

American, Incendiary

by

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## ABSTRACT

The American culture of capitalism and consumerism is predicated upon the idea that the individuals inside the system are safe. The years since 2001 have seen such finite illusions of isolation and security irrevocably altered and a collective vulnerability rise in the vacuum. Today, with the birth of social media and immediate information, terrorism—as a form of reprehensible protest and a desperate act of war—has gained a new fundamental resource: violence can be broadcast around the world the instant it happens. But with this technological upheaval, a new rogue brand of vigilantism has been born online, and is continually gaining strength as the reach of the Internet snakes further into everyday life, hypothetically altering the notion of individual power and America’s sense of justice, all while potentially placing more innocent lives in harm’s way. And still, amid the uncharted and ever violent reality of war, technology, and the Internet, there live people: the scarred and delicate tissue of heart and body, ever healing, deceptively vulnerable, and increasingly alone.

For Mindy—

“The wonder in these ancient ruins is not that so much has fallen, but that anything remains.” *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai, and Egypt*

“We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein.” *The Quran*

"[The drone program] in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent." *New York Times report on Obama's drone war*



Hacker

I am.

It is enough to start with that.

Enough to fight this godawful inside of me.

## Predator

There is nothing there. The sky. Today it is blue. An expanse, a forever, running from the peaks of the western mountains, to the ending of the earth in the east. They know from the wind there will be no rain. No clouds. A quiet. The blue.

They look up, everyone, on their way to school, to work, to mosque, on the walk from the house to the well. They look up, knowing they will see nothing. They look up despite the fact that they have never seen anything up there before. But still, they squint, hold their palms up over their brows, and stare into the sun. Looking for a flicker, a dark.

Say of these people, of this life, what you would like. But know that they understand this predator. Know that they know fear. That they have learned everything there is to learn about this killer.

They squint because they know that up there, somewhere, in the blue, is a beast circling at 10,000 feet, its 50-foot wingspan sparking not even a glint of silver; its bulbous, distinct head; its shift-focus eye; the hellfire.

Today nothing will happen. And yesterday nothing happened. But together they hold the collective weight of their neighbor's limbs. They have the collective shudder buried in their bones. Have seen the rip of a home, the split of existence—have all wondered where it has gone, how so much house, walls and furniture and fillings of a life, could be reduced to rubble and ash in an instant. Have learned to wait until dark, ignoring the moans of the not-dead, the burn of the fires, to make their way through the mess, drag out the bodies, listen for breaths. Because, in the day, they have watched the rescuers too explode.



When the sky is blue, they avoid each other, cross the street to avoid being part of the casualty cluster. They are weary of every face, of all men. Because all men of the right age are guilty. So boys avoid this age. They stop counting birthdays. They hunch their shoulders to stay small. They avoid meals to stay thin. They struggle as though it can be held off, as though they can stay too weak to lift a rifle, too ignorant to build a bomb.

Maybe they even hate themselves. For living here. For being born and staying here. For being the other. The necessary evil of another world. But still, they understand that they are important. That in some empire around the globe they are the glue between neighbors, a bond where these white-teeth strangers can get together over grilled meat and say, “Thank God *you* are not one of *them*.”

Today there is no hellfire. No rubble to clear. No friends to bury. Tomorrow will be the same. But it is only a matter of time. Because they have seen their children watch their parents die, their brothers and sisters, their playmates, and they have seen the fire lit there, in those eyes, that anger—that rage of oblivion, of necessity, because all other feelings have been exploded. And they have watched the bearded men come down into the village, with their machine guns and RPGs and their straight backs, to walk the streets calling out to anyone with the anger. And they have seen those broken souls, those oblivions, listen.

Because here, like everywhere, there are lessers of many evils.

Phisher

In the dark he could still feel the concussion, the bone-break punch of air against his chest. He felt the blood in his ears. The fear.

He knew he would die there.

But oblivion was warm and tight against his limbs, nothing like falling. More like the weightless sink of a body underwater.

But there is no body. No lungs or heart. No hands or face. No eyes. Just the solitude. The freedom of nothingness.

And the nothingness tightened over him, wrapped him with the weight of an ocean. In the absence there was also nonbeing, where motion and stillness were the same, where alive and dead were equal.

For days he felt as though he was not breathing. For days. Or hours, seconds. Here, to exist was the same to have never.

Then, somewhere there was a name—a map worming into the fog of his thoughts. Letters that wanted to mean something but dissolved one at a time. A face peeled away. A body. Another. Gone.

He was alone.

He woke up sick, to volume, his stomach heaving up, through his throat.

“Let it out. Breathe.”

There was a hand on his back, the fingers spread and warm against his skin. The space was small and white then bigger and pastel, populated, full of only one sound, a

sound that slowly drifted apart, became voices and clatter, until he knew he was alive, again. With this thought came the possibility that, for a time, he was dead.

Air came clean for a few breaths. Painless. His body was a comma over a small pail, retching. But he felt new and light, void of the imposition of past and trauma. He loved the hand on his back; wound with this love up through fingers to hand and wrist, out and across arm and body. So willing, for an instant, to love anything there.

He vomited again.

“Is that everything? Just a couple more.”

The woman rubbed her hand up and down his bare back.

There was a feeling of emptiness, a bodily release of tension.

“Do you know where you are?”

The hand guided him back, away from the trashcan, till he rested against a wall. When his eyes focused he saw that he was in a hallway, with people everywhere, a flood of blurred colors. His shirt was missing. His body raged. It hurt to think, to inhale, to move.

He spoke without thinking, “What happened to me?”

The woman stepped away, setting the bucket on the bed beside him and dropping her hands into her deep pockets. Her face a frown. Another doctor hunched over a clipboard ran into her but she seemed not to notice. Dark pools were welled beneath her eyes. Her cheeks were flush and soft, gave nicely to the cut of her chin.

“You were in an accident.”

“Am I okay?” He tried to shift his weight and a rod of pain spiked through his shoulder and into his chest, sapping the air from his lungs.

The woman didn't move.

She lifted a small penlight, leaned in and lifted each eyelid carefully.

"Can you tell me your name?"

Instinctively, he pulled away, but his head slapped against the wall behind him.

"Graham."

"Careful," she said. "Last name?"

"Smith."

She frowned. "That doesn't help anyone."

He spit more bile into the trashcan and looked back up at her, unmoved.

"And today's date?"

He paused. Her palm was pressed against his forehead.

"December."

"What day?"

Words dissolved across his mind. He couldn't grab hold of them. "Christmas Eve," he said.

She stepped back again.

From down the hall there was a scream. A wail, a pain he'd never known. And when he looked he saw much more of it. People scattered down the hall, sitting on gurneys and slouched against the wall, so many it was nearly impassable. And everywhere there was blood, on clothes, on the walls, on bodies, hands and faces. Doctors and nurses wove amid it all.

"Mr. Smith."

He slowly looked back to her. "The shooting," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Mr. Smith, my name is Dr. Wright. I’m a general practitioner here at St. Josephs. You’ve been admitted here with a fractured collarbone and a severe concussion. Due to the nature and cause of your injuries you will be required to speak to the authorities before being checked out. Though, with the severity of your concussion, I do recommend keeping you here for further inspection.” While she talked her hands pulled her wavy-brown hair from it’s loose ponytail and rebound it. She didn’t meet his eye.

“How long will that be?”

She looked down the hall and shrugged her shoulders, the chords of her neck tightening, fractures growing in her face.

“Mr. Smith, do you remember the nature of your injury?”

“I was with my brother.”

She glanced at her watch. Graham saw for the first time how young she was, how smooth the skin ran over her cheeks.

“Did he die?” he asked.

She met his eye and he realized he’d never be as strong as her.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure.” She gestured toward chaos, as though it was the only answer.

Graham nodded.

“If I get a chance I’ll look into it. Or at least I’ll try. He might not even be here, they took people to every hospital in the city. What’s his name?”

“Thomas.”

She wrote something in a small book. “Listen,” she said. “I’ve got to go. Keep your arm elevated. If you have to move around for any reason just keep the brace on.” She pulled an orange medicine vial from her pocket and held it out. “This is morphine. When it starts to throb again take two every eight hours.” Before he could take the bottle she said, “This is an incredibly strong pain killer, Mr. Smith. Be careful.”

He took the pills and she continued, her words drifting into the river of noise. Graham looked at the nurses and doctors pushing back and forth down the hallway. Police officer’s loitered, hunched down on their knees, listening, asking, taking quick notes. People milled everywhere, hundreds of people, faces smudged dark, chewing on dry crackers, sipping bottled water. He smelled sweat and something like bleach. And everywhere he turned he saw blood, dried and fresh—a handprint on the wall across from him, just big enough to look like the construction paper turkeys he made in grade school. Underneath the volume, Graham picked out cries, wails from somewhere far off, swallowed sobs from the family on the next bed.

Down the hall he could see a TV monitor hanging from the wall. A video on an endless looped showed smoke pooling into the sky.

“Do you hear me? I need you to acknowledge that you recognize that under no circumstances are you to leave before making contact with the proper authorities.”

Graham looked back at Dr. Wright. “Okay.”

She had grown suddenly tense. But her shoulders slumped again easily. “Well, all right. Your jacket is there.” She gestured toward a plastic bag on the bed beside Graham. His red jacket was balled inside. “We had to cut your shirt off and your sweater. And your cellphone’s been confiscated.”

“Just mine?”

“Everyone’s.”

“Did you call anyone for me? Like my parents?”

“For that we’d need your real name and another 50 people. Right now we’re just trying to get the situation under control. I—” she stopped and shrugged her shoulders.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” she said, her voice stern. “There are other patients that need attention.”

“Am I just supposed to fucking wait?”

“I’m sorry.” She folded up her notebook and it vanished with her hands into her coat. “If you begin feeling any severe headaches stop any doctor or nurse you can.”

Then she was gone, swallowed in the chaos.

Graham sat for a moment, watching the TV. He was too far away to hear anything or read the ticker that rolled across the screen, but he could make out the bold red words that stayed glued in place: *TERRORIST ATTACK*.

Then smaller: *one suspect dead, two on the loose*.

He had been there. The memory was fogged and broken, images he couldn’t hold to. But he had seen them, the suspects. They looked like kids. Like every other nobody around campus.

A nurse pushed through the crowd near him and Graham called out to her, “Excuse me.”

But she was already disappeared.

He tried again to move, this time slower. The pain was quick, but numbed by his timidity. This was the last place he wanted to be. Beside the bag that held his sweatshirt sat a small box of off-brand crackers and a bottle of water. He used his teeth to unscrew the cap. There was no doubt that Tommy was dead. Graham finished the bottle in two breaths, his free hand uncontrollably shaky.

The doctor was wasting her time. He should have never asked her to look.

His mind was clouded but he knew as soon as he saw the chaos that he would hack scrips. It's how his mind worked. He was opportunistic, and there was no better opportunity than this. He was free to roam in a hospital.

He planted his good hand on the bed and shifted slowly, lowering his feet to the floor. The pain was immediate and overbearing, everywhere across his body. His vision narrowed, blackened at the edges. And just when he thought he would pass out, die even maybe, his toes found linoleum and he stood, people rushing past, huddled on the floor, splayed out on gurneys, crying, bleeding, probably dying.

He tore his hard shell red jacket from the plastic bag and he shook out his wallet and Chap Stick and keys onto the bed. Awkwardly he slid his free arm down the sleeve and pulled the other half up over the bulky cast and zipped it to his throat. He shoved the empty sleeve into a pocket and grabbed the loose items from the bed. He looked both directions down the hall, and picked one at random.

Hospitals were already some of the least secure networks in the world. They were years behind in the tech, running the most basic anti-virus programs. He knew people knocked out internet-connected machines accidentally all the time. The machines, wired to administer proper doses at proper times, ran java, and algorithms designed to worm



into java scripts to steal data would accidentally DDoS the heart monitor after stumbling across it on the net. More often than not a doctor or nurse would detect that something was amiss, would shut the thing down. But sometimes, a patient died, alone, in the dark, all the systems designed to prevent it, humming quietly, infected.

Graham had never been to this hospital. Or any really. So he didn't know where to start. All he needed was five minutes with a computer, or less if he could regain the feeling in his fingers, clear the fog from his head. He kept the worm that Walter had written stored on an unregistered dark site, on what journalists called the darknet. All he had to do was download the thing. The worm would then cover its own tracks, hide itself deep in the system. The code, which while messy, still packed with notes and useless strands, was getting stronger every day Walt sat down with it. Once on the hard drive, inside the network, it would install the RAT, a Remote Access Trapdoor that would let Graham and Walt in whenever they wanted.

With that they could write scrips on demand, sell them for hundreds of dollars each, make thousands.

Graham had never really considered it before, hitting a hospital. Mostly he phished. He could write sloppy code, had once spent a year crafting an algorithm, but it wasn't natural to him. What was natural to him was making bait and reeling in ignorant targets. He was an online conman. Mostly what the general public new, was email scams about Nigerian princes and the promise of instant returns and wealth. But in truth phishers had grown far more sophisticated. Their techniques more targeted and catered, sometimes impossible to resist.

Graham focused on passwords. With a password he could do anything, get in anywhere. He was careless about who he hunted, and careless about how he found his way in. But he was careful about his trail and was sure to never take more than he could.

Mostly he went after the rich, if he could. He picked targets however he could. Mostly now that was through facebook, where he could gauge the depth of their wealth to determine their worth. It was also where he could learn everything he needed to know about their lives. He could find the names of their pets, their spouses, birthdays, hometowns, school names, teachers, email addresses. Most of the time, this was enough. He could brute force his way into their email by imputing the information he found on facebook to the one algorithm he'd actually written. From there it sucked ram and punched in hundreds of combinations a second. More often than not it worked in a matter of minutes and he had access to an email. And today people were lazy. More often than not Graham would stumble across an email with social security numbers, bank account information, credit card statements, more passwords even.

It wasn't always so easy. But so often it was. So often he laughed at their naiveté.

The information he stole he packaged. He made files of people. Once he had a hundred people, he could sell the whole set for a couple grand. His buyer was a faceless entity that he'd traced to an IP address in the Ukraine, though he knew the whole business was about running TORs and throwing your tracks through servers around the world, making it nearly impossible to know where anyone actually was. All to avoid capture. To make some money.

The people he robbed, he knew, would be insured, though he didn't care. Their money would be promptly repaid. There would be troubles with the identity theft, but in

the end they would be fine. Money padded a life so thoroughly that such imposition was hardly even felt.

He stumbled through the hallway, weaving through the chaos of people. Bodies pushed past him, and there was pain, blooming behind his eyes, exploding inside his head. He was looking for an empty computer. It didn't matter where it was, only that he could get online and that it was network linked.

TVs played everywhere he went. The scene. The cameras outside the mall, tilted up and focused on the dark smoke, the police, the traces of blood along the walls, along the asphalt, the death toll.

And around him the blare of tragedy.

*So this is terrorism.*

For months on end talking heads had been screaming about ISIS, about Arabs and Muslims, refugees, sneaking across the borders, worming their way into our system to destroy us. Always, it had angered him. The lack of compassion. Syria was in ruin, people in need of food and water and safety. And America wanted to turn its back, lock its doors. But now, his body was a consequence of their violence.

