm. I swatted it out of his hand, but he had already captured the birds' attention. Several flew away and, when I took a step, more cleared the site. The two in the hole had not left, nor did they when we were upon them.

Stay back, I told my son, they carry sickness. Messing with dead things. The vultures tore at the thick gray cocoon, revealing pale, hairless skin on one of the the man's legs.

My son nodded and ran back, retrieving the tarp. We could throw this on them, maybe? He outstretched one corner to me, like we were making a bed together.

Still hadn't heard a word from the man. Part of me worried, funny, that they were hurting him. The dead man. The tearing skin wrap made a *shhk, shhk* sound, its thick flaps remaining attached, frustrating the vultures who couldn't gain purchase on a meal.

When we threw the tarp onto the birds, there was a moment of quiet, then their screeches pierced our ears like cutting glass. Shredding plastic threads, breaching holes in holes, the vultures' curved yellow beaks made way for their bald and wrinkled and crimson faces. They shrieked at us or the sun, their necks thrashing about in the openings. My son backed away without breaking sight, patted the ground behind him as he went. I flipped open the blade I kept on my belt and searched for an opening among the flurry of beaks and talons, the vultures snapping at swiping at the air knowing it might be their last moment, that their friends may soon return for them.

They hate fire, the man finally said.

I don't have fire! I shouted into the grave.

My son called out to me, Fire? then soon, I think I saw something. He jogged back with a tiger-striped Zippo caked in mud, holding it out for me, flipped open.

No, it's dead.

More tearing from under the tarp, the vultures' heads had disappeared and there were only glimpses of black, then red, then yellow, then red, then black through the holes they'd torn. The holes, I noticed, were at this point more than enough for them to fit through, but they had turned on each other. My son asked what we should do and I put my hand on his little chest and pushed him back. The birds' deep and loud squawks, clumps of feathers bound together by flesh in the black water at the bottom of the grave around the cocoon, the air thick with a rancid, rusted odor. Finally, quiet. I put my knife away.

I peeled back the tarp. It was matted with blood and feathers. I rolled the limp vulture carcasses off the cocoon, scooped my hand into the moist layer of mud under the man. The skin wrapped around his body had a rough, scratching texture, dozens of tiny cuts on my forearms as I hugged the body to my shoulder and hoisted. It wasn't what I'd thought, no stiffness. The body sagged at the ends like a sleeping child carried off to bed.

Now we go back, the voice said.

In the truck, my son asked where we would take the man, to the hospital or a cemetery. I had called the hospital's number from my hotel phone book that morning, but found the line was disconnected. An operator had confirmed that the town's hospital had closed permanently and the nearest was on the other side of Lake Kerr. There is no hospital here, I told him.

There will soon be nothing.

I glanced through the rearview mirror into the bed of the rental pick-up. Olive tie-down straps twanged across the cocoon. I was sure he hadn't moved or breathed. Dead. Carried him a half-mile, he would've had to breathe. Never looked inside. Who knows how long he'd been buried there.

Nothing of what? I tried to ask.

Then where are we going? my son asked.

The authority is not with us. We've done so much already. Look around.

A street lined with closed businesses, half-buildings, plots of dirt and rusted rebar skeletons. A whirl of air through cracks in the window, thick with moisture and dust, a muddy whisper. A crooked stop sign serving as a perch for a colony of dark blue butterflies. This was a place where people used to live. Fires, countless fires, for the past two years. Thought to be one man at first, then many.

This is our purpose. We must unmake the suffering.

The man kept saying we, not I. I didn't know who they were, but they were behind it all. In that moment I knew. My heart was heavy with hope and fear and its weight pulled at my head, sinking it to a tilt.

Dad?

The police station, I said, snapping up. Punched it into my phone's Maps app with one eye on the road. I didn't know where else to take the body, even if the voice seemed to implore against it. My son sat back in his seat, picked caked-on mud from his jeans. No matter how calm he seemed, I knew he'd never forget what happened out in the swamp.

In the following month, so many visitors came to our hotel room. My son and I were both asked to stay, first by state authorities, then a series of doctors, then the FBI. They called the body

we found The Living Man. Not breathing, but very much still alive. One of the forensic scientists visited the gravesite with us. He dated the wrap that preserved the man's body—made of bull shark skin, he'd said—at more than twenty years old. No way I know of that could happen, nor them, which I suppose is why they were so interested in me.

The conversations with the visitors began with doubt: that my son and I had staged a hoax, that we were after government assistance. The hotel in Ocala they moved us to on their dime was more of a home than we had at the trailer back in Texas, that much was true. But there was no denying that we had handed them a miracle: a living person who hadn't seen daylight or air or food in years. They didn't ask me to come see the body, which was fine; I didn't care to see how a creature that sat for so long would look. Beside that, his voice echoed for long in my thoughts, as I tried to sleep, as I went out for a smoke at night, as I played arcade games with my son downstairs in the hotel's rec room. Why risk hearing it again?

When the FBI came, their questions focused on the topic of Stillwater, about my reasons for being there. They confirmed that there had been more fires than I'd known of, more than one-hundred in all. Businesses, that abandoned hospital, government buildings, parks, and, more than anything, homes. People had fled. And rightly so. The FBI's dilemma was that there were nearly the same number of suspects as fires. The town relied heavily on support from the state to remain afloat, only a matter of time before it would become a ghost town, left only for those who were behind the arsons. The agents wondered why my father would leave a map leading me to this man, if perhaps he was a friend or enemy. I told them that there must have been something else there, something valuable, that the people who buried the man took away. One of the investigating agents, a younger man, responded to that by asking what was more valuable than a potential key to immortality. He did not sound very official. I can still remember his narrow, serious face when

I laughed at him.

Dad, they're showing him next week. In Orlando. Can we go? my son asked. That hotel room was growing stale for both of us. He kicked the door and sat back on his twin bed. We'd been in Florida for six weeks with an armed guard standing outside our door. I came to wonder which side he was guarding.

The doctors came with wires of every color and clear rubber suction pads. They connected them to my head in the bathroom. They took my son to another room for this. Yes or no questions, watching a monitor. They told me to be silent, to answer in my thoughts. Shaking heads at each other. They moved on to closed questions. Once, after asking the color of the sky, the female doctor's eyes popped open, then her eyelids sank back over them. One asked the rest, Is there a reason we aren't testing him near the subject? Shortly after, our visit to the Orlando Science Center was set, not that it was my choice.

The door to the exhibit room was secured by men in dark suits, permitting only five patrons at a time. The man and his cocoon were encased in a hexagonal glass chamber with THE LIVING MAN etched on the top of one side. On another side, smaller etchings explaining that the man was *"found in a limestone tomb below the swamp, thought to be set there by living descendents of Timucua Native Americans,"* and that *"miraculously, his brain was preserved intact and still shows signs of electrical activity."* They did not mention that his body hadn't aged, nor that he was a white man who rested there for only twenty years or so, not hundreds. My hand on the glass, sweating, I saw the man through the fan of my fingers. He was set on a metal slab with a clear incubation pod around him, *"His body was kept in the ancient tradition of the Timucuas by wrapping it in the skin of an animal, similar to the well-documented mummification rituals of the Aztecs and Egyptians."* Did they expect people to believe this? Bold enough to flaunt this secret to the public. I couldn't

understand. Picked at the corner of a suction cup on my temple, then a pat on the shoulder from the accompanying doctor.

They want us to come here, to our body, the voice said.

I waited for the doctors to tell me about my brain. Nothing. I said nothing.

Why should they want that? I thought, sealing my eyes shut.

Nothing.

An hour later. The room was emptied except for me, the doctor, the living man. Silence bouncing off the glass and my skull. A guard brought in a chair for me and set it against the chamber. The interior of the chamber had fogged, just slightly, since I'd been there.

Nothing at all, then? the doctor asked. His tone soared high, desperate.

Only my own voice, I said.

*Luis Ipema is a father, fugitive, and believer.
His story has been published in the care of his son,
who wishes for his father's legacy to carry on.
We at Evolutionaries salute his efforts to preserve and disseminate the truth.*

Excerpted from the online news-blog, *Edge of Sunshine*. Publication: 15 January, 2012

TS: You wrote, "I didn't know who 'they' were, but they were behind it all." My question for you is: how could disembodied spirits, as you tell it, start the Stillwater fires?

LI: The spirits can speak to the living. I'm evidence of it. [. . .] They all know each other's lives, how their homes looked, the sounds of their children's' voices. They are vengeful and connected on a conscious level. They want to see Stillwater erased from not just maps, but history.

TS: With all due respect to the spirits, in this day and age there is no such thing as erasing history. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Ipema?

LI: The town is practically gone, most of it burned once the swamps went up. And yet, when is the last time a major news source, hell, a local news source, has run a story on it? When did anyone try to stop it? Look back at the editions of Stillwater Weekly Tribune from 2009—if you can find any, that is. After the first few fires, there was no mention of any more. Someone on either their side or on the government's wanted to silently end that town. Maybe both.

TS: Do you think The Living Man is a criminal, a terrorist, a freedom fighter?

LI: Was, you mean? I believe he was on the side of the town and thought there was no alternative but to cleanse it. But he, like the others, is a murderer at the end of it. His spirit has still not been judged. One day, it will. And God will have no mercy on his soul. Of that I am sure.

TS: President Obama sent you a letter didn't he?

LI: A short one. He said that I had done "a great service in the progression of modern science and our understanding of our place the world." All I did was find a talking corpse.

TS: The Living Man is still quite alive.

LI: You might call it that.

TS: Scientists seem to think so. In fact, the Smithsonian has made an effort to find any relatives to bring them in for testing. However, they couldn't conclusively determine his parentage or any lineage, for that matter, based on DNA. To be able to examine a living subject who carries the same genes as The Living Man might lead to a monumental scientific breakthrough.

LI: Is this a story you tell me or a question?

TS: How do you think your father knew that The Living Man would be buried where you found him? And why did he leave the map to you when he passed?