It angered him. That those assholes were right. Because, he had been there, Graham had seen them. And they were, weren't they? The suspects? They were Arab. They were Muslim. They were ISIS. Here to destroy America. Our American bodies.

Hacker

Before I left I watched my mother.

In the house I grew up in. On the street where I was born. I hadn't been home in a year. She stacked wood in the fireplace and lit old newspapers. She wore a sweater knotted over her hips and moved like everything hurt.

I made her this way. Cut the pain into her back, that hollow behind her eyes. Her hair greying, tucked behind her ears. The way she broke and steadied and stayed.

I stayed beneath the blanket while she made food. Smoke pooled in the ceiling.

If I could have let her save me I would have. To give that to her. To let her breathe. A daughter doesn't need a mother. But a mother is not without a child.

Martyr

In his knees he still felt as though he were running. He pressed his forehead against the cool wall, his palms too, to steady himself. The chords of his muscles shook. A voice in the back of his mind told him to take long breaths. In and out. He wanted to push himself through the wall.

The house, unheated for days, months, was frigid. His breaths came in long, clouded puffs that dissolved quick and wet on his face. His eyes focused on the gun he'd dropped at his feet. He could still feel the weight of it: 9mm, sixteen rounds in the clip. Another in the chamber. Each squeeze supersonic, the stopping force enough to drop a pro football player. To split bone. Remove limbs.

From down the hall, near the open backdoor, snow swirled into the house. The white stark there, where he looked and watched it shiver with the slight breeze. The type of thing a mother would scold for. Hussein, his feet there in the snow, was sucking short breaths. The stain over him was growing.

Shaheed wanted to go to him. But the sight of the mess, the emptiness of Hussein's limbs was unbearable. Shaheed had no idea how to help. When they ditched the car Shaheed had cinched a belt around Hussein's shoulder, the sucking wound, wrapping it clumsily around his whole upper half. Pulling the belt to the farthest notch. The blood oozing over the leather.

He had done the sloppy work in a shed behind an abandoned house near the mall. Then he'd pulled the tarp from the trunk and over the getaway car, taking a last look at the mess of gore they were leaving behind. The second car was parked down the block.

He'd retrieved it and gone back for Hussein, laying him across the back seat. From there they had gone straight to the safe house. Weaving through the congested streets. The ambulances and emergency vehicles whirring past, headed the other direction, toward Fashion Plaza. Hussein stayed splayed in the backseat. And Shaheed did his best to look innocuous, vacant, running his hand absently through his patchy beard. Turning, he swore he could hear the muffled clink of propane tanks rolling together in the trunk, though he knew they were wrapped carefully into blankets, all three of them, bungee corded in place. More than once he pictured the rusted car erupting into flames, the satisfaction of his flesh burning alive.

When he finally got his breathing under control, in the hallway off the kitchen, he could hear the house groan softly. The perpetual settling of turn of the century homes, he told himself. But he worried, that beneath, there were steps. Feet crunching snow. A monster edging slowly to the head of the stairs. The Dread. He listened with his whole body. Stars bursting into the corners of his eyes.

He was certain that they hadn't been followed. Not from Fashion Plaza and not after they ditched the getaway car.

But still he could feel eyes running across his back.

Out the open backdoor was a small porch, the boards rotted, his footprints and Hussein's painfully obvious in the snow. The porch opened to a fenced backyard, a splintered tree, the overgrowth of abandonment, the rot of winter. The whole of it colorless with fresh powder. The houses beyond obscured by the low clouds. The dumpsters grey. The oak's fingers leafless.

He watched the snow fall. On another day it could have been peaceful. His mind whirred. He knew he was panicked. And he knew he had to get moving. But all he could do was lean against the wall to fight the tremors in his limbs.

He tried not to blink. When he shut his eyes all he could see was the ash, the split second of glass when the windows popped, the slivers like stars over him. He could taste the chemical smoke on his tongue.

He knew what to do. There was a plan. There were more bombs to set. There was more destruction to cause. More to prove. First he needed to carry Hussein from the kitchen to the second floor, away from the unboarded windows. Retrace their path here and brush away the most obvious footprints. Lock the door. Find a way to stop the bleeding. Save his brother's life. Keep fighting.

Phisher

Graham found the computer in a dark room full of bunk beds and couches. He'd tried several other doors, some locked, others not, but empty, or crowded. The blood caked on his brow, which he'd seen in the bathroom where he'd vomited up more bile, gave him leeway, so he left it. People assumed him in shock, confused, lost. It was his ticket into any room he wanted. In the mirror he'd seen the bruises along his face, the cuts, the dilation of his eyes. But he couldn't find the marks for all the hurt, the everywhere of it.

The computer was on but asleep and when he woke it he found that it was password protected, with a user name and log in required. But this he could work around. He canceled out of the screen, backing out of the administration log in, and opened the terminal, to access the guest access to the machine. So long as he was careful about his trail, it didn't matter that guest profiles were monitored with a keystroke memory.

The machine though was slow and the blue light in the dim room stung his eyes. He stood, afraid to contort his body to sit, of the hurt there. All he had to do was open a browser, visit his dark site, download the package, and log out.

The computer loaded.

Graham blinked and saw Tom in the shadows. His brother, dying, a bullet destroying his face, a family deconstructed in a moment. The grief racked him. He could hardly breathe. The reality of it was overwhelming. Inside, he could feel unrepairable parts breaking.

He would have to call their mother.



The desktop finally loaded. He found the browser, an old outdated Internet Explorer.

And the heavy blue door at the other end of the room opened. His reflex was quick, he punched the power button on the old monitor. He worked mostly at the library, or coffee shops, never too near campus, never at one place too often, and he always had to be on his toes—if the wrong person looked over his shoulder. Or if the feds caught up with him. He had to be able to wipe everything on the hard drive in a matter of seconds. The screen went black, the light lingering behind his eyes.

In the dark room, the computer sat in the far corner, beside a couch and TV, away from the door, with several bunk beds sitting between. Graham stood as still as he could, not breathing. He felt stupid; surely he'd been seen. His brain, numbed and fogged as it was, ran through excuses. He would say they'd taken his phone—they had—and he didn't know his mother's phone number and he needed her to know he was okay, to come get him, that her other son was dead; the intruder would feel sympathy, pity him, and let him leave. Especially tonight.

Lies came easy to him. They were first nature.

But as he stood in the shadows, holding his breath, the seconds ticked by with nothing. The door had closed, bringing the darkness back to the room. Then he heard a faint noise. As the silence settled and his ears adjusted, he could pick out the sobs clearly. And when his eyes adjusted, he could make out the form, a powerful frame down on his knees by the door. The teal scrubs, the fingers locked over the neck, the fight for air.

For once Graham wasn't angry.

When the nurse left, Graham flipped the screen back on. Light flooded the space again, burning his eyes. He had listened to the man cry and something in him had changed. It was a moment he wasn't supposed to see. Nurses and doctors and cops and firefighters weren't supposed to break. They were supposed to be rocks, ready for this exact moment. Of course, he knew this concept was inherently flawed. Of course they were human. But he had forgotten, or been numbed to it. To all the death and violence. But now he couldn't turn away. The man had cried for a handful of minutes, then he'd made a phone call. And Graham had been able to do nothing. He sat on the floor, behind the desk, pain pulsing through him, unable to avoid the sobs, and the conversation.

“Taylor. Jesus Christ... No, no, I'm okay, I'm okay. I'm at the hospital. I just... There's hundreds of them... I don't know, I don't know. But... god, I can't breathe. I can't breathe... You know I can't come home... Just stay inside, okay? The cops keep telling everyone to stay here if they can. To just stay inside. That they're still out there. So promise me you won't go anywhere... Yeah, get him, and just stay inside. Please... These guys said they're going to hurt more people. That they've got another bomb. Something about some tweet or blog post... I'll be safe here. But you stay in... I love you too... I love you so much.”

There had been more, the man sucking words through his racked chest. And anger had returned to Graham. A wild anger. He hadn't known about the threat. He had assumed it was over, that the men had set the bomb and fled.

His eyes adjusted. The download had completed. He should go. But he opened a new tab. He didn't trust the news media, so he went to Reddit. The story was the first thread. Thousands of people were weighing in. He started from the top, the three men, at

least one of them Arab, two of them walked into the mall with backpacks, baseball hats, did a loop of the shops, and stopped to watch the children's Christmas play. Each man dropped his bag, the shooting started, the bombs exploded, they ran from the building. In the parking lot they exchanged fire with police officers, killed one, wounded the other. Then a man, a civilian, a vet, was able to kill one of the men. Then the civilian was killed. The other two fled in a car of unknown make and model.

Then, people found the tweets. A series of them, mostly incoherent, drug induced it seemed, but promising to alter the skyline of the city, promising not to stop until they were dead and they had taken as many Americans with them as they could.

Graham read through all of it, standing hunched over the computer. Someone could walk in on him at any second, but he didn't care.

The civilian, the vet, the hero, was Tom.

Graham logged into a dummy email account he'd set up a while ago, one of dozens he regularly created to prevent anyone from picking up more than one breadcrumb. He punched in an address for Walt, one that would forward and ping his primary account. It was risky and he couldn't help but remember that his keystrokes were being recorded. But he needed to leave and he couldn't think of any other way to get out and get across town.

The city, he'd learned from the thread, was under lock down. A curfew had been placed upon residents and businesses. Only absolutely necessary travel was allowed. Roadblocks had been set at major intersections. A noose was being knotted around downtown, and it would be tightening all night until the remaining attackers were

captured. Buses and trains were shut down, shops closed, Christmas, for all intents and purposes, was shuttered.

Graham couldn't help but feel like these men were winning; despite all his anger, he was afraid.

W,

Emergency. meet on clarkson & 19 asafp. Bring comps, antenna, wolfhound.

G

He tried to say as little as he could. Every word was fucking up his ability to hack the hospital to forge scrips. With Walter's help it might still be possible, maybe if they could remotely erase this computers memory, burn the keystroke log and his stupid footprints. Because with forged scrips they could easily make a couple grand.

But he realized, standing in the dark room, the computer turning itself to sleep, that he didn't care about the money. His brain was humming with what he knew he was about to do. He had power. He had the ability to find people with the internet. If the police could not find these terrorists, these murderers. He was certain that he could. He would find them and stop them.

He wouldn't let them kill anyone else.

Graham slipped from the break room. The hallway was chaotic. Nothing had gotten better. There were more bodies, more people milling and running back and forth, from room to room. He was exhausted. At a nurses station he found a case of water and

he took two of the chalky pills Dr. Wright had given him. People whirred around him. He glanced at the TV, straining his eyes to read the text, and finding those last words again: *on the loose*. Two of them. And his mind was made up. The notion was vague—his thoughts were clouded and distant, and he had to reach for each one—but simple. He had power and he would use it.

A pulse built near the back of his skull. Graham felt the world beneath him shift like a boat in a squall. His vision rocked. It was not the existence of pain, but the threshold; a warning. In his chest there was the tense anticipation for more of the knife-sharp cuts that had run across his nerves. He was afraid.

What could he really do anyways? He could barely think. How could he do anything on his computer without being able to think straight?

A door opened across the hall and a bed was wheeled out by several nurses. Their movements were exact, practiced, but still fraying, out of step. A sheet had been pulled up over the lumpy form of a still-writhing body.

Again he heard the cries. He looked at the faces of the other patients around him and watched their emptiness. They were zombies. They would do nothing. They were overtaken by their pain, their collective misery. They were paralyzed and they would stay that way. They believed themselves powerless to fend off the grotesque violence of the world—such a dirty business should be done by others, behind locked doors. They were powerless. They were weak.

He had to help. He had to do something.

The disorder churned around him. He didn't know the way out. But he couldn't just wander. There were cops everywhere taking statements. No one was to leave, not unless absolutely necessary. The city was locked down.

When an older male doctor passed by the station, his nose down to a clipboard, Graham fell in behind him, walking close enough that it looked intentional, like he was being escorted.

Graham struggled to keep up, his focus set on placing one impossible foot in front of the other. He picked out a seam in the tiles and urged his feet to balance on it. But the ground seemed to skip and drop. Several times he stumbled painfully. Acidic bile rose in his throat.

He tried to watch for Dr. Wight. He felt eyes slither across his back, he waited to be stopped. He passed two police officers questioning a young woman who held a palm to a bandage wrapped tightly around her head, stained a dirty color. The officer not taking notes kept his hand rested on the handle of his gun. Everyone was shaking.

Or maybe only Graham.

As he neared the end of the hall he spotted another officer speaking to a couple in front of the elevators, a hand held out firmly before her. Twice the couple, leaning heavily onto each other, attempted to step around the officer and twice she placed herself between them and the elevators. "I'm sorry," she was saying, over and over. Their voices rose. Finally the husband lowered his shoulder. The officer responded in kind, separating the couple and bringing the man quickly to his knees, wrenching his wrist. His wife shouted.

"We just need to find our son!" she cried.

On his knees the man shrunk and grew calm.

“Ma’am, please...” the officer said, never meeting the woman’s look, never even raising her eyes from the floor. She whispered something else that sounded like, “I’m so sorry.”

The officer looked up as Graham and the doctor approached.

At the elevators the doctor punched the down button and looked sheepishly to the officer. But again she was distracted with the couple, the three of them looking incredibly fragile. Graham stepped past the doctor, without breaking stride, and pushed into the stairwell, taking the stairs as quickly as he could, down, down, down.

For the first time in what seemed like hours there was silence.

Hacker

I leave the light on when I sleep. The small overhead lamp that shines into my eyes. Blue behind my lids. If I wake in the dark I am there. The room. The concrete and damp. The windowless. Alone. My chest on fire.

I've been out of prison for a month but it's only gotten worse.

We tried doctors and therapy and sunlight and music and pills. Only the pills did anything. And they only helped me sleep. I cycled through anxiety meds, depression meds, antipsychotic meds. They were worms in my brain. They tore me up. But soon I got a dose of sleeping pills that kept me under, strong enough to bring darkness and nothing else, something empty and deathlike.

But this flight is more than I anticipated, longer and more confined. And, with the cabin lights dimmed, everyone else falling comatose, I feel the muscles inside me rage, a wolf trapped inside a canvas bag, and I am terrified. Sleep won't come and I'm afraid of too many pills so I try to watch an inflight movie, I try to read a mindless magazine. I pace the aisles until they ask me to sit down. I count to a thousand. Two thousand. Finally, I give, route a circuit board in my head, lay the solder, plant the fuses, build something that would hum with perfection. I write strings of code three hundred characters long, algorithms to calculate the odds of my death in a plane crash, based on the ratio of crashes per take off, the number of deaths per crash, the most dangerous routes, the weather, the season, the temperature, 22-year-old women skipping bail, abandoning family, wanted cyberterrorists buried at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.



We're on our final decent. From my window I watch the wing flutter in slow motion, cut between the clouds and rain, peel open the grey world beyond.

I picked Paris because of an anarchist chick I used to date.

I'm shaking, my knuckles are white. The man who has sat quietly beside me for seven hours looks at my hands and up at me. He is in his 30s and unremarkable in everyway. There is no life I can imagine wanting more than his right now. He has a soft smile, his cheeks saggy and too red.

He says, *I sailed it once with my dad. Across the Atlantic. From Nova Scotia to Spain. I thought I loved sailing before then. Sailed my whole life up to that point and then never again.*

It's not that I don't think. I think. I'm still in here, inside this shell, this hurt. Not all together. But still here.

I smile at him.

He looks down at his palms and remembers something, some feeling, that feels worlds away from possible.

*What I mean, he says, is be grateful you flew. No matter how much you hate flying.*

I want to tell him, *thank you. Leave me alone.* He pulls a small leather bag from under the seat before him, rustles through it. It is dark beyond the window. His pants swish against my leg. There is more to say about flying, about Paris. About the future.

But I just stare at him. I stare until his face turns ugly and he looks away, at all the other women on this flight who are not me.

*This isn't who I am, I say.*

He looks back towards me. *Okay, he says, I know. Sure.*

Sure.

There is a sudden jolt and I inhale sharply. Outside the tarmac rushes past. The brakes engage, and together we shutter and slow.

He pulls out his phone and powers it up. The blue light splashes across his face. I can't resist peering over his shoulder. Still. I spent ten months without seeing a single screen. I had withdrawals. And when I got out, one of the many terms of my bail was zero tech. If they caught me online, even so much as picking out a waffle recipe, I'd be fucked. So, I obeyed. All but once.

Not that it matters now.

He scrolls through texts. Checks his email. Facebook. Twitter. Fires off messages. The phone vibrates repeatedly as notifications that have sat stagnate in the ether of the net are rerouted home. I catch glimpses of a woman. Of a dog. A sunset somewhere flat. He checks his calendar. What he has is mundane. His life is capitalistic. Wealth and work equals happiness. He will never know anything meaningful. But he will always have so much more than me.

I am certain I'd do anything for his life.

Outside, I can see glimmers of dotted lights somewhere far off. When Alex wound up in Paris I was shocked. We hadn't talked in months, not since I'd ended it, when I opened up Facebook and felt the urge to track her down. I hadn't even known she'd left. At first there was the pang, the regret that I'd let her flee, her beautiful, scrunched face in such a foreign place. Then the guilt that maybe she had fled me. Finally the shock that she'd picked Paris. The un-shaved, tattooed, anarco-punk who lived and

died by her principals, who taught me how to fuck and fight—the burning warmth of lust in a string of forgettable, un-shaved men—going soft and cliché.

Some nights I can still feel her hands.

She doesn't know I am coming. And I don't expect her to be happy. I don't know what I expect. What I know is she came here, running from something, for some reason. And I think I'm looking for something similar: to not kill myself.

The plane zags through the rain and rolls to a gentle stop at our gate. Mist collects on my window. I want to think something meaningful. I want to feel something solid. Everybody stands at once and I fight the urge to panic. But panic is less of an urge, more of a wild beast, a wolf, a predator. Once it has been unleashed inside of you, there is little you can do to control it. Either you kill it. Or it consumes you.

## Martyr

Shaheed studied the wretched palms of blood he'd left on the wall. The paint was sagging and chipped all along the hallway, now, as he stepped back there were two dark prints, the lines and folds of his identity dangerously

He had been promised death.

And now he was more exhausted than ever, more than his lowest days over the past year. He looked down at the gun. It could be easy that way. But still, like always, there was The Dread. He was a coward. So weak he had been pushed here. To this abandoned house to watch his brother bleed out.

It was almost as though he had watched his life crumble from afar, as though he could see himself drifting off into the abyss. Steadily his thoughts had grown cold and submerged. Until it was a battle to even think clearly. Then one day in the spring he couldn't get out of bed. It was a cloudy morning, class started soon, he'd failed again to finish his homework, to study, to do much of anything. And now he couldn't move. His limbs all dead weight. All day he laid and stared through the rivets of blinds into the folds of the clouds, listening to the sound of his breath, thinking nothing, feeling nothing.

The next day he went to class. Life resumed some. He sat through chemistry and calc two and everything else, the lecture halls booming, people skittering between buildings, his mind fogged, dull. But now, worse, he could feel it. The pressures of his anger, that ripe and bile disease, flooding his limbs so that every morning it was a battle to roll his body from the mattress to the floor. So that instead he lay, for hours, whole

days, looking at the white teeth paint of his ceiling, hearing nothing, not the traffic along Evans or the buzz of his phone. Just wishing an overness. To be able to be done.

Soon, death crept into his head. But he fought it off for days. He did not want to die, not then. But, the more he considered it, as the spring semester rubbed away, the more the idea warmed. The paradox confounded him. Made him only angrier.

He kept the window shaded. He let his phone die. He missed a week worth of school. He willed himself to be still. To stay curled in bed forever. To not eat. Not drink. To soil himself. He made it a day without food. But he was unsure how long it would take to die. In the bathroom there was a razor. Somewhere, in an overnight bag there were sleeping pills. He could buy a gun. He could wander into traffic. Leap from the roof of the Memorial Union. But these options meant rising from bed, moving, taking action. So he laid. His eyes dried out. His head ached. But he hardly felt it. What he felt was Emily. Her hair. Her hands. The way she no longer looked at him. The way she stopped calling. The way no one called but his brother. The way he was worthless.

Finally, in the second day, he pissed himself. The release was unnatural. Everything in his body fought against him. The warmth spread quickly between his thighs and pooled in the bed beneath him. The smell was ammonia. Dehydration. The wet cooled. The smell worsened. He was disgusting. A stain. More than ever he wanted to die. Because he could feel this. Because he could feel nothing else. Because he couldn't bring himself to do it. His pity became unbearable. He pulled himself from the bed. His limbs shaky. Walking to the bathroom, dripping, he was humiliated. He could do nothing. Not even die.

“Shaheed.”

He looked up. He was still standing in the hallway of the house. A dark river of blood had run from one of the palm prints nearly to the baseboard. Somewhere in the back of his mind was a pain, an ache.

He stooped and lifted the gun from the floor. He could free himself.

“Shaheed.” Hussein said again. He was propped against the kitchen counter, his head rolled awkwardly to look at Shaheed. His face was scrunched tightly in agony. More blood had pooled on the floor beneath him.

It was painful to see Hussein this way. His brother’s power, his strength, robbed, his fragility splayed open to the world. On his face were traces of gore, where he’d run a hand over his eyes. In his hair too. The morphine had quieted his howling.

“It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” Hussein pushed himself up further with his good arm, readjusting against the cabinets. His 9mm lay beside him, the handle colored dark. “We did a beautiful thing there, brother.”

Phisher

Graham pushed out of the stairwell and they were there, waiting for the elevator in their blue windbreakers, the yellow lettering, the badges around their necks.

He felt his heart lunge. Fuck. A year's worth of anxiety pricked into a single breath.

The door clacked shut behind him. The ground floor was just as busy as the fifth. Phones rang. People shouted, wailed. A trace of blood ran across the floor as far as Graham could see.

One of the agents looked to him.

“You doing okay, sir?”

There were six of them.

The man closest took a step toward him. “You look like you're going to pass out, kid.”

Beneath their jackets Graham spotted bulging outlines, the way their hips set as though succumbing to the weight. The agent held out a hand towards Graham, as though he would catch him if he fell.

Graham felt his mind steady. The morphine was wetting his brain. Slowing everything. But he fought it. He could do this. He nodded. And realized, then, that he could use this man.

“Do you have a phone I could borrow?” Graham asked.

The man cocked his head.

“I spoke to the officers on five and gave my statement. They asked for my phone and I didn’t think. I just gave it to them. But I need to call my mom. She has no idea where I am.”

“Sorry kid,” the man said, turning away.

“You don’t get it. I came down here looking for a payphone. They took everyone’s phones up there. And I can’t use the landlines, the doctors need them.”

The man held up his hand to stop Graham. The elevator doors had ticked open and the agents were filing in.

Then Graham said it, “I need to tell her my brothers dead.” It almost felt like a lie. He would have said it even if it wasn’t true, and he would have tried to cry all the same.

“I’m sorry kid, I don’t have time.”

“Let me just text her then. Tell her I’m okay.” He was crying. Not horribly. But the tears were hot on his cheeks.

The man took a deep breath. The others were waiting inside the elevator, one was holding the door. “Shit. Okay,” he murmured. He turned to the others, “Go up without me. I’ll meet you up there.”

He fished the phone from his pocket and passed it to Graham. But he made no move to give him any space.

With only one hand, Graham couldn’t be quick. Not like he liked at least. He had no intention of texting his mother. But he could still feel the anguish. She would be devastated.

He opened the browser.

The agent peered over the screen. “What are you doing?”



Graham didn't look up. "I don't remember her phone number. I'm going to email her. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

The agent rested his hands on hips and stepped back. He glanced down at his watch. "Shit," he muttered again. Then, finally, turned and looked up toward the TV.

Graham typed in the truncated url he'd created for Pastbin page where the RAT waited. He clicked download. The computer upstairs and the cellphone were entirely different operating systems, but it didn't matter. The RAT was designed only to open a door for Graham and Walter. From there Walter would write the code they'd need to hack the scrips or crack the FBI server.

Graham hadn't planned on hacking the FBI, but, like upstairs, the opportunity had arose, and he would need all the information he could get if he wanted to find the men who killed his brother. The file downloaded quickly, faster than it had on the PC upstairs. He closed the tabs and the browser and handed it back to the agent, said thanks, and turned down the hallway. He half expected the man to stop him, to tell him he couldn't leave. He expected an arm to reach from the darkness in his periphery and snag him. He expected to be caught. But he kept his eyes straight ahead, forced one foot after another. The florescent lights ticked past, the double doors beneath the exit sign came and went, and the blizzard beyond swallowed him whole.

Hacker

The sky is bleak. Clouds sit low and heavy with rain. Wind plows through the narrow streets, shaking branches and shutters. Bottles click together in the gutter. The sun never really rose. The world just got lighter. I shivered on the first train and then the second and surfaced Colonel Fabien to grey and colorless city.

I have Alex's address in my pocket, but I feel guilty showing up so early in the morning. So I walk circles around her neighborhood looking for an open café to warm my hands.

Mostly though, I feel like the world has ended. Cars hum past every few minutes, but there is no one on the street. Down certain alleys there are the shapes of men, forgotten and curled into themselves like children aching for a womb. The shuddering shapes of wolves.

It's almost December, it's almost been a year.

Near a park I find a bench and sit. I rest my bag beside me. It is light, stuffed with some old clothes and the handful of things I could imagine needing. Prison changes your perception of need. Of want. Of everything and self.

I pull my hood up over my head and tap a hit of morphine onto the spine of my thumb. I always expect it to burn, but instead I feel it instantly. What they wouldn't prescribe was painkillers.

Across the street, I watch two cats fight over a kill. From here they are silent, their bodies all jerks, swishes of the dark aggression I know so well. If they were closer I would tell them I know their hunger. I would buy them great bags of cat food and let

them live beneath my porch. Or I would kill them both. Give them what they don't know they want. Let it end.

Soon enough though the meal is torn in two and both cats disappear noiselessly into the damp brush of the park.

I fish the flash drives from my pocket and lay them out over my leg. Somewhere a dog barks. Then another. There is no limit to what can be forgotten. None of the three particularly full. Still, I can feel their danger weighing into my numb thigh. Whole lives broken down to an inch of solder and circuit board, fifteen gigabytes of existence.

In an hour I will knock on Alex's door. Her building is just down the block, one of the hundred identical buildings. I pull out the small journal I bought at the airport in New York. So far the only thing I have written are the foreign digits of her address on the first page. I found her small apartment online; my last hack, the only time I have been online in the past year. I also found her new haircut, her new tattoos, her job, her friends and bank balance, the nudes, her cell number, her debt, all that money never paid, not a penny, to the insurance companies back home, her lack of visa.

Her grey building looks like every other building I've seen in north Paris. Her street like every other street. At the door I hesitate. There is no name beside her flat number. Fear flickers in the corners of my mind and I glance over my shoulder. I expect them to be there at any moment. All those men in suits, ready to take me back.

I expect them even though I was careful. Because what I have learned is they have no limit. My power exists only online. Theirs exists everywhere. They can twist any arm

they need. If they can't find you on the net, they'll go state-by-state. Break down lists of every hacker whose ever crossed their path. They will stop at nothing.

Not that they even needed to do that with me. They were able to find me the first time because I was stupid and thoughtless. As soon as it was over, as soon as the smoke cleared in Denver I knew they were coming for me.

When I ring Alex's bell it is because I can feel them there, somewhere hidden down the block. Their dark suits. Their guns. I can feel them coming for me. The button makes no noise. I expect Alex's voice, but instead the door buzzes and I push through it reflexively.

The entry way is narrow and in need of renovation. I climb the stairs one at a time and each moans with age. I grew up in Missouri. Life there is full of groaning wood, but nothing so old as this. What is an aged building, but one we just haven't destroyed yet. It is not so amazing that this city existed, but that any of it is still exists. For centuries the world has done nothing but build the capacity to destroy; to control, to suppress. That is the progression of capitalism.

At her door on the third floor I hear music. An inaudible hum, a sizzle. I knock and there is a pause, somehow. But the door doesn't open. I knock again. And after a moment I hear the locks. Then, her face. Peeking around the door. There, in the small opening, a rush of warmth. I adjust the bag on my shoulders. I feel dwarfed by it as my muscles ripple down my limbs.

For a moment, a fraction of a second, there is nothing in her eyes, they are clear and light, her face is calm, relaxed, smooth and unchanged from that last moment of memory. Then, quickly, there is recognition and surprise. Her eyes go wide. Creases rack

her brow. She says nothing, makes a sound, and leaves her mouth open. The door creaks further.

*You buzzed me up.*

Her eyes run me over, a hand pressed over her chest. *I thought you were my neighbor. She always forgets her keys.*

*You shouldn't be so trusting.*

She shifts her weight to her hip. Now I can see how different she looks from when I last saw her. Nearly two years ago, getting wrecked at a basement show. It's almost too obvious, how much has changed.

*There's nothing to be afraid of here.* She puts her weight on the last word.

*How's that worked out for you so far?*

She kicks open the door with her foot and steps aside. *It was working great.*

## Martyr

Shaheed closed the door, silencing the wind, the storm, and slid the improvised deadbolt into place. He lifted Hussein and carried him to the second floor. In the bathroom there they had hidden a small pack. Three changes of clothes. Three jackets. Protein bars. A first aid kit. More morphine and adrenaline. An electric razor. Hair dye. A sawed off double barrel shotgun that had been Omar's father's, with 20 shells.

Shaheed dumped the contents onto the floor of an empty bedroom. The air was stale and musty, the sockets torn from the walls, the fixtures stripped, a home foreclosed and forgotten.

Shaheed wanted nothing to do with this. He cared nothing for cutting his hair, shaving his beard, changing his clothes, the way he looked. The idea, he knew, was to continue. Survive until morning. Until the sun rose on Christmas. Their goal was to make a record. A full on assault of the city. Their goal was to die in jihad. Though Shaheed did not know for what. Or against whom. Their mother was Iraqi, but they had not been raised Muslim after she vanished. And Shaheed had never read the Koran. Nor did he understand jihad.