LI: I wrote and still hold faith that there was something else buried in that spot. Whoever left The Living Man there must have taken it. I'll never know what my father intended for me to find. Mister, I wrote this in my account. You read it, yes? Honestly, I don't see what this has to do with the Smithsonian. This is not why I asked to have this interview. For you to degrade my family.

TS: If your father knew him, perhaps he knew a relative, that's all. Have you asked The Living Man himself? It seemed in your account that he was aware of his surroundings. He may

have answers.

LI: I have nothing to say to him.

TS: You wrote that The Living Man spoke to you during your visit to the Orlando Science Center, but you lied to the doctors when they asked if he had. Why?

Mr. Ipema requested that the interview conclude at this point. I offered my ear to him for any off-the-record comments about the origins of The Living Man before he ended the call, to which he declined and disconnected. Edge of Sunshine respects Mr. Ipema's privacy and will not be releasing any of his personal information or forwarding messages to him. To wit, we do not possess any means of contacting Mr. Ipema. He called us of his own volition, unsolicited, and we arranged a time for him to call in for the interview. We thank our readers for understanding this sensitive situation.

IPEMA INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT — [REDACTED] FACILITY

[2014/10/23 1713:40 DUR: 00:35:17]

State your name and date of birth for the record.

Kyle Bradley Ipema. February 29, 2001.

Do you so swear that the statements you are prepared to provide are truthful to the best of your recollection?

Yes.

State your relation to Louis Ipema.

He's my father.

Do you recall your whereabouts on July 18, 2011?

We were in Stillwater. Florida.

That place does not exist. Are you stating you were in unincorporated Marion County? [FURTHER CLARIFICATION]

Yes.

What was the purpose of your visit?

Vacation. In a way. My family used to live there. That and my grandfather left a map for my father when he passed away. It pointed to, uh, Marion.

When did your grandfather die?

1986, winter, I think. I wasn't alive, of course. He's the one—

We'll get to that. The medical records state that he died of a sudden brain aneurysm. Were you aware of this?

Dad told me it was something with his brain, yes. But it's not hereditary.

[00h00m53s BLANK TAPE]

Were you in the swamp on the subject date with your father, Louis Ipema?

Yes. Looking for what was on my grandfather's map.

State for the record where you obtained the map.

My father received it in a lockbox when my grandfather passed away.

Did he explain to you why he waited twenty-five years to use it?

I don't know. He always seemed to hate Florida before we went.

You understand your father's situation is extraordinary and holds the interest of many federal departments. You have, of course, read his account of The Living Man. Is that correct?

I have, yes. I sent it in.

Is the account, to your memory, accurate? [FURTHER CLARIFICATION]

No.

Please indicate any discrepancies.

I did not hear the voices he heard. He did ask me once if I could hear, and I told him I could not.

What else? The body you found. He wrote that he never looked at it. Is that true?

He took his knife, after the buzzards, he took it and cut into the skin wrapped around the head. It was a shark's skin. It was tough and sharp and

cut him all over while he stretched it out and sliced. He pulled back a flap and looked at the man's face.

Did he recognize the man? [...] Did he?

Yes, he did. He told me to come down into the hole, to look at him one time.

Did he tell you the man's name?

Yes. My grandfather's name was Paolo Ipema.

It is your claim, then, that the man in the hole, so referred as The Living Man, was your grandfather, Paolo Ipema. Is that correct?

Yes.

Mr. Ipema, where is your father?

[00h13m04s BLANK TAPE]

Mr. Ipema, are you aware of the research being performed on The Living Man?

[Panting] Somewhat. They say his brain is still alive without oxygen or nutrients [...] it's a mystery. His body, too. Didn't seem like he had [...] decomposed at all when I saw him.

Correct. And with the assumption that your father's tale is reliable, that brain may still be communicating with others.

I don't—I can't believe that.

Then why, Mr. Ipema, would your father demonstrate such disgust toward The Living Man, his own father? Why would he publicly allege that your

grandfather, and the 'they' with him, are guilty of acts of widespread terrorism in Marion County?

How would you feel if your father was alive for twenty-five years after his death a—and you found him buried in a hole in the middle of a swamp? He couldn't deal with it. I know I wouldn't be able.

[00h06m11s BLANK TAPE]

A blood relative would be invaluable to this study, son. His genetics are, they say, 'muddled.' Like many individuals' DNA blended together. It stands in the way of progress. You must understand why we're looking for him, your father.

I told you [Productive cough] I don't know where he is. The last time I saw him, they were taking him to the museum with that doctor.

And what do you know of that day's events?

[Ipema spits] Nothing. But what he left in his writing.

Explain how your father has given multiple interviews since then, Mr. Ipema. How would these journals have access to your father, meanwhile his own son doesn't?

They don't. No one has spoken to my father in [...] three years. [Metal crashing] I swear! I swear! He sent it to me. I wanted it known. It seemed so important, and it's [Ipema groans] all I have left of him.