But he knew hate.

He knew that for so long the world had been broken, unchangeable. But now, finally, there was a war. A battle for the fate of humanity. He sat for whole nights while Hussein and Omar talked it through. There was a rot at the core and they were going to cut it out.

With a knife fished from his pocket he tore the seams of Hussein's shirt. He was unprepared for the gore. The wound was a mess of blood. Unfathomable amounts. There should be pressure, he knew. Then stitches. Then he, he was certain, in order for Hussein to survive he would need more blood.

Hussein's head lulled, empty. His eyes open but incomprehensively vast. Scattered on the floor was an assortment of epipens. Soon he would have to read their tiny labels and jab his brother with what he needed to survive for another few hours.

Shaheed looked down at his small watch. The face was smeared with blood. He wiped it clean and read the time. It was late afternoon, soon it would be dark, but they had to wait the whole night, survive until dawn.

In the back of his mind he heard Omar telling him to let Hussein die. *Cull the weak. The strong must do what is necessary.* They had all planned to die. And Shaheed had wanted to. More than the others, he was certain. But now, suddenly, crouching in the after of their violence, with Omar already dead, he wasn't ready to let his brother die.

Without Hussein, Shaheed was certain he would fail their mission. He couldn't do it on his own.

He took the bloody belt from the floor and the cut his soiled shirt, fashioned a tourniquet. He pulled it as tight as he could. The blood squished out across Hussein's chest. As he pulled Hussein woke from his emptiness. Pressed back against the wall, let out a small, sick groan.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, though Hussein did not seem to hear.

Shaheed crossed the room and tore open a case of water they had left earlier in the week, with the rest of their supplies. He used a bottle to rinse his hands in the sink,

scrubbing as much blood from them as he could. He drank one and took another to Hussein with an energy bar, but he only held them in his loose grip.

Shaheed ate half an energy bar, careful of the blood still caked in the patterns of his hands, the taste ashen, empty.

Then, he took the sheers from the floor. First he cut the mop of hair his brother had collected. Taking handfuls of it and jerkily slicing them free. Before his eyes his brother grew old. His face, forehead uncovered, grew deep, bottomless lines. He let the hair fall across them, rubbing the clumps away with his hand, strands collecting in the sticky blood.

In the distance there was the sound of sirens. He couldn't tell if they were new or if they'd always been there. Closer he heard the sudden crack of a gun, then another, and another before he realized they were fireworks, harmless bursts of light.

While he worked changing Hussein's appearance he said nothing. And his brother was quiet too, rolling his head to help Shaheed reach this side and that.

The beard went next. Hussein's eyes followed Shaheed as he worked. He held his brother's chin in his hand, rocking it from side to side. Hair collected everywhere, he rubbed it accidentally into his eye. An ungodly mess. The trimmer only got so close; a dark and menacing stubble still shadowed Hussein's face. Shaheed sat back on his haunches and stared at his brother. His hair was light when it was long, a trait taken from a father they never knew, but when it was cut short there was a darkness from their mother. Shaheed took a towel from the bag and wiped carefully at his brother. He had aged decades. He looked battered and angry. There was a lost look in his eyes. Shaheed



couldn't help but think that he now looked like the murderer the world would expect:  
dark and furious.

Shaheed frowned; he would die that way.

In the bathroom, before the sullied mirror he cracked open a water and drank half and poured the rest over his head. The dye was subtle. Maybe too much so. Unlike his brother, Shaheed had dark hair already. The hair dye was violently blonde according to the box, but as he washed it out of his hair with bottle after bottle of water, it grew soft, a strawberry color. It made him look young. And he looked younger still when he shaved his scraggly beard—the beard he'd been growing to follow Wahhabi, the beard he was never supposed to shave, under penalty of death.

He looked down at the burner phone he left resting on the sink. There was only one number programmed into the phone. It would be easy to dial it now. It was a matter of buttons. The world would change again. America would bruise and bleed like it had only once in recent memory.

He knew it wasn't what he wanted. Not really. But he didn't care. Not about the people who would die; towards them he was ambivalent. What he cared about was Hussein. He would do anything for his brother.

And what did killing matter when life was worthless?

But in truth he was painfully exhausted. And all he'd done so far was drive the getaway care. But still the adrenaline had destroyed him. Ravaged his body in a matter of minutes, like a hurricane he had never known before, a war inside his limbs. It was strangely beautiful to know his body this way. What it could accomplish when pushed.

He slipped the small phone into his pocket and grabbed a fresh shirt.

They would wait. So long as Hussein was alive Shaheed would wait. Their plan was to wait until Christmas morning. Eight A.M. A thousand families eating breakfast, sitting around trees, opening presents, laughing, being rich and white and American.

Somewhere deep inside the thought of it made him sick. But, he looked back to his brother, crumpled against the wall with his 9mm in his hand. Hussein had given him this chance. How could he say no now? He wanted this death. But The Dread had kept him from it. How could he turn down this opportunity?

In the dank bedroom he opened the closet. On the hangers hung three black vests, strapped with bulky bricks, bright wires. It felt stupid, trying to save his brother for now just so he could die later. But he knew he had to. First he would need to find blood. Find help. Then, together they could have their peace.

To move his brother and get the care he would need, Shaheed would have to wait until nightfall. Which meant for now, they would wait.

He slid one vest to the far end of the rack, and one by one, carried the other two to the bare mattress beside his brother.

Phisher

Graham watched the red and blue lights from the hospital streak and ricochet brilliantly off the snow and into the night. He stood shivering in the cold on the corner of the empty street. The silence was immense. But beneath the quiet he could hear sirens, what sounded like a hundreds of them, blaring in the distances. Further, there was the thump of helicopters. In a way it was beautiful; the brightness, the impossibility of it all. In a way.

Then, closer, he heard the sudden clap of fireworks, kids taking part in the chaos.

He stood beneath a tree, his arm braced beneath his thin sweater, shivering. The snow was getting deeper by the minute. He stomped flat the powder where he stood. The morphine split his body in two, his head from his shoulders, severed the connections between mind and limb, so that every movement felt delayed and distant.

After a quarter of an hour a car turned on to 19<sup>th</sup> several blocks away. His first instinct was to run. But he'd seen only two other cars. He was certain this would be Walter in his rusted Volvo. It had to be. So he waited as the car drew slowly near, tires crunching in the stiff snow. When it was a block away he finally picked out the black and white paint job as it passed beneath a streetlamp. And at the same moment a light splashed over him blindly. He covered his eyes with his hand. Fighting the urge to run. Why run? What had he done wrong.

The siren lights blipped silently into the night, urging him to stay put.

He had illegally flee the hospital. Hacked a hospital and a federal agency.

The squad car rolled to a stop before him, his body still in its spotlight. The window lowered. “Show me your face,” a voice demanded.

He let his hand fall and stared directly into the light, colors bubbling at the corners of his vision. He was angry and high. But all he could think of was the murderers, the men who had killed his brother, so many others, and were planning so much worse.

He stared into the spotlight and pictured them warm and comfortable, waiting to strike again.

“What are you doing out here?”

The voice was a man’s, deep and grated.

“I came from the hospital.”

“They’re not discharging anyone from there. The city is on lockdown—”

“I know, but my grandma is sick, I live with her and she needs her meds and I’m just trying to get home.”

He couldn’t even tell how many officers were in the car. The light stayed trained on his face, blinding him.

“The fuck are you doing standing out here then?”

Graham was suddenly cornered.

“I... I was just waiting for the bus.”

“No fucking bus tonight.”

“Really? Shit.” Graham played stupid.

“Listen, kid. Get off the streets, okay? I don’t care how far your grandma’s house is or how you get there, but the whole metro area is on lockdown. We’re arresting anyone outdoors until we can figure what in the holy fuck is going on. Okay?”

“Okay,” Graham said. “I will. I promise.”

“If I see you again...” the voice trailed off and then the light flicked off too. The darkness was sudden and instant.

Graham blinked it away and rubbed his eyes with his hand. The sound of tires gripping road, the form of the car lurching from sight.

He had wanted to run, but not out of fear, at least not for his life. The fear he did feel was distant, and it was the fear that if he was arrested he could do nothing. But that sort of fear is not real fear. Real fear is fear of death. And for the first time, as close as it was, he could find it nowhere. It was a sensation that set him free.

But beneath it all there was adrenaline and he settled with that.

After the brush with the cop, Graham retreated to the dark alley between buildings, beneath a busted out lamp, waiting for the glow of headlights. Finally Walter came. He drove recklessly, careening through the drifted snow and stopping suddenly at the curb before the empty corner.

Graham stepped out of the alley and jogged to the car.

“What the fuck, Graham,” Walter said as soon as he opened the door. “Get in.”

Gently Graham pulled himself into the seat and shut the door.

The heat wrapped over his cold limbs and for a time he sat unmoving, simply willing his body to warm. Simply grateful. Though he could tell Walter was riled up.

“I was searched twice on the way over here. They have checkpoints set up all over the whole city—they’re broadcasting them on the radio, man. What the hell I’m doing here? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to pick you, guy, but what the fuck.” Then, all at once, he saw the cast. “Jesus, man. Are you all right??”

“I need your help,” Graham said.

“Seriously, what happened to your arm?” He flipped on the cab light. “And your face?”

“I need to get online. Where can we go?”

“You sound crazy man, look at yourself. I’m taking you to the hospital. Your face is all fucked up.”

Graham had no patience. “I know, alright, so shut up. What I need from you is to get online.”

“You sound insane, man.”

“Please.”

“Okay, let’s get home then, back to the dorms. How about that?”

“No,” Graham snapped. “We need to stay close.”

“The dorms aren’t far.”

“We need to stay near downtown. We need to find them.”

“Seriously are you okay, guy?”

“I’m fine, Walt. I just need to get online.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I’m not doing it. You look half dead. You look sick. I’m taking you home. Besides I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Did you hit your fucking head?”

“Goddamnit,” Graham spat. “Take me to your sisters place. That’s close by, right? Take me there so I can get the fuck online. Okay?” Graham exhaled. The pain was welling in his shoulder, the nobs punching into his neck, his face, his mind. “Drive.”

Walter stared at him hard. Anger on his face. He was not one to give in easily. But still, he shifted the car into gear.

Graham watched Walt grind his teeth, spin the wheel. They'd known each other for a little over a year, fallen together quick. Their obsession with the darker sides of the internet setting the generous groundwork for their friendship. Though their skills were nowhere near equal.

Walter cracked, weak at the knees for his friends. "You fucking scriptkiddie. It's almost midnight. And even I'm afraid of my sister so you and that cast will be doing the talking."

"Just drive."

Silence settled over the car and the hum of aging tires. The flecks of snow glinting in the headlights.

Walt eyed Graham, his back hunched over the wheel.

"Does it hurt?"

"Of course it fucking hurts."

"They give you pills."

Graham nodded, not caring if his friend could see his response.

Then, quietly, Walter said, "So you were there?"

Graham set his jaw. Atoms were splitting inside him, going nuclear, reshaping the core of his being, recoding his DNA.

Walt opened his mouth but said nothing, nodded once. And silence hung for some time.

"We have power, Walt. We have the power to do something."

“What are you talking about?”

“We have the internet, man. We can find them.”

“Are you nuts?”

“These *terrorists*. They deserve to be caught. To be stopped.”

“You mean with this?” Walter gestured to the emptiness before the car. “What the fuck power do we have? Every law enforcement agency in the country is working on this. And what do you mean *we*?”

“We find them.”

“You mean *I* find them? But I’ll ignore that for now, I’ll humor you. Let’s say *I* find them, then what? These assholes have guns and bombs.”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a pretty big thing not to know.”

“We have to try. We’ve done it before.”

“You’re simplifying it immensely, guy.”

Graham shifted in his seat to face Walter. The fracture in his collarbone biting electrically into his chest, the pain sweeping across his face. “What’s the worst that can happen if we try?”

Walter shrugged. “We find them and they shoot us in the head. Or blow us up. They kill us and a thousand other people.”

Each breath brought Graham a sharp kick, a resnapping of the bone.

“We have *power*,” he said again quietly.

For a moment the boys sat motionless in the car at a redlight. Snow swirled around in the glow of the streetlamps. The solitude, the quiet, the dead of the normally



bustling street, kept the enormity of their particular trajectory at bay. There was a misunderstood sense of possibility that passed through the car like a bolt of electricity.

Walter shifted in his seat and gestured toward Graham's empty sleeve and the cast that lumped beneath his jacket. "Did they do *that*?"

"With their car," Graham said. "And..." every word he could find grew bitter and unspeakable, catching sickly in his throat.

Tom.

In the distance Graham spotted the chaotic bursts of blue and red. Though he felt nothing of the fear, he knew that this was a city in terror. The street before him was dark, every shop closed, every window black.

He remembered it was Christmas Eve.

He glanced at Walter, his clean shaven face, his beautiful bones glowing in the soft light. Walter was his only friend. The only person he felt had ever really understood him. More than his mother. More than Tom. Walter was his family.

"I've felt their violence," Graham said. "I know what they're capable of." And there was the promise of more. Endlessly more. He recognized in it an anger. The sort of anger that does not simply fade away, not in one outrageous burst, it remains, growing only greater even as the body begins to deflate around it, exhausted in its unwavering quest for the explosion of the horrid trapped at its core. They wouldn't stop. They were only catching their breath.

Hacker

Inside she is burning eggs. *I wasn't expecting you.*

I drop my bags in the hallway and she gestures for me to sit at her small table and lowers the volume on a small radio. There are only two chairs and the other is stacked with books and loose paper. In the opposite corner sits a bed, the sheets knotted, the mattress on the floor. The space is miniscule. The walls are tacked with photos. Clutter everywhere. Beneath all of it I can smell the scent of something eerily familiar: sweat and dried milk, a hint of old incense. A life I have nearly forgotten. Or one I've at least tried to forget.

*I can make more eggs, she says.*

I tell her no, but she insists and brings a cold mug from a shelf and fills it with hot coffee from a French press. In my hands the mug warms and I can feel it leech up my arms and into my chest. I realize I am shaking, my whole body.

In a way I am afraid to see her.

The last time there was rage.

While she cooks she is silent and I watch her move. The eggs from the cabinet, the butter from the counter. The pan sizzles loudly and she cracks a shell over its rim and splits it with ease. Here, in Paris, I know she is a chef again. The café is forgettable, just like all the ones in Columbia. But I know she'll say that it makes her happy, that it's what she loves.

When we were together, she would always be cooking; looking up recipes, preparing something for later, experimenting.

I trace her legs. The bare of them running from her shorts, the skin smooth, pale and splashed with dark tattoos, flowers and waves and text. Her arms too, are covered in wispy ink, the base of her neck even. Somewhere there was my name. On the inside of her knee in small type. A ring hangs from her septum. Her hair is cut sharply over her left eye and dyed deadly blonde. Her t-shirt is black and sleeveless, some band I've never heard of.

Suddenly there is the smell of food and a deep hunger. I haven't eaten since my layover in New York. I haven't been hungry. I've been too high, too anxious, too asleep.

There are things both of us could say. Questions linger in the room. Like why I am here. What I want. What I am expecting from her. How her new life is. If I have made a terrible mistake coming here.

By now the man from the plane, the unremarkable man, is probably at an office, surrounded by dozens of people who know his name, who know the names of his children and his wife, whose lives are all as equally vulnerable as mine—only they haven't been wrecked by this truth yet.

When the food is ready she brings two plates and clears the second chair and I don't help. Eggs steam before me on a bright ceramic plate. I have never cared for flavor. I love the smell, the varied richness of Alex's cooking. But for my whole life I've been happy to eat whatever. She couldn't stand it when we were together. She spent our brief few months determined to find something I cared to eat. But I never let her. Even the few things that I found a hint of enjoyment in chewing, I said nothing. By then, it was out of some sort of vapid spite.

*I won't ask how you found me,* she says after taking a bite.

I shrug and she fakes a grin. A part of me had thought that maybe one of us would be excited.

*You need to be more careful.*

*No, Knees, she says, you need to stop abusing my privacy.*

*I didn't come here to do this.*

*You've got no right to hack me.*

I barely hacked her. She changed her passwords once after she split, but never since then, and even those new ones were easy enough. An amateur could steal her life.

*You're vulnerable.*

*No one else cares about my shit, besides you.*

*Exactly, I say as she takes a bite, they don't give a fuck who are, but they'll steal every cent you have, they'll steal your IDs, destroy your credit, sell all those photos. They'll fuck you. And with an expired visa you'll be screwed. No way to get yourself righted again.*

Her face contorts. Her fork has stayed lofted between bites. Now she sets it down and pulls a pack of cigarettes from the windowsill. *Who told you about that?*

I shrug. She says, *Right. Yeah.*

She lights the cigarette and inhales. I hold my hand out for the pack. It's been nearly a year since I've even been able to smoke, but she sets it down on her side of the table and makes me reach.

*Why can't we just have some goddamn small talk, she says. Say stupid shit about the weather. About Columbia. About Paris.*

I look out the window. There is the street, the steely clouds, skeleton trees, a small shop across the street with blinking lights, the first signs of people. No sun, no color. I'm not in a hurry. I've got nowhere to be. There is a desperation that has been welling up in my chest for a year, a knife worming wildly inside of me. I avoid mirrors. And my mother. On Alex's wall there are photos of me. Of the dozens pinned everywhere, they were easy to spot. Those times.

I'm afraid that I'm not afraid anymore.

I'm afraid of how nice death sounds.

She runs a hand through her bleached hair and it falls perfectly back into place, curving around her cheek, framing her exasperated face.

*It's cold out.*

She takes another long drag. She humors me, *Not much snow though, not like home. And I like that.*

*Do you miss it?*

She nods and bites at a hangnail. Her hands are delicate, rippled with burns. *I miss some of those feelings. The good ones, I mean. Not the people, and not really anything else. But I think I miss the way I felt there.*

*Think you'll ever go back?*

I try to eat more of the eggs. There are peppers and onion, slivers of dried tomato, a slice of toast with peanut butter. I chew through it. Mostly I drink the coffee. Its warmth settles heavy in my stomach.

*If I do I think they'll arrest me.*

She doesn't elaborate and she doesn't need to. She knows what I can find. And she gives me a look that says she does. Not long after we stopped talking she got battered by a car while she was piss drunk and stumbling through the middle of the street. She was uninsured and her medical bills piled up until owed two hundred thousand dollars. Around then she disappeared. She kept a low profile, but even I knew she'd wound up in Paris. I couldn't quite sort why she picked Paris, but I do know she never extended her visa after the first three months and has been living under the radar ever since. It's a fine line to walk. And how I knew she would help.

I look at her arm. I can't remember which one it was. *How does it feel?*

What I heard was the whole thing was hanging on by nothing but tendons.

Absently she rolls her left shoulder. There is a lion there, in black ink, over her entire upper arm. Beneath the ink there are hints of scars, things she's long buried. Her cigarette is nearly gone. She takes a long drag and lights another. The smoke has pooled some and she cracks the window. I can feel the cold leach in.

*Are you going to blackmail me? You of all people should know I don't have money.*

I shake my head.

*What then? Don't fucking kid with me, Knees.* She points the ember of her cigarette at me. *I know you.*

Really, I thought I would be safe here. I thought she would see me and see something parallel. Something equally desperate. I thought I could unpack my meager bag and she would push aside her books and blankets and make space for me. I could find

work, doing something quiet, learn French, share her bed and her friends, weave myself back amongst the threads, disappear back into the subtle ocean of life. Just die.

Or maybe, I thought, she would pack her things and we would get my Bitcoin turned to cash and take a train somewhere I've never heard of and live quietly by a body of water, share a life. I thought I could be someone new, live one of the lives I never did, make choices I never made.

*I know what you did, she says. I watched all of it on the news. I remember, when they arrested you, I never thought 'no that's not right.' Immediately, it all just clicked into place.* She shakes her head, a dark smile on her lips. *Of course you would.*

My stomach sinks. What little appetite I had vanishes. Suddenly I'm afraid that she's going to turn on me. I came here, chose Paris, precisely because I thought she wouldn't.

I look straight at her. I want to look away, but I won't let myself. I imagined this moment everyday I was locked up. Staring at those grey walls. In the dark. I pictured this, her face, her eyes, and I stared, I longed for it. And now it's here. I've never told anyone I've loved them. Not really. I might have said it, but I never meant it like they did. Language is pathetic. Malleable, meaningless. You can say whatever you want and not mean a word of it. You can lie through your teeth your whole life. But code can't lie. It can pretend, it can try to look like something its not, but it can't lie: the truth is always there, buried somewhere in the darkest fissure. A binary. A yes or no. A one or zero.

Dead or alive.

I want to tell her it wasn't me. Not really. But it was. That I didn't do it. But I did. That I didn't mean to. But I did. That I thought it would end different. But I didn't even think.

I shrug and she lets out a sad, indignant laugh. *Why couldn't you just let me tell you the truth?* she says.

I don't understand.

*I would have told you eventually. Everything you found when you hacked me, if you just would have given it time, given me time, we could have gotten there. You could have...*

She trails off and slouches in her chair and stares off out the window.

I understand what this is about now. Why do people hold on to past so tightly?

She stopped talking because she knows she's wrong. What I can find in a dox is truer than any story or explanation. I know it, and she does to in a way. We could have spent our lives together and I wouldn't have learned those truths, not really, not all of them. I had her darkest, her worst, her every key stroke, her every search, every purchase and email and thought. Our hard drives record every secret we have. I had what she would never give and it destroyed us.

*That's not love, she says. That's not trust. It's,* she searches for the word. *It's you trying to control me. Trying to have all the power.*

I don't know what to say. Everything in my head is a lie.

Except that I am sorry.

I don't finish my eggs and I don't ask for help with my money and she doesn't try to make me stay. I try not to look at her, but it's hard, I see her, her whole body there,



shivering against the cold in that antique chair, battered and broken, riddled with scars, and stronger than I'll ever be.

I am tripping over my feet, my bag, falling into the door, out into the hallway, feeling her eyes racking over my back. Her voice calling out to me. Down the stairs, to the street. To the cold.

It's six block to the subway and two transfers to the Gare du Nord. I ask for the first ticket and hand over a fifth of the cash I've got left. The train lurches to life seconds after I find a seat. I don't know where I'm headed. I pull my bag to my chest and watch the pillars of the station whirl by, the lines of track coalesce, the buildings that all look the same begin to blur together, Paris fades to suburbs and slums, to grey, to nothing; green and flat and rain. I'm angry. And sorry. I shouldn't have gone to see Alex. I shouldn't have come to Paris. But for my mother I don't want this guilt to kill me.

Martyr

Hussein had not said a woman. But Shaheed kept waiting for one. There was the concern of strength. He was not as big as Hussein, as Omar. But he was certain that he could overpower a woman. A woman who would be less likely to fight. To submit herself to him.

He kept the gun tucked beneath his jacket. It's weight reassuring.

*You have power.*

After the sun had set a stiff cold had settled over the city. Snow drifted lazily and unending, collecting in the collar of his shirt. His muscles ached from squatting behind the car. He had been waiting a half hour and no one had come through the doors. Slowly, he stood and let the blood settle through his legs. He glanced around the vast parking lot. Even with the streetlights, the space was shrouded in darkness. As far as he could tell he was alone. Bouncing his weight from leg to leg, he rubbed a palm down his thighs, urging the blood to flow. The bulky, weighted vest, shifted awkwardly, making him feel constrained and clumsy.

There was a safety in the cold, the way it licked over his limbs. It kept him grounded, present, with his cuts and bruises, the uncomfortable caked blood, hiding out in a parking lot behind a hospital.

Streetlamps dotted the walk between the employee entrance and the lot. Their glow was dim, after a few feet fading into the gray of dark. Above, the clouds sat low and tumultuous, belly-heavy with the dull light ruddiness of the city.

He did his best to keep his body low, to stay invisible, between two parked cars. He shoved the gun and his hands into his jacket pockets, the cold numbing his face, his bare lips. His lips. Her lips. Emily. He kept thinking about her, well aware that she was a distraction to his cause, that he will never see her again. Not in this life.

Still, she came to him clearly. He'd come so close. Loved her so well. He'd taken care of her in this city so far from her home. He had held back her hair. Listened to her break over and again against the same cheap drugs, the same impossible men with their same hands and same bodies and same words and shifting faces. He'd tried to save her. There was a right way and a wrong, and she had wanted nothing but the excited, wherever it lay. But still, he'd held her hair back when she lived down the hall in the dorms. And after, when she had her own place and he had to walk 12 blocks to get there. The cold taking him there safely. It kept him from the truth. He was doing this because of her.

Wasn't he?

Because of the world that made her that way.

The one that made him worthless to her.

From where he stood he could see car they'd driven, parked in the darkest corner of the lot, where the street lamp had burned out. Hussein inside. Bleeding out his life. Dying in silence. It made him angry. It made him sick. The weakness of it all. He couldn't understand. They were martyrs and they had missed their chance to die right.

He waited. The cold frosting the insides of his nostrils, collecting on his eyelashes. The weight of the vest straining his tired legs.

He wanted to sleep. He could kill himself now. Here.

Then, a woman. Even in a heavy coat he could tell it was a woman, short and thin, by her gate, her hair. She waved over her shoulder as she spilled from the mouth of the glowing doors and looked up at the snow, making a beeline toward the parking lot through unshoveled snow. She was walking right towards him, her whole body like Emily.

He could swear it was Emily. But she wouldn't be here. Unless she'd been at the mall. But of course it wasn't her.

He pressed a hand to his head. He felt out of control. It made no sense. He needed to breathe and get power of his thoughts.

The woman was still far enough away. He fished inside his pocket for the small baggy. In the dark he couldn't see the browned powder, nor could he tell how much he scooped onto his finger. He snorted the substance, the explosion instantly behind his eyes, his whole body suddenly awake.

There were people in the distance, milling in the street across from the hospital, even though it was late and cold and the city had been locked down. He needed to take her without anyone seeing.

As she got closer, as the drug worked deeper into his mind, his limbs, he grew sure that he could take her. She would be easy to overpower. But he wouldn't need to. Not with the gun. He could see that her hair was blonde and pulled up into a ponytail. She had her hands in her pockets her shoulders hunched deep against the chill. She passed between the small shrubs lining the parking lot.

After passing several rows of cars, her head down, Shaheed set out to intercept her. She had begun to angle towards an unseen car. He tried not to look directly at her.

He adjusted his grip on the 9mm. But suddenly she stopped, standing between two cars. She looked at her feet. Shaheed froze and crouched low behind a SUV, feeling as though she had seen him, and sensed his truth. He could gun her down if she ran. Maybe escape again with Hussein. Maybe. Could they outrun the police a second time? Disappear again? If she ran now it might be over.

Shaheed peeked his head over the trunk of the car. The woman had leaned herself against one of the cars, her body arched over like she would vomit. The sobs were small at first. She began to sink. He could hear fragments of the affair. Finally, she was on her knees, her forehead pressed against the car. Another man would love this woman. Another man would comfort her. What place did love hold in the world? Did it even belong? He could grab her now. She would hear nothing over her sobs, would never see him coming.

He stood slowly.

He did not talk about Emily. Not even to Hussein, not since Omar had made them swear off women and grow out their beards. He'd known though that he would continue to see her and he did.

He did not tell Emily that he loved her. But he used the word when he thought of her. With her he was weak and submissive. He came when she called, left when she asked, brought her dinner and coffee, held back her hair. Who would ever understand? What could he do?

He could force her.

The thought had crossed his mind, those nights, when they sat in her bed, talking of the men who lied and pushed and won out, were given finally the sweetness she always claimed to refuse.

They were talking like they did, endlessly, about nothing. She made jokes at his expense like she did. He felt a puncture in his chest, but managed a laugh, managed to push the side of her face playfully away. She giggled and pushed back and he thought, for the first time of grabbing hold of her hair, forcing her down and open and for a second the thought did not sicken him. She didn't respect him.

But suddenly she stood, said, "I've got to pee."

As she climbed from the bed he could see the curve of her poke from her sheer shorts as she adjusted them. She did not bother closing the door and while she peed he touched himself and came quickly, his hand, hidden by the pile of blankets, still around himself when she reappeared, framed by the light in the doorway. Maybe that was the first time of true love. The shame. The hollow. The longing and sickness and anger. All swirling together behind his heart.

The blonde woman finally stood, her legs trembling, even from Shaheed's distance, and brushed the snow from the knees of her scrubs. She took one step and then another. Shaheed held his breath. He stood so close he thought he could smell her, but she didn't look over at him.

In the distance another group of bodies exited the door, the unfiltered light pouring over the glittering powder, their voices hurling noisily. If she even so much as saw him. If she screamed. He would be helpless.

She cut down the row towards him. It would make things easier, the closer she got.

He held the gun in his hand, his finger against the safety. This would be a turning point for him. Could he kill with intention? The idea of it felt ghostly and distant. His limbs felt foreign, unfriendly and unwelcome.

In the fall, after the first snow Shaheed had gone with Hussein and Omar to the mountains west of the city, to a place called Slaughter House—a place Omar had picked for its name alone. Omar had brought new targets. They had been practicing with the guns for weeks. But before, they had fired at red circles pinned to trees, at birds and squirrels.

“This is how they train marines. And cops in Florida.” Omar unrolled several enlarged photos while he walked to the pitted trees lining the opposite of the clearing. Hussein stood by Shaheed, loading rounds into a magazine, leaning against Omar’s truck bed. The smell of diesel and pine swirled in the air. A thin layer of frost crunched beneath their feet. The guns were laid out across a blanket, black and heavy.

One-by-one Omar hung out five photographs, glossy and sharp with color. They were people, some headshots, some wider, revealing more. There was a man in a suit, his phone pressed to his ear. A mother with a stroller. Two children holding hands. An elderly couple. A young girl in a green apron delicately holding sample bottles of something, her smile easy and inviting. They did not belong. Not amongst the trees of the forest.

It took Shaheed a while to realize what he recognized about the photos. Not until after Hussein had opened fire at the closest, the mother, slugs mushrooming into sappy

wood. They were from the mall, from Fashion Plaza. They were real people. Omar had taken their photos without them even knowing.