It was important because he was trying to keep something alive that was meant to die. We need to know where he is. We need to know he will not fur-

ther interfere.

Look, you called me because you needed someone. For questions, for research. Fine, then. I'm a blood relative. Why not me, man? Leave him alone.

Very well. The other reason you're here today. [Door latching] Thank you for your willing compliance. Please stand by while I consult with the anesthesiologist. We'll be back shortly.

[END TAPE]

Unknown author

c. 1970s

Not much is known about the source and timeframe of this artifact. On the surface, it appears to have very little to do with Stillwater or the persons and factions of interest. What this strange, first person plural account simulates is thinking process of a hivemind and the loss of one of its members. For this reason, this piece is integral in understanding how Nectar operated in Stillwater before its destruction and erasure. Furthermore, the setting for this account could very well be Stillwater itself based on the details provided, indicating that this piece may in fact have been written by a member of Nectar.

The pages of “Last Words” have aged in a way consistent with other documents I have reviewed for previous projects with artifacts from the 1970s. However, an unusual property I observed after removing the document from its protective binder sleeve is that the oddly soft paper is silent when manipulated. As an experiment, I unsuccessfully attempted to tear a corner of one of the pages. Even riskier, I held a page to a fire and caused no damage or discoloration. I have no idea what this is printed on.

LAST WORDS AFTER DECAPITATION

When the head cracks with a shallow bounce off the pavement and the body folds into itself, his psychic howl pierces our consciousness, lightning in a deep cavern. We buckle, too, sharing a pain we cannot measure or mitigate. We know he is leaving us, but can still see through his clouding eyes.

Brother? many voices echo.

God, are you there? He had already forgotten.

No, we are not God, we lilt in a young woman's whisper. We are part of you, we squeak as a child. Then, in the kind and wizened voice of a grandfather: Be calm and accept the way, brother.

His mouth gurgles and peels air from the base of his neck. *Please.* From the shrinking periphery, a blurred huddle of cobalt-suited men wearing paper masks and booties descend on his headless shell. We have seen men like these before, stealing our blood in sterilized cells, unwrapping our preserved bodies and raping them with their electric instruments.

K— me, hon. One more time before I go.

Again in the woman's voice, we tell him that we cherish his love and will never leave his side, that his vow of endless tomorrows has made our lives worth living, that we will follow him into the next place and tangle our tired fingers together as we always have.

Her endless lips pierce my everything.

Through the dark fog crawling from the edges of our shared vision, two cobalt men hoist his body onto a steel cart and cover it with a plastic sheet. Another of them affixes a glass sphere, a sophisticated fishbowl, to the stump of his neck, smearing a burgundy paste where the glass meets open flesh. He then cradles the glass, which catches the steady crimson stream and sporadic spurts.

Is . . . no. My hand is touching my chest. Who is that?

Steady now, we say. Getting lost would be a terrible way to leave. Yes, gather your thoughts and pay no mind to your body.

The the fishbowl is full now, and our vision rocks to the side in an unseen man's hands. The world circles, a revolution of colors stirring like paint. Light washes a field of white over our view and then nothing.

His mind races through a wooded path: the crowded aromas of trees and animal waste and clear reality, the crunching of branches and pinecones, the squishing sounds in softer spots, the stinging of branches scratching at his thin, hairless arms. He runs backwards, catching flashes of his sneakered heels and tube socks cut through the high summer grass. Tiny birds flutter into the trees, wicking dew from their wings.

Another new day, yet I am still here.

Of course you are, we assure him. We never truly leave.

The grass keels and shortens, the clutter of the woods vanishes. In front of him, a withered gray barn with its doors wedged open. Though the air is still, the

frame of the building sways and rights itself, first to one side then the other. He lowers himself near the grass and prowls closer to the building until he can see a rusted pile of metal resembling a truck—a sight we have known since he became a part of us. This is how we remember it:

He was eleven years old when it happened. Like any boy his age, he liked climbing trees, playing ball, picking scabs. This was before children were poisoned by electricity and programmed by the government. One day while exploring the woods between his neighborhood and his friend's, he came upon this barn. The barn was unsteady, like it was built on mud, and there was no house attached or nearby. He had already been taken home by the sheriff for trespassing a handful of times, but a shriek from inside the barn drew him closer. The sound was not unlike a varmint trapped in one of his father's cages. He would say, "They got their place and I got mine. Leaving 'em alive and making a ruckus lets their kind know what happens here." This varmint was no possum, though. Bigger than that.

Her face was pressed against the windshield of an old Chevy pickup, her hair was like sparse clumps of gray straw despite the smooth cheeks and tight skin around her eyes, and her voice was gravelly and high, though it wasn't forming words. Most of her scalp was discolored like the scar on his cheek. A man's girthy, soiled fingers dug into the frame of her tiny face from behind her, just beyond where he could see. As the boy came nearer, he saw the girl's teeth were mostly missing or broken off at the gumline. Tears cut ravines through the dirt on her

face as she was pushed again and again into the glass. He could swear he heard it giving way, cracking a little weakness. The man was on the hood of car behind her, both of them wearing only the filth of the barn.

He sidled up at the rear of the pickup for a closer look and pressed his palms against the cold metal of the tailgate. The truck rocked in rhythm with the two at its front, and now he was part of their motion. Minutes passed and the girl's cries turned to grunts; she was in pain but must have been too exhausted even to use her voice. It was then that her eyes met his and widened into white circles, shining green at their centers in the dim morning light of the barn. She stared at him for a time, no change in her sound, then flitted her gaze left and right. The boy followed her eyes, seeing dozens of doors lining the walls near the high barn ceiling. Chains hung in U-shapes from inside the doors to a metal pillar at the center of the barn. One of the doors was open with a ladder resting beside it. No chain he could see. The girl shook her head, smearing her nose against the glass until the man wrapped her hair around his hand and wrenched her head backward. She winced and shut her eyes tight.

And so, he ran.

Time changes.

How is that? we ask. We use a Japanese woman's voice to say, It is unwise to dwell on the unchangeable.

His vision takes us to the side of the barn, a place we haven't seen. There is a large black box, a gasoline generator. From inside, the familiar shrieks of a young girl. He scans the ground and raises a large stick, shakes off a flurry of ants, and wedges the stick against the generator's side panel. Pulling, pulling until the stick snaps and the panel swings open, revealing a row of switches and a handle at the end of a cable.

We've done great things together, we say. But it is too late for this one, brother.

Consider my life. What choice do I have?

He tugs at the cable, pushing his foot against the generator for leverage. The machine grinds with each attempt, rattling against the loose, dry boards of the barn wall. Stirring from inside the building, clinking of chains and a thud. Another pull and the generator springs to life, droning its song of industry. The man is certainly coming now.

He sprints to the rear of the barn and comes to a set of great doors like those at the front. A lift of the corroded latch and the right door creaks open. Lights on each corner of the ceiling, plus a floodlight at the top of the metal pillar at the center, project silhouettes of the chains on the floor like a web. In that web, the girl is lying on the ground before the truck, alone.

We wouldn't want you to be hurt, we say. Isn't it enough already?

He can envision her now, and so can we. A different her, leaving here and finding the family who had been searching for her so long. She is home-schooled at first, her parents too nervous about her appearance to send her with the rest of the kids. They raise money for her new teeth by taking donations at church picnics and doing odd jobs for their neighbors. She has a wig of beautiful curly auburn hair that bobs up and down and looks just like her mother's. A boyfriend asks where she learned to fuck like that and she leaves him. She graduates high school but can't be bothered to go to college. Her friend's mother gets her a job at the restaurant in town, first waiting tables, then moving up to assistant manager. She marries twice and has 3 kids, none of which in those wedlocks, but both husbands are fine men who treat the children as their own and never put their hands on them. There are troubles, but life is the space between troubles.

He is close to her now and we can see the shackle around her ankle, above the foot covered in dried blood. Following the chains, we see the spindle where they are all connected to the doors above. Perhaps there are more here, but they are too high. It's only her down here.

It's too late for me. Go.

She stares back, like an animal who grasps the idea of words, but not their meanings. He pulls at the chain and she cradles her knees to her chest, shivering. The shackle is held together by a crooked pin and simple latch. He slowly extends his hand toward the girl's foot and she whimpers, then covers her mouth with both

hands. The latch breaks with only the slightest pressure and the pin takes some effort to slide out, but soon the girl's foot is freed. Yet she doesn't move. He waves his hands at her, says, *Go. Leave. Me for you.* She sucks in her lips, surveys the doors and drooping chains above them, gropes her raw ankle. No telling the last time she has seen the skin beneath the shackle.

And then, she runs.

He doesn't hear the man's footsteps behind him, nor does he see the machete until his head is tumbling to the barn floor.

"You try," he gasps.

The cobalt men shout and cover the head in a panic, trying to forget our brother's last words.

Emily Sorenson (b. 1988)

c. 2007

A personal narrative created for an assignment by a sophomore student in Daniel Miller's creative nonfiction class during the spring 2007 term. This paper was recovered by accessing archives of Turnitin, an academic writing software used primarily for the detection of plagiarism in colleges nationwide.

During the narrative, Emily describes an unsettling encounter with Marilyn Kenny, the writer of diary entries appearing earlier in *Afterlight*: "Dead Language." Almost 30 years have passed since the events of "Dead Language," and Kenny now holds the distinction of oldest living person in the country. Her secret to living, despite what she tells reporters, may be more sinister than it first seems. However, questions remain: is Sorenson's work here more creative or nonfiction? how accurately has she depicted someone who she believes will never read her work? has she done a justice or disservice to someone without a voice?

A SCENT OF WHEN

Emily Sorenson
Professor Miller
ENG 183D
2 April 2007

A Scent of When

But she always smiled, all the way to the end. Even though she couldn't remember. Even though our names had vanished into the fog. Even though we were no longer her child and husband, only the nice people who came with her food and played the music she liked but didn't know why.