Omar and Hussein emptied hundreds of rounds, ripping the posters, the trees, to bits. Shaheed joined them, still enamored with the explosive power of the 9mm in his hands, the kick, the force of it. At first he didn't even aim at the people, just toward them. But soon, Omar goaded him, made a bet that he could not hit the man between the legs, made a joke of it, all of them shooting and laughing, drunk on the magnesium and violence.

After they stood in a small circle, their breath billowing between them, vanishing into the sharp light of morning. Omar held up a poster, a young man on a cell phone, his legs a blur of motion, his body shredded with bullet holes. "This here," he said tapping the corner of heavy paper with the barrel of his Beretta, "Is no more alive than him here," slowly he dragged the gun up until it was centered on the man's forehead.

Hussein threw a thick hand on Shaheed's shoulder, "Remember, brother, God will reward you for this."

Shaheed looked up at his brother, his new wild beard, and did not tell him that their new religion did not call him *God*, did not remind him that they had been born in America, were half white, newly angry.



Phisher

As Walt drove Graham sorted through the bags piled in the backseat. There were three laptop computers, two small monitors, routers, modems, antennas, and what looked like several dozen feet of wires. And, in it's own special case, a homemade wolfhound device. Walter had built it over the summer, using some hackers guide to mass surveillance. He'd also built a dragnet device that could be innocuously plugged into an outlet at a coffee shop and capture metadata from everyone who logged onto the wifi.

The wolfhound acted as a mobile cell tower that intercepted every call made within its radius, collecting data, recording audio, generally invading privacy. It was a staple of modern police forces. So Walter built it, to show that anything the government could do to him, he could do to them.

Graham was satisfied with the equipment, but as he turned back in his seat, the left wheel of the car caught in a thick snowdrift, pulling them easily into the empty opposing lane. For several seconds they slid weightlessly before Walt brought the car to a sudden stop. Graham was gripping tightly to the door handle, the pain gone for a moment. So when the car stopped, Tom was dead. He could feel it. He could feel his brother absent. And he couldn't breathe. The world pressed against him, threatened the integrity of his bones, his body.

Without a word Walter goosed the pedal until the tires found traction.

"Can you just get us there without getting us killed," Graham muttered.

"Right, so we can go poke a fucking hornet's nest." Walter pulled the car up to a stoplight. The intersection was empty in all directions. "So what is the plan?"

“We’re the fucking hornet’s nest, Walt. And they tried to blow us up. We’ve found people before. We’ll find them.”

Walter made no move to hide the discomfort so obvious on his face.

“First thing’s first, like always; we put out the word on the IRCs. Recruit anyone looking to put in some work. Crowdsource.”

“That’s not a plan. We need a strategy.”

“They made a mistake when they used the net to put out their message. What did they say?”

“‘That was only the beginning. a beginning with no end. violence is the end.’ And ‘by Christmas your skyline will be altered.’”

“That’s where we start.”

“You think that will lead anywhere? They’d have to be the stupidest terrorists ever to leave a door that wide. Plus, I’m sure that’s the first place the feds went.”

The light stayed hauntingly red, the color deep over their faces. Finally, Walter lifted his foot from the break and rolled the car cautiously through the intersection.

“Well, we both know the feds can’t hack worth shit.”

“They don’t have to hack anything, guy. They just call up Twitter, *say hey, give us everything you got*. And Twitter does. Because the feds are the fucking feds. Not to mention Twitter and facebook and Google all let the NSA browse their data 24/7.”

Walter ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

“We can do it.”

“Stop acting like you know what to do.”

Graham shrugged and looked away from his friend.

“What do we do when we find them? Duke it out?”

“If we have to.”

“Jesus,” Walter shook his head exasperated.

“We’ll need weapons.”

“Are you serious?”

“They have guns.”

“Exactly.” Walter slapped a hand against the wheel, his body shuddering with a quick rage. “Exactly. We aren’t going to fight them. If you really want to find them I’ll help you do it. But that’s it. We don’t go looking for trouble. Okay?”

Graham was unmoved. Walter waited.

“We have to stop them.”

“Okay, but we do it the right way. We do it *my* way.”

“Just help me find them.”

“But get real, guy. You know how the feds work. If there was anything to find on these assholes it would be on every news station in the city alongside those closed circuit pictures.”

“So the feds don’t have shit?”

“Not yet. So we probably won’t get shit either.”

“No, that’s exactly where *we* come in. Where anon can do some work.”

“You make it all sound so goddamn easy.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky.” He adjusted his weight. His shoulder screamed. Pain everywhere. “Everybody makes mistakes. We’ve only got to find one of them.”

Walter laughed. “Right,” he said. “Okay.”

Hacker

The train settles into a rhythm. The green outside whirs past. For a stretch the tracks follow a highway, the cars' lights reflecting dully in the mist. Grey towns come and go. Time seems to slow, to force me to face the violence that has settled beside my heart.

So often when I look out at the world I see a disease. Humankind as a sickness upon the Earth.

It was almost a year ago now. But I still avoid it, like an open wound. I avoid it like I saw it, like I was in Denver that day, like I've got scars too. But I don't. I learned the names everyone who died though. Every one of them, no matter how you count. And I've read everything I could find on the subject: the portraits, the studies, the histories of the brothers. Even when they took the internet from me, computers all together.

Because I helped.

I feel terrible for visiting Alex. It was a mistake and now the guilt is dropping heavily in my stomach. I am ashamed and embarrassed. What had I expected?

I was the weak one with her. I hacked her days after we first met, before she even bothered to remember my name. I was obsessed with her body, that was first, and her anger. There was a guy then, who came by from time to time, and through him is how we met. They were friends of friends, drank in the same circles, crashed the same shows. Lived the same lives on repeat, week after week. I was tired of it when I met her. I went out to get fucked or fucked up, but it was boring me. But she was magnetic. She sucked me back into another year of basement shows and anarchist meetings.

Then one day, she found the file while I was in class. Back then I stored every dox, every job, on a flash drive, wiped the whole thing from my hard drive and the keystroke log. Keeping files like that around is a liability, but a necessity. That business is all about power. About who has the most of it, who can leverage what and when. It's important to always know more and know the gold.

I don't think she was looking for it. But she came across the box. Each stick marked with numbers that corresponded with a hash digest. She must have simply plugged each stick in to find the one with her on it. Still, it was password protected. Which was my only real mistake. The password. Her name.

I've got no right to call her vulnerable when I protect myself like that.

When she confronted me I was furious. I countered that she violated my privacy. I tore her apart. I called her a liar for not telling me everything I already knew, everything she had never revealed.

She never came back for her things, her clothes and books and stacks of black and white photos of me, of her, of us, and after a few days I burned everything in a fire pit behind my apartment. Everything except for one picture.

Sometimes it's hard to believe.

But you have to take believing out of it. Because even if you can't believe it, it still happens. I've watched it a dozen times, watched them kick down doors, not believing the stupidity, the slop, the childish resentment. Then they came for me, knocking gently at that shit apartment, the one I lived in even back when Alex was around. They came and kicked open the door. Pressed their guns into me. I thought I was brave before then, with their weight on me, the sound of boots stomping through my

bedroom, some guy already there looking at my computers. I told myself I'd be strong and I wasn't.

I didn't believe it, not even then, down the barrels of their guns. And I didn't believe it after they shut me off in solitary.

I don't believe it now.

They've taken my belief, over ten dark months, they pulled it from me like hairs from my scalp. How do you believe anything when the whole world unhinges before you, eradicates itself of logic and sense, burns out its own eyes?

The courts finally let my parents post bail after a human rights lawyer got involved. It was all of their savings but I spent the end of October in my own bed, shivering. I hadn't planned on fleeing. But the depositions and meetings with lawyers and therapists and doctors, the way media vans sat along our block for weeks. I dug out a fake passport with the name Erin Rowens I'd long ago hidden in the wilted, frozen earth of my mother's garden, and spent the night on her laptop.

I figured someone would be watching her computer, so I was careful, though its possible they installed a keystroke virus months ago. I ran a TOR browser and put a few Bit through a currency exchange using the fake passport number and dumped the funds into a Paypal account. Once there it's useable in the real world. I only bought the first ticket though, the one from St. Louis to New York. I bought the next ticket at JFK with a stranger's cellphone and different money. I flirted and wired him four hundred bucks and had him pull it out from an ATM, gave him a fake phone number and said I'd thank him when I returned home in a week. It careful work, but it would be a hard trail to follow. It

would take them weeks to put me on that flight to Paris. Who knows where I'd be by then.

I think I said everything in solitary. Not at first; at first I worried ulcers everywhere, worried my hair away, shook and cried. But eventually I talked. To no one in particular, or to anyone. My mother. My father. Alex. All those dead kids. I told them everything. I told them in the darkness, in the silence, in the absence. Then I told them again. I told the truth. The truth of everything, the real core bits, the things that don't have words because no one can quite nail them down, smash them into the right sounds.

But a body's got only so much hope. And soon there's nothing left to say.

I ran because I was out of hope. Skipped bail. Left my parents, my mother. And on the flight I was foolish enough to allow myself a small hint of hope in Alex, that she might save me. That building a new life would be easy.

Now I'm alone again, utterly, completely, with no plan and no idea where this train is even heading. I look at my ticket but the cities are in French and I feel stupid. I've made a terrible mistake.

The train stops first in a small town and a young couple take the seats beside me. They are beautiful and drunk, and soon the sun breaks through the clouds and the train continues so pointed and sure, while I sit feeling like a body battered on the rocks of a tyrannical ocean. Sad and sorry and broken.

When the man comes for tickets again I ask, *Where are we going?*

He punches the couple's tickets, says, *Munich by way of Strasbourg.*

What the fuck is there to do on a train to Munich. There's only so much France to see from a fogged window. Only so many broken parts to rebreak over this endless world.

I think of the videos of the attack.

Before you see anything you hear the thin song of a children's choir, and at first you can't tell what song it is. But by the time the camera steadies on the Christmas play in the courtyard, you can tell its "Silent Night" and you feel sick because you know what you're about to see. Down in the courtyard is Santa and his workshop full of parents and kids. But you can't tell what the play is, even though you can't help but try—it's what your brain wants: to know, to understand. You hear the soft and uneven harmonies swell, some people clapping. The scene is decorated with red and green. A Christmas tree is twinkling out of focus. The shot gets shaky and you can hear the guy holding the phone laughing. All of this in less than ten seconds, before the crack, sharp and loud, that at first you don't understand is a gunshot because it's too loud for the phone to record properly. But you know that's what it is when the camera juts up and you see this lady in the distance fall back like sheet in the wind, all billow, you see her because no one else is moving at first, and our brains are born seeking out that motion, because we're always ready to run—fight or flight—you see her fall like a dress from a skyscraper, because she's all dress now, then it's all screams and you can't hardly make out anything, it's just a mass of ugly sound and a final pop before everything goes sickly quiet and the screen fills black and thick and everything is dizzy with falling or running.

They said, *graphic* and *terrifying*, every time they played it. And after they talked about how they suspected the first explosion had such force that the microphone in the



phone popped. And you believe it because no one else is trying to explain why the sound stopped on the phone. Or maybe everyone is because no one knows how to explain anything else. And you don't want to think about anything else except why you couldn't hear the rest, the second explosion, the echoing gunfire.

What happens next is days past. Weeks. Months. First our lives go one a little at a time and we only come back to it when the news comes on. It's a slow forgetting. Then the news forgets, the whole country follows. We abandon the mourning, leave them to bare the weight of a tragedy. And that's that.

Outside now is France. A city somewhere. Another city crumbled. Houses of tarp and cardboard smudge together beneath an overpass. Children in dark jackets. Everyone looks lost. But I only see a glimpse of their quiet as they watch the passing train. I wonder if this is their whole day, watching trains pass, full of the rich and happy—to travel is to not worry about warmth or food.

At this point I'm not sure I could use a computer. Inside it was easy to not think about computers. Inside your mind is a wreck: uncontrollable, destroyed, capable of so little. But outside they're everywhere. But my online life is dead now. Recorded, but forgotten, a soiled corpse stepped over in the street. I could build something new on a library desktop in a few hours. And there is a desire for the familiarity I know there. But I'm still afraid. I can feel the breakable still perforating my body.

What are you supposed to do when you don't even feel safe at home?

You're not supposed to fear your government. Not in The West. Not in the twenty first century. Not in America.

I used to think I was brave.

Then I felt them on my skin. Under my skin.

I am a terrorist.

At some point it is no longer, *what can I take from this?* It is, *what will this take from me?*

It makes you sick to your stomach to watch the attack on TV. But the sickness fades because your life isn't over. Life keeps on with time. Rumbling past. Until everything is past. The closest I had come to stopping time was alone and logged in. I watched the world go past like a ticker, like France from a train, only it wasn't me moving, it was the world and everyone else with it.

Which is why I'm here. To understand *what* I am here. What *am* I here? We're all looking for perspective. Trying to see our lives in a new light. Somewhere in this world, there exists a reason not to kill myself. And I'm determined to find it.

We all tell ourselves stories.

One story I've told myself that I'm here, in Europe, to hear the music, to find a treasure.

Alex used to believe in me.

There was something bare in the way she talked to me, talked about me. Some faith she had in me when she shouldn't have. I told her so. But she told me that after the worst things, when she didn't know what to do with her hands, let alone herself, there was me, a lighthouse out there, promising safety.

Her words.

They were soft. She still takes photos. Sees the world more delicate than she would ever admit. Like silk on your cheeks. Like flowers from her throat.

Maybe I ran to her because I remembered how it felt.

But now I see it was a weakness, a mistake in my heart, a slow leak from my lungs.

On the train I watch the young couple across from me, our legs share space and they can't help but face me, look past me to see out the window. They are both young and attractive. Both light and American. They talk in whispers, their lives and truths great secrets. They sit with books in their laps but they don't read. I don't look up, do everything to keep them distant. I don't want inclusion into their space. After a time I realize they are speaking French, but in a rough way, a messy way, full of stops and starts, the girl always correcting, the teacher. They make so much soft and sexual.

*You're American*, the boy says to me eventually. His face is hard and heavy with dark bags and stubble. His hair is dark too and cropped close to his head like a soldier. The girl laughs at him but he doesn't look away from me. Something tells me they have just met.

He looks at me like I saw myself online, like nothing I ever was. Sees that my hair is not so dirty brown, cut terribly short, that my skin is not so pail and sick, my tits are not so small, my arms not too long, my teeth not so worn, my nose not so sharp. He sees something I don't and I know I don't want him to stop looking.

What I see is what I am not and will never be. I hate that I let some stranger make me feel. I fled my life to make myself feel again. To be strong from the inside out.

I cry in the bathroom, the way I have for weeks. My body not mine, racked, the hopelessness uncontrollable. I fled home because I'm scared of how close I feel to being able to pulling the trigger.

Later, I can feel his eyes on me. I can feel them clawing at my clothes.

The girl is eager to talk and the boy sips from a bottle of amber liquid.

*Did you come from Paris?* she asks. *I love Paris. That city. Did you visit the memorial?*

She means for the attacks. I shake my head. *I was visiting a friend. Just stopping by.*

Her light hair bobs around her head, her eye lashes are dark and I see what this soldier sees in her. The urgency. The safety from the things he's seen.

*Well you've got to go back. I mean it. Hop on the next train going the other direction.* She runs a hand over the man's arm. *It'll change you.*

They have just met they tell me. In the south of Spain. They aren't really a couple even. But they met and hooked up and decided to join forces because they were new to Europe and new and exciting to each other, because everything was new and exciting. The girl couldn't stop smiling, touching the boy's knee, his arm, the space beneath. They told me they had booked Airbnb rooms together in to save money, that they were on their way to Strasbourg to see the Christmas markets.

I watched the way their hands worked, the way they trusted the body of another. They were strangers. She could wake up in the night and he could be gone, gone with all of her money and clothes. He could violent or drunk. She could be the same. But she trusted him, and he trusted her.

*By the way, she says, my name is Anna. And this is Phil.* She rests her hand on his chest.

*What's your name,* he asks.

I say, *Knees.*

*Knees,* Anna says. *What's that from?*

*I like it,* he says. Then he says it, my name, and it sounds nice from his mouth.

And I want to be in there, that warm moist place, behind the sharp razor of his incisors. I want to die in that darkness like I know I will now, in some impossible place where I won't see my hand before my eyes, where I'll be blind.

Then he smiles at me.

*Where are you from?*

I tell them some about school and Missouri and Alex. And it feels nice, to talk like this, about nothing, to live in this fantasy, where I can become someone new, so fully, without filter or fear. I can change the whole world with words that live and die in the clatter of the train car, in the sunlight that pools at our feet.

I've always wondered what it's like to be alive.

How it tastes.

This girl trusts this boy with her body, with all those breakable parts, with all of her softness. And he trusts her. Near the end even that had been hard.

After, I could hardly sleep. The attack, I mean. And never two nights in a row. The paranoia took. Hooked the meat inside my lip. Every rat in my walls was the sound of the feds surrounding my building. I tried to go out a few times, to drink away the new ghosts, give myself away to any one who'd take me. Both times I met men, guys from the

college who bought me drinks and laughed loudly and didn't say anything horrible. And both times the thought of hands on my skin, the possibilities of what they could do to my body, destroyed me. Both times I left through the back.

By the time the feds did crash through my door it was a relief.

If I had known what was coming next, I would have fought.

Later, when Anna wanders off to buy coffee and pastries, Phil runs a hand through his short hair. We have been talking for an hour and he hasn't said much. Light glints off his eyes through blurring trees.

*I was in Syria two weeks ago*, he says.

He is my age. Maybe younger.

I nod but don't know what to say. *Did you go home?*

He shakes his head and chews his lip. His cheeks are sunk. *I mean, we touched down. But I caught the first flight.*

Suddenly, I believe I understand him. Maybe we are the same. Maybe we know the same truth: that home is the most dangerous place.

*You too right?* he says, but I'm not sure what he means. Then he says, *You're running from something too.*

And we don't say anything more. But I look at him. And he looks at me and we sit and stay so close that our knees are nearly touching. I imagine I can smell him, aftershave and salty skin. And when I hear my heart, for a second, for a beat, I believe it's his.

When Anna stays gone for a half hour and the train, the constant, the rattle and shake lulls us, he speaks again: *We shot goats. Dogs and cats too. Any sort of stray*

*animal. I see all these strays here, people feeding them on the sidewalk. We shot them for target practice. We made a game of it.* He pauses and looks out the window. We are passing through a small town, the houses look German, white plaster with heavy brown beams, like this is a fairy tale. *I made a lot of money that way,* he says.

He is quiet. *Now I'm supposed to feed them.*

His eyes are far off. I know why the girl trusts him. Look at him: he is all broken up and cracked like me. I could tell him my secrets and they would slip into his fractures and disappear. There is already so much on his shoulders, he can take a little more.

*I caused an accident,* I say. *A kid died.*

He looks back to me and nods, says, *Kid kid?*

I sit with it and try to think of an answer. I can feel his eyes on me, groping and gorging my flesh. I am hungry to be consumed.

*A young man,* I say.

*That's what happens,* he says, *Young men are supposed to go die in a war somewhere.*

*What happens if you don't?* I ask.

*Then,* he says sadly, *you've got to live with it.*

*Which one's harder?*

He cocks his head at me.

*Living or dying?*

He rolls his head like his neck is sore and glances out the window. He is handsome in the sort of way that you'd never notice him, handsome like the next-door neighbor it takes your whole life to love.

*Nobody's got to live, he says finally.*

He is my same age. From my same state. Grown up and gone to war, like it's the most normal thing in the world. And it is. What's off is that we meet here, on a train in France.

He says, *I made it all the way home. We landed in Springfield and everything. But I didn't even go home, I just turned around and bought a ticket and left.*

I want to ask him how many dogs he shot. And if he ever shot any people. I want to ask him what it feels like to kill on purpose, to mean to end a life.

Outside a small town is turning into a suburb of a city, the skirts of it. Phil has on a sad smile and I feel myself want more of this moment. But Anna comes back and hands us both coffees and takes his face and kisses him, smiles and says, *I love France.*



Martyr

His finger on the trigger, he moved. From the shadows of the cars. She was only feet away now. The voices of the others were close and loud, growing louder. But he was quick and she didn't turn until he was there, behind her. He grabbed her arm and jammed the gun into her lower spine. Pressing himself into her.

"Don't scream." He hissed into her ear, strands of her hair clinging to his lips, greasy and sweet with sweat. He felt a tremor of fear rock through her. But she didn't try to run.

"Don't scream," he said again because it felt powerful.

And wrong.

He felt the bulk of the vest press against her.

"Do you know who I am?"

She didn't even try to look, but he felt her nod. She knew him, recognized him already, even with his new light hair and shaved face. An instant drunkenness flooded him.

*Who am I. Not no one.*

"Are you a nurse?" he hissed.

He was already pushing her away, toward the car at the farthest corner of the parking lot. Her back arched away from the barrel of the gun as far as it would go.

"Are you?"

The she said, "I've got a family."

He thought of Hussein. Hussein bleeding out in the back of the car. Hussein. He would stop at nothing to save his brother.

“Me too.”

“Please.”

“Answer the question.”

“I’m a doctor,” she said finally, and he pressed his hand firmly over her mouth, her head pulling awkwardly back against his shoulder. Her face was warm and he could feel the wet, hot streams that had already rivered down her cheeks. “Walk,” he said, pushing her, and surprising himself with how tender the word had slipped out.

He pushed her faster toward the car, fighting the urge to break into a run. The group of people rounded into the same aisle of cars, only 40 yards away. Their voices clawing at his back. Shaheed picked out four bodies. Three men. All in heavy jackets. Lit by the yellow streetlamps. Unnervingly close. He urged her to walk faster.

Finally: “Hey.” An uncertain call.

“Look at that.”

“Hey, is everything okay?”

“Margaret, is that you?”

“Is everything okay?”

Shaheed looked back, sweat pooling around his collar. One man turned and began to walk right towards them, his head bent curiously. Shaheed adjusted the grip on his gun.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered to her.

They kept calling out, walking closer.

Shaheed pulled the gun from her back. His heart thundered. His finger wrapped over the trigger.

Then she suddenly she pulled from his grip and turned. One man had broken away from the others and jogged closer. She raised an arm. "Sorry," she said. "It's me. Hey."

The man slowed to a nervous walk, his hand raised in response.

"Shit."

"It's just me," she said. "This is my friend. My boyfriend. We were just... I just want to be alone."

"Jesus Christ," one of the men laughed, slapping a hand over his chest.

The others began laughing nervously to themselves.

"With everything tonight," the closest man said, trailing off. "You never know. I just wanted to be sure."

Shaheed kept the gun behind a leg. And, then, strangely, he raised his hand too, in a small wave. The men waved back.

They all laughed some more. And someone else said something funny. Shaheed just stood and watched. Their faces all pools of shadow, close, but a thousand lifetimes away.

If he had been any closer they might have recognized Shaheed's face. The face of a killer. A madman. A terrorist.

*Am I these things?*

"Have a good night," she said still waving. Then she did something unexpected. She took Shaheed's hand and began pulling him along. Her hand was warm and soft. Her

fingers wrapped around his fully. He held back. They walked like this to the end of the row of cars.

“Where are we going?” Her voice was hard again, scared, defiant.

He led her to the car, eyeing her as they walked, their hands still linked.

She explained without him asking, “You would have killed me,” she said. “And Mike. And the rest of them. You would have shot us all. I know *your kind*. I know what you can do.”

She looked at him with something he had never seen in a face, something misunderstood and dangerous, something terrified.

She was the first to see him like this. The first to look with this face. He studied her and urged himself to feel nothing. Over his shoulder the parking lot was quiet, a car pulled slowly onto the snowy street and disappeared down the block.

“You’re a fucking monster,” she said as they reached the car. “You’re sick.”

“You don’t understand,” he said softly. Surprising himself.

“There is nothing to understand,” she spat.

He let go of her hand and grabbed her arm, shoving her into the hood of the car. She tripped over her legs and collapsed with a loud thud, making no move to rise. He could make out Hussein’s form in the backseat.

“Get in.” He didn’t raise the weapon.

But he realized he had not yet looked down the barrel at a three dimensional woman, at a real girl, a real mother or daughter.

She looked up at him slowly, defiant.

“Fuck you.”

Hussein had grown quiet and weak over the hours of waiting. The bleeding had slowed, but not stopped. All color had left him. He had fallen silent. But now Shaheed imagined Hussein taking hold of this woman, showing her his power, forcing. She would understand that.

He still held the gun leveled without looking down its sights. From so close he couldn't miss.

She closed her eyes, she was still curled over the hood. Her knees buckled and she fell into herself, huddled by the wheel well.

“Get in the car.”

She trembled at his knees.

He waited but she didn't move.

“What's your name? What did that guy call you? Margaret.”

He saw a small nod.

“I won't help you.” She pulled her arms over her head.

“Please Margaret. Will you get in the car.”

“I won't help you.”

“Get in the car.” He stepped close and pressed the gun against her temple. Until her head was forced back against the car, kept pressing. What would Hussein do?

“Get in the car or I'll kill you and walk up to that hospital and kill everyone I see.”

She let out a small sound. Her everything was trembling.

The words had never been a part of him, coming from somewhere distant and pummeling through. He recognized nothing here. Of himself, or this world.

Somewhere he still felt like a child. Like this was a game.

People had always created him before he ever could. They had made him who he should be to them. Who they needed him to be. And so had she, this woman. Margaret. She took what she was told, bought it fully, blindly, believed. And so he gave her what she thought, the man she assumed. He could be that.

But he wasn't that. Not him. *Not me.*

Was he?

She stood quickly and climbed into the open car.

Shaheed stood holding the door, watching Hussein slip the barrel of his gun beneath her headrest and into the base of her neck. He shut the door. He couldn't tell, but he thought she was crying.

*Weakness. We must purge our weakness.*

He got into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. The car was already on and it let out a sickening shriek. His heart leapt. He put it into gear, forced a breath, and coasted quietly from the parking lot, from the dazzling blue and red lights pulsing at the mouth of the ER on the west side of the building.

Shaheed didn't know where he was going. He just kept turning away from the hospital, away from the checkpoints the radio had been announcing all night. Every time he spotted police lights he turned, making their path winding and unclear.

“Sit up straight.”

The woman had slouched slowly away from the gun that Hussein kept rested on the seat back. Reluctantly she leaned her head back against the headrest. Shaheed eyed her stiffness, the way she looked cold.

“And take off your shoes.”

For a moment she did nothing, but the question hung heavy in the car so she pulled her knees to her chest and undid the laces and pulled the boots off. Hussein took them from her and dropped them into the floorboard behind Shaheed.

“What’s your name,” Hussein asked.

She said nothing. Her face staring straight ahead.

He asked again, slower.

“Her name is Margaret.”

Hussein let out a small sound. “You’re very handsome, Margaret.” He inhaled audibly. “But I bet you know that. I bet you see it in yourself. You’ve been told it a thousand times. Every day, I bet.” His breathing was heavy and wet and sickening. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

The windshield wipers squeaked across the glass, the snow melting against the warmth within. Shaheed was certain his brother had taken another hit of the dark powder. He wasn’t even certain what drug it was, just that Omar had told him it would make him brave.

Now he could still feel it coursing through his veins beautifully, numbing all the edges of this sickness.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” Hussein’s voice was gruff and thick, like he was putting on a show. But Margaret didn’t so much as flinch.

“What’s so fucking wrong with me, Margaret, that you won’t talk to me? Am I so vile? So disgusting you can’t even both to acknowledge my existence?”

Shaheed could not look anywhere but at the snowy road in the headlights. Margaret he had been able to tell finally, was several years older than both of them. Maybe her mid-thirties.

“You’re wrong,” she said.

“About what?”

“You’re wrong. You’re wrong,” she said again. “No one says I’m handsome.”

“Do you think you’re handsome?”

Shaheed had never heard Hussein call a woman *handsome*.

“No, no.”

Hussein folded back into his seat and rested the gun on his knee. “Well you should,” he said. “You’re very handsome.”

She bit back a small sob. No one spoke.

“You should thank me.”

From the corner of his eye Shaheed watched her set her jaw. He wanted to speak for her, or to tell her to speak, or to reach out and lay a hand on her knee. Such unmasked fear made his heart sick, made it run loose, he could not sell any lies to himself about this.

“You saw those people, Margaret, you work at the hospital.”

“She’s a doctor,” Shaheed heard himself say.

“You’ve got their blood on you. I smell it.” Hussein said. He was looking out the window while he talked. “We did that. And look at us. Yesterday you would have said,



*who the fuck are they*. Nobody. Nobodies. Fucking *nothings*. That's what you would have said, isn't it?"

He waited. "Say yes, Margaret."

She said yes.

"Exactly." He slapped a hand against the door. This sound made her jump.

"Which is what's wrong with this fucking country. With this world. We did all of this."

Hussein seemed drunk on himself. "And you, what are you? A doctor. What have you done?"

There was a silence. The road blurred before Shaheed, the streetlights smearing together the colors of the street.

"Now who's the fucking *nothing*?" Hussein asked.

Shaheed wondered if Hussein had used one of the adrenaline epipens also.

She knew what he wanted so she said it without pause, "Me."

"Say the whole thing for me, Margaret."

"A nothing."

"Now you're getting it." He laughed sickly. Shaheed had never seen this before.

"You should be grateful for me, Margaret."

Shaheed eyed Hussein in the mirror; in the dark he recognized almost nothing there.

"Do you think you're safe here? We're doing this for you, to show you that you aren't safe. That your government is lying to you. No one is safe. *America* is not safe. Your protection, your freedom, your happiness—it's an illusion. Can't you be grateful to me for showing you that?"

“You didn’t save anyone. You killed them. You’re delusional.”

Shaheed looked back at his brother. He expected him to lash out.

“I’m not. This,” he paused. “It’s about more than a city, a couple thousand innocent people. Millions of lives are at stake. Billions. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary in war.”

Shaheed could tell she would play along only so far. He could sense it. She feared only so much. And his gut sank when he realized this woman would take death, nothing more, but death, gladly from them.