Dad insisted that there was nothing to be done except make her comfortable and keep ourselves happy so she would see only happiness. I was eight at the time, an age where singing and dancing didn't come with embarrassment attached, so I did my job the best I could to entertain her. Dad told me stories at night that he'd made up himself. One night, after the hospice consultant had left and we cried together until the infomercials came on, he told me the story of the wisps. The wisps were like faeries, twinkles of light that floated in the air like dandelion seeds to and fro in the breeze. It was the wisp's instinct to seek out pleasant memories and bring them back to its home so it could share and experience them with the other wisps. They were like bees, he had said. They were not mean spirits or even tricksters, but instead knew only the life they were given and didn't intend to hurt anyone. When I asked where the wisps lived, he said, "Out there." As his story went on, he explained that the wisps had come to their house so often because there were so many happy memories, but by accident they took too many from Mommy. I told him they should be sorry, should say sorry, but he told me the wisps couldn't be sorry because they didn't know what they did.

I remember spending the next several summers catching fireflies in the evenings. At twelve years old, I took my first date along to help catch more fireflies. He told me to make sure I punched holes in the top of whatever I kept them in so they could breathe. Still, I never did. I would often steal some of my dad's matches and take a Mason jar out into the woods behind our house around dusk. For the lid of the jar, I fashioned a piece of mesh from a screen door I found in a trash pile out in the swamp instead of using a metal lid. The fireflies were mindless and simple to trap with slow, horizontal sweeps of the jar. After I had caught around ten of the bugs, give or take a few depending on how patient I was that day, I brought my catch to a perch on a low-hanging branch of an old oak tree on the property we called "Methuselah." Careful not to burn my fingertips, I scraped a match on a worn strip of bark, dropped it into the glass container buzzing with the insects, and twisted the top so tightly that I left red streaks on my palm from the notched brass rim at the top. Sometimes I would rip clumps of the Spanish moss off the tree and throw it in the jar with the bugs. The jar always swirled with a white smoke that the fireflies' lights could pierce through at first. While I could still see the lights, I would twirl the glass around, making it resemble the telescopic pictures of galaxies we saw in science class. A sporadic plink-plinkplink sounded from the hot sides of the jar and, before long, most of the insect vapor and a sour odor would waft out of the mesh on top of the jar as the fireflies plonked to the bottom. Smoke and smell, but no memories.

* * *

They say The Swamp Witch lives alone out in the woods where she can't be hurt by the "smoke and electricity" of civilization. A reporter for Channel 2 had an interview with her in 1995—almost twelve years ago now, just after my mother passed—living off of animals she'd

trapped and water from a nearby spring. At 109 years old, she was the oldest woman in Florida at the time. Now, at 121, she is the oldest living person on record in the United States.

At first, I considered writing my “explaining the unexplainable” narrative about why the good die young, but figured the obnoxious classic rock song that plays every other hour on 96.5 FM already did the job. Instead, I decided to seek the opposite: the secrets to a long life. And who better than The Swamp Witch, whose real name is Marilyn Kenny according to the family Bible she showed the Channel 2 reporter, to provide the answers?

I tighten my grip on the small outboard motor of the jon boat I borrowed from my dad’s friend, my long, dirty blonde hair curling in on itself as it is pulled through the humid swamp air. The turns are tight and frequent in the deep waterways of the National Forest. Knees of cypress trees jut out like snorkels or spindly brown fingers, piercing the shallow, black water and pointing in countless different directions. My fingers are filthy as usual, this time from raking mud to the banks of the river at a shallow chokepoint. I’ve spent many first days of school over the years explaining the black grit under my nails to classmates, that impossible kind of dirt that just won’t come out.

The motor’s propeller grinds to a low moan and stops, the stench of burning fuel coating my nostrils. I lean over the back of the small boat, expecting to see pale swirls of mud in the water from the propeller hitting bottom, but instead find a tire-sized nest of weeds and sawgrass gathered behind me. Reaching shoulder-deep into the murk, I tug at the green knots.

An uneven female voice calls from out of sight, just beyond the overgrowth. “Yanking at it’ll only make it worse.” I look, but can’t see the speaker, yet know at once it must be Marilyn out here this far. I call out her name, her real name, and she answers back, “That’s it, baby. Now,

I hope you haven't come out this ways without a brushknife." Her voice now sounds like it is right beside me, but she remains invisible.

I debark by climbing onto a cluster of arching roots and hop onto the surest ground possible. My bare feet sink down to the ankles in dense, warm mud that belches a rotting odor as it gives way beneath me. I follow her "hellos" and "who's theres" through the tall grasses, sagging ferns, and pointy fans of saw palmetto clusters until I see an olive drab, 40-foot shipping container nestled under a canopy of mossy sand pines and live oaks. Multi-colored, spray-painted messages collage the exterior of the metal rectangle with words like "COME OUT" and "FOUND THE WITCH 7/9/05" and "RUN." Thin white ropes run from the sides of the box into the branches of the trees. What I hope are clusters of animal bones dangle and jangle from the ropes against each other—perhaps windchimes or perimeter alarms. One of the clusters resembles an inverted ribcage arranged to look like a spider; I imagine how the bones would look in the original orientation and can't think of what animal would have such large ribs here in this swamp. When I duck beneath the clusters and crunch over an orange bed of dead leaves and pine needles toward the box, I spot brown and green and yellow roots growing along the sides and into the wide open hatch on the right side.

"You're here to see me, anyway, aren't you? Come on, then," the witch says. Her voice echoes from within the metal container and into the damp, darkening sky. I didn't realize until now how long I have been on the water, and the daylight will very soon fizzle out. For the first time in the journey, though, there is a pleasant aroma in the air. It smells, strangely enough, like a bakery with fresh doughs, sweet butter, various spices, and ripened cheeses. I enter the open hatch and discover the witch lying in a tangled hammock of fine Persian carpets. She holds up

her fragile, leathery hand to greet me. A sad gray dress, or sack, I can't tell, conceals her body and platinum hair cut almost to the scalp frames her withered face. There is no furniture in the container, although a bed of grayish-white moss and dead ferns blankets the floor. What fills the rest of the space is shelves, hanging circular platforms, spice racks, a multi-tiered chandelier, alligator skulls, tiki torches, and shrines—all covered in what amounts to hundreds of candles: ivory, sunrise, aqua, rose, crimson, seaweed, and even midnight black. Only one is lit: a cinnamon-colored sphere with a wick peeking out of two sides and swinging from a fishing line, dribbling wax onto the mossy floor.

"I like your house," I say. "That candle smells lovely."

The witch snaps up in her hammock and says, "It does. They all do, baby. Is that why you're here, to sniff up my candles and pay me compliments? No? What you after?"

I stutter. "I just was wondering if maybe I could ask you a few questions about your lifestyle. You're really an inspiration, even if you don't know it." The witch sighs and gestures her hand to center of the floor, where I sit obediently and sink into the moss and ferns. "So how have you lived to be so old?" I flinch, but she doesn't.

"Live off the land. Animals, fruits, plant roots. Spring nearby, off that way." She gestures to the north, I think. "Feel like I'm repeating myself. Don't care much for that," she says.

"You're right. I know this from Mr. Noah Reese, that reporter who came to see you over ten years ago."

"Ten years, you said?"

"Twelve, actually."

She shakes her head absently. A plump squirrel skitters into the container behind me and I try not to move. The witch is motionless, still in her thoughts while the squirrel eases its way under the swinging bakery candle, jumping toward the witch's hammock and furrowing his tail when a glob of cinnamon colored wax lands next to him.

"He didn't say anything about the candles," I say. "Did you have them then?"

A crunch and raspy squeal as a fossilized driftwood cane pulverizes the squirrel's head. I stand up and backpedal to the entrance of the shipping container. The witch says, "Did have them then. It was the one thing I asked Mr. Newsman to keep to himself." With her cane, she tumbles the body of the squirrel closer, covers it in grass and moss, and pulls the fishing line holding the bakery candle close enough to blow out its two tiny flames.

"You're famous, well-known at least, because of your record," I say. "Would you say you have a good life?"

"Record?" The witch sniffs at streams of smoke floating near her.

"Oldest person in America."

She twirls her finger through the smoke, forming a little gray funnel. "That people have found, maybe. America's a big land. Plenty of places to hide from people."

The swamp is now only lit by the moon, the stars, and the iPhone I've been using to record our conversation. I can't remember in which direction the jon boat is stuck in the nest of grass. The witch's eyes catch the light of my phone like a cat's and she springs up out of her hammock with a youthful agility. The pleasant aroma of the bakery is gone. In its place is the dank, musty stench of everything decomposing around me. The low bellow of a gator rumbles

from somewhere close; so close that I know I would not be able to run from it if it wished me for a meal. The vibration prickles my skin and tenses my neck and shoulders.

“Don’t be frightened, babygirl. All safe in here,” she says, tiptoeing closer. “You haven’t yet told me your name,” she says.

“Emily.”

“Ah, Emily. Lovely,” she says, running her thin fingers over a row of candles on a shelf. “You might best stay here with me for the night. The old swamp can be dangerous in the darkness—and you with no cutter, even!” She stops at a sandy yellow candle and turns to me, her eyes aglow. “Emily, you must be no more than twenty. Did you know I’ve outlived all of my children? And all of my grandchildren? Just an old hag with not a soul to love. And yet, I can’t seem to go with them.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammer. “You seem nice enough.”

“Don’t be sorry, just stay. I’ll help you with your boat first thing in the morning,” she says. “I have just the thing.” The witch picks up the yellow candle with one hand and plucks the bakery one with the other like a low-hanging fruit. She tosses the used-up candle into the pile of bedding where the squirrel is buried. I can’t help but wonder how she prepares her catches to eat, or if she eats them raw. The witch threads the fishing line through the new candle and, without my noticing how, lights a wick on the side. The light from the candle spills out weakly into the pine needle clearing outside the container, enough for me to tell that even if I stole a candle or used my phone, navigating the swamp in this darkness would be worse than a nightmare. It is a darkness I haven’t encountered before in the swamp. It’s watching us, or maybe only me. While

I survey the area, the witch lights a second hanging candle, this one bright blue with a wider and brighter flame on the wick.