“Thousands of people?” she said. “You’re brainwashed.”

A roar exploded into the cab, a concussion of deafening pressure, a snap of painful white. Shaheed jerked the wheel and ducked his head, smacking his brow into the hard between his hands. Margaret threw herself into the floorboard with her arms over her neck. The bullet tore through the bottom of the car. The sound impossible in the confines of the small vehicle. The packed snow, the base ice, took the car from Shaheed. He threw his foot into the brake.

They were thrown.

The tires jumped the curb and the car slapped around a lightpost.

She was running before she even opened the door. Her body fell hard, face first, into the snow and she crawled wildly until she found her footing.

Shaheed stumbled from his door, a pain already blooming behind his eyes, and saw the gun, Hussein taking aim through the windows from where he had fallen behind the driver’s seat.

Shaheed took chase, rounding the car, getting into Hussein's line of sight. The vest, strapped firmly to his chest, was impossibly heavy. He would never catch her.

There was the reverberation of not wanting her to die. It was sudden and surprising.

So against everything they were doing.

He ran hard, chasing her down the sidewalk in front of an immaculate apartment complex. She hadn't screamed. A half block separated them.

Her feet bare.

It was wrong.

Without her Hussein would bleed out. Didn't his brother understand that?

Her feet came from under her and Shaheed's heart slipped into his throat, a quick fear, a fear for her before anything else. She hit hard.

Phisher

Walter's sister lived in a small, nondescript, brick two-story on the west end of City Park. A mile from the hospital, so close that if Graham hadn't been so high, so beaten, he could have walked. It was a house that had been sectioned off into three units, and she rented the top floor, with its cramped bedroom and cracking plaster.

Graham had never met Walter's sister, though he'd heard about her plenty. She'd flown through college in two and a half years and landed herself a quick job poking holes in firewalls for a credit card company. In Graham's world pentest jobs were for quitters. Sec work was degrading, overly controlled, expressionless. Hacking with rules and constraints. Hacking with the fun carved from it.

Walter parked in a small back alley behind the house. Graham struggled to pull himself from the car. His body was unbearably exhausted, his legs rubbery. As he stood catching his breath Walter unloaded a backpack and a large duffle bag from the car. They climbed the rickety staircase that led to the apartment's lone door.

Walter pounded out a greeting.

"She's gonna be so fucking pissed."

"What's her name again?"

"Kiley."

"Kiley Monroe," Graham mused.

"Are you high?"

"Morphine."

Walter pounded on the door again.

“You’ll have to hook me up when we’re inside. I brought some dank shit too,”  
Walter patted his backpack.

“Is she even home?” Graham asked.

Walter pulled his keys from his pocket and sorted through them. Finally he selected a rust-colored house key and fit it into the top lock. “I hope not.”

Hacker

There are always worse things. Phil and Anna are buying maps. Phil is buying cigarettes too. His bag is pixelated army greens and over sized and hers is stitched with three Greek letters. I watch from a bench. When the train settled into Strasbourg I stood when they did. I wanted strangely to be close to him. I asked to tag along into the city. I said they knew French and asked if they could help me find a hostel.

I watch Phil in line. He stares straight ahead, his face empty and open, like a body forgotten by its soul.

I read once on some forum that there are things to never ask a vet. Why'd you join? How could you leave your family? Do you have PTSD? Did you kill anyone? But I think them. I look Phil over, watch the way he moves, and wonder if it's harder to kill or watch your friends die.

In a way I am at peace with what I did. People died, but I did the right thing.

How many more people would have died?

Maybe Isaac would have kept going even after Adam was killed. Though everyone who knew him said it couldn't even have really been him. They all said it, one after another. *Not Isaac. Not him.* They said that Jonas and Adam must have forced him, must have held a gun to his temple and said, *you're dead if you don't.*

But I know Isaac now. I know no one forced his hand. He was fragile and desperate and they offered him a hero's way out.

After all, he's there on camera, side by side with death, with no gun to his head, just one in his hands.

I don't know what to make of Strasbourg. I haven't spent much time in cities so busy. I'm overwhelmed. But Anna finds it beautiful, everything, everywhere. And she knows the sights.

*I've been dreaming of this my whole life*, she says over and over, her voice too high. *My grandfather was born here during the war. He was French German.*

Phil keeps looking over his shoulder, walking like he might fall dead.

Around me there are supposed to be beautiful things, so I search, I strain my eyes. I see the way the city flows together, block after block, the buildings one of a kind, the way the streets roll like waves, the gardens, wilted and limp and clinging to the far-distant return of spring. I see the grey, the streets, the sky, the water, but somehow not flat, not dead, not limp. But not beauty, not in anyway I feel.

We walk despite the cold. Anna says there is too much to see and trains rush it. *I want to be in it*, she says. And after a half hour of walking along the bank of L' Ill, Phil is hungry and thirsty for a beer.

*It's good to drink when you can drink*, he says when we duck inside a warm German bar. *This is nice*, he says, *We had a layover in Germany on our way home and we got piss drunk*

He orders three of the cheapest beers even though no one tells him to, and we squeeze into a small booth against a cold window. I hold my hand out over the thin glass and feel the way the cool radiates from the surface.

Alex was my protection, once. Somehow. From something. But I never told her that. How do you tell someone something like that? How do you look them in the eye and tell them your life is in their hands?

Phil and I order cheap food. Anna does not. And she orders a gin and tonic, despite the beer in front of her. She tells me that she is in school, even though I don't ask, that she just decided to hop over for Christmas break to visit her sister who is studying abroad in Italy, in a town I have never heard of. And that she came here to see the house her grandfather was born in, survived the war in, grew up and old in. I don't ask anything but she keeps talking, and Phil and I listen. She is pretty, and nice, and blonde and I see why Phil has fallen in with her.

Phil finishes his beer and drinks hers.

For a long while we talk about easy things. We talk about movies and Europe and Twitter. They tell stories about their friends and it's all very unnerving in a way, I feel myself smile, more than I have in a year, maybe more, and I laugh even, somewhere after the first beer.

But after our second round Phil talks about a drone strike, says, *We cleaned everything up. So much of what we did was cleaning up, dragging bombed out cars off the road, picking up limbs and putting them in bags, all while people try to shoot you from some roof. Anyways, he says picking at a chip in the rim of his mug, The drone missed it's target by about a football field and end up dropping a half ton of explosives into a goat pen. It killed about twenty of them and blew a hole in the fence so the rest were out wandering all over this village and we spent the whole day cleaning up dead goats and rounding the live ones back up cause it killed the goat herders too. By the end*



*of the day we'd gotten in two firefights and Manny and Sanders had each taken a bullet, all because this guy, this kid back in Nevada in some air conditioned room was doing a shitty job at his video game.*

He takes a long drink. His eyes have gone far off again but he seems to be watching people walk by outside, in their heavy coats.

*They've all got pointed shoes,* he says again after a while because neither Anna nor I knew what to say about his friends being shot. *Do all French guys have pointy fucking feet?*

But I'm thinking about myself as a drone pilot, from my basement in Columbia while Graham walked down the barrel of a gun.

Anna has eaten half of her food, had sips of her drink, and now she looks at Phil with her mouth open. I expect her to say that what matters is that it is saving American lives. The lives of our boys. She seems like she would say this, with her blonde hair and her money and her happiness, for her these sorts of things seem obvious. Can't we all be so disconnected? So free? I want to admire her like this.

*Do you think it will end,* she asks.

Phil scrunches his brow, rubs his chin back and forth across the lip of his mug. I have seen him disappear like this a handful of times in the hours I've known him. I recognize the moment of pain that claws into his face. Does he see his friends being shot while chasing loose goats? the dogs they picked off for target practice? something else? something worse?

*Probably not,* he says into his beer. He has pulled into himself. He continues, *This type of war can go on forever. We'll never be able to eradicate the threat, and they'll*

*never be able to topple The West. He shrugs. And sure as shit people will keep birthing soldiers.*

*Besides, he says, There's no difference, between war and terrorism. Both are boring-as-fuck life interjected with random violence, worse than you've ever seen. Then coming down, he says. He takes a drink, says, If you can.*

*And this is you coming down? I ask. Europe?*

He grins and nods, *And you.*

He looks at me in a steady way, unafraid.

Here is what he sees: tired, sleepless and beaten down, a thick blue coat with duct tape over tearing parts in the arms, brown eyes and too-short brown hair matted against my forehead, small chin, hollow cheeks, prison-muscle faded from a workless months on the outside, shaky hands, chewed fingernails, the cords of my neck, the pink of my lips, the freckles on my cheeks that linger through the winter, the lost, the hurt, the confused, the angry, the hopeless and hopelessness.

*You come down as far as you can before the next. It's just a question of how low you can get, how much you can forget in the between, he says.*

There is always worse.

What I see: a handsome man, a boy thrown into the awful, gun in hand to become a man, right then and there, on the spot, someone with hunger and no direction, a man not afraid to die, but terrified to go home.

Anna nods gravely while we talk, and makes jokes that she laughs at herself. I want to dislike her. I dislike how close they sit, and the way they share their food, and the way their limbs touch accidentally, without notice. They have known each other for a

week, yet they move like lovers. They must have been looking for each other, must have come to Europe with these roles set already into their minds, looking only for the body to fill the space.

When we leave the bar it is dark. I've always hated the way it gets dark so early this time of year. We walk together for a time toward nowhere in particular that I know. I just walk with them, just because I don't think about it.

At a corner Anna stops and pulls a map from her bag, studies it for a moment and points suddenly, *There's a pair of hostels just that way.*

Her finger stays steady. It is a nondescript intersection. It feels arbitrary to me. It feels like she is sending me off. Like Phil is hers. Like I'm not a stray dog that can follow them home.

The light turns suddenly and they both say, *See you around, Knees*, and I say, *See you*, and they are jogging away, their hands catching on the other. They cross a bridge over thick black water. There is snow heaped along the sidewalks and steam snaking from the streets.

I watch them until they are gone, disappeared into the throng of the city, and I am alone again.

I turn toward the direction she pointed.

Where have I been?

And how do I come back?

Martyr

Shaheed carried Margaret back to the car in his arms.

Hussein had crawled into the driver's seat and pulled the vehicle back into the road. The bumper had crumpled into a v and a fender was dragging on the ground. A small stream of smoke snaked from the hood. The stop took less than two minutes.

She had not tried to fight him. Shaheed had lifted her gently and she had covered her eyes with her palms, like she was afraid of what would happen if could see into them. Her weight in his arms had felt good. He sat her in the back seat and crawled in with her.

Shaheed wanted to scream at his brother. He was an idiot for firing his gun in the car. He was being weak, letting her get to him.

Unless she was right. Unless this really would change nothing.

“Do you live close?” Hussein asked, looking at Margaret through the mirror.

She nodded.

“We're going there,” Hussein said.

Shaheed desperately wanted to recognize his brother. He didn't want to be afraid that he might turn and kill her here, while their bodies touched.

“Go straight,” she said.

As they pulled away Shaheed saw several people watching, some had come down to the street. Some had their ears to phones. Hussein turned at the first street, a quick and subtle left. What had they seen? Then again at the next block, he took a right. Going as far out of sight as he could. Hussein followed her directions from there. Her apartment wasn't far. Every couple of blocks Shaheed could see flashing lights pound in the

distance. Fashion Plaza was several miles south and the space between was dense city and suburb. The radio claimed much of the police effort was centered around there, discussed the curfew, the plea for everyone to stay inside indefinitely; kept reporting the location of the checkpoints, as though someone out there was trying to help Shaheed and Hussein escape. Shaheed had seen it before dozens of times. All anyone had to do was turn on the news to follow the developments of their own manhunt.

Omar had predicted so much of this. *It will be beautiful.* They hadn't talked that way at first. At first it was a war and a war only, casualty clusters, pipe bombs, jihad. But their language changed as the time grew closer. Shaheed felt the change was to keep it possible, to convince themselves that it was right. They made the language to make it so.

*It's beautiful.*

There was excitement somewhere in him. And somewhere else there was sadness. Sickness. Lust. He didn't know what to feel, which to embrace, which to live through. They were all there together, confusing the others, and him. He had wanted this. He had wanted to overcome The Dread. "Are you willing to die?" Hussein had asked months ago, never knowing that that was the moment Shaheed had been swayed, that that was all he really wanted, that his life had been overcome by a suffocating depression.

They had also talked about power, and he understood it to a certain extent. It was intoxicating. But it felt to him dangerously uncontrollable. Like some sort of irony.

Now people feared him. And what more true power was there?

But it was tinted. Ugly. He didn't enjoy it.

Hussein had made sure, had always made sure this was what Shaheed wanted, had made Shaheed repeat how bad he wanted it, needed it, believed it, until he went horse,

until he coughed up blood the next morning, had made him make sure, had not pushed him into any of this, had only welcomed him along. Hadn't he?

Omar and Hussein had accepted him.

In front of her apartment Shaheed helped Hussein from the car and got into the driver's seat. Margaret gave him the apartment number. Before driving away he watched the two of them, Margaret and Hussein stumble together up the steps and toward the heavy front doors. Hussein's arm was thrown over her shoulder and she was supporting him, nearly dragging him along through the snow. The quiet, deadening snow.

For a moment they were lovers, two kids, tripping home drunk, another messy holiday.

Could they have been somewhere else? Him and Hussein? Does a space exist other than this that would have held them at this moment? Or was it always bound to be this one, the stoop of this City Park West apartment? His life should have been so much different.

It was easy to blame their parents for leaving. Their aunt for raising them as bastards and dying drunk with cancer, Hussein hardly 18.

Shaheed shifted the car into gear. In a couple of hours it would be Christmas. And for the first time tonight Shaheed noticed the lights. They were everywhere down the block. Almost every house had at least one strand tacked around the front door. But many had a blow-up Santa or decorated trees. And almost all of the lights were on. Despite everything, someone had taken the time to plug all this shit in. Despite the imposed curfew, the checkpoints, the warnings to stay inside, call the police at the drop of a pin, the bombs, the blood, the terror, they lit their fucking trees.

It was Christmas and they had almost stopped it.

Shaheed didn't have any heroes. And neither did his brother for most of his life. During their years in subsidized housing south of the city they led isolated lives, skirting beneath the radar of the system in order to ensure the state wouldn't separate them. Like this they idolized each other, two planets caught within the gravity of the other, fueled by the motion, growing forever closer.

Hussein, before Hussein, the character, the anger, even existed, was Adam. He skipped out on college to work seven days a week and keep a roof over their heads, even as the roof was ever changing. The plan was for Shaheed, then Isaac, to succeed; go to college, get a job, make real money.

But when it happened, when Shaheed was accepted to Denver University with a full ride scholarship—a slap in the face of their poverty—their carefully curated balance crumbled. Shaheed moved into the dorms and a rift grew. Hussein's transformation was almost over night.

Suddenly, he had heroes other than Shaheed. He met Omar at a gym and suddenly Hussein had someone new to feed off of. His anger, his animosity bubbled to the surface. Hussein began attending prayer with Omar, a practice the brothers had given up the day their parents vanished.

Suddenly Hussein had belief. Suddenly he was talking about the Islamic State and reading