A breeze sweeps in, swaying the floating lights but not extinguishing their flames. The candles dance in the wind as their smells reach me: they smell like a beach. Or rather, *the* beach: the beach where my family vacationed in Tybee Island, Georgia, when we were still a whole family. The smell is salty, crisp, and bright—how is it bright? I can somehow smell the sunscreen we all globbed on since we were such a pale bunch. I run my hand over my forearm and feel greasy, no matter how much I try to rub in whatever has coated it. I smell my mother's spicy bloody mary that made my nose and eyes burn if I got too near it. Dad draws a heart on the side of Mom's foggy glass and she licks an arrow through it. I love when they play like that, like I'm not there and they just love each other. I can smell my mother. She is happy, she is dancing with me. We are sweaty and covered in sand and don't care in the least.

The container tilts and rights and tilts. The borders of my vision blur like horizons. I lie down. "Marilyn?" I ask, staring up from the floor at the gently swaying lights, little fireflies in the box

"Yes, dear?"

"May I stay?"

"Of course, dear. Just for the night."

"Just for the night."

Curtis Nolan (b. ?)

c. 2014

This project memo and notation were used in the construction of an artificial Governor's address broadcast over local radio signals in central Florida in mid-December 2014. Nolan edited together numerous recorded statements and speeches given by the Governor to craft a message designed to assuage the locals around Stillwater, who had probably all but forgotten the town by now. Even its most harrowing events had been blacked-out from local and national media. Regardless, an extended "test" from a naval facility, the only to use live bombs in this half of the country, was bound to be cause for concern. What was to those living nearby an inconvenient and persistent series of rumbles and pops was in fact the extinguishing of a town and its peoples' entire history. It was Project MAYA's final act of deletion.

SPLICE

Assigned Engineer: Nolan, Curtis

Deadline: December 12, 2014

Objective: Audio clip of Governor Scott addressing complaints and concerns of bombing and fires in eastern ONF.

Deliver to: [REDACTED]

This is Governor Rick Scott. Good morning, fellow Floridians. Recent test runs of live explosives at Pinecastle Impact Range have raised concerns in the immediate radius. It should be understood that the use of live explosives at Pinecastle is a standard practice which, as most locals are aware, causes disruptive sounds and vibrations. As of late, the United States Navy has been moving forward to test in alternative environments to urban targets like those represented in the Range. It was in coordination with the Parks department and Fire and Rescue that the area where this testing took place. I can assure that the area was sufficiently cleared and evacuated over the past several weeks in preparation for this test. The safety of our citizens and tourists is our primary concern in the Parks system. We are aware of ongoing fires in the area, which is attributed to the release of methane from the swamps. Fire officials from across the state are responding to this matter and have pledged to contain this fire before it causes severe and lasting damage to our beautiful National Forest. Thank you for your concern and patience. We will notify you with any new developments.

I heard this played over the AM newsradio station while laying low in Astor Park in the days after the bombing. It sounded seamlessly like Rick Scott at the time, though now I wish I could hear it again. The colors appear to be a reference system to the existing recordings Nolan used to splice together the speech. My phone recording of this manufactured address was corrupted and refused to play back. All that I could hear were a series of clicks. Every station I've asked not only lacks a recording ... they don't recall hearing such a thing. I'd wager Nolan also engineered the curfew announcement in "Wrong Address," if one truly existed.

I left a webcam running in my hotel room while I tried to recover any last fragments of evidence around what used to be Stillwater. The fires were out quickly, less than two days, and the ground was covered in a gritty sapphire powder. Among the powder, clean shoots of grass and shrubbery sprung from the ashen ground up to my waist. There were no buildings. Not even foundations left. Some of the streets were half present, half mounds of asphalt, the bulldozers hadn't fully cleared them out.

My phone buzzed an alert. Motion on the webcam. They'd found me. I loaded handfuls of the sapphire powder into my backpack and began my trek across the forest, to the place you have since found Afterlight.

Please. Do not let them take it. This is all that remains.

Curator's note: merryweather's final post-entry comments were chilling at first and only shook me deeper as I worked on crafting this new edition of *Afterlight*. I have experienced the same shivers of paranoia, heard the same muted footsteps following me, seen gouges appear and vanish in my doors and windows. I should not have searched for so long. I should not have insisted. I should not have opened that case.

On the road, I have had at least a dozen cars nearly swerve into me. My wife insists they are lowlifes manufacturing accidents for the insurance money. At work, we had a significant section of ceiling collapse which closed the building for the rest of the week. I had called in sick that day. My friends have persisted in probing into my work: how's the book coming? are you done with your research yet? going out of town again for the novel? My mind holds onto the hope they are being good friends. But I know that the Project is watching, waiting, moving the pieces.

They know.

They know about me and soon they will know about you. We can't make them go away, but they can unmake us. Keep moving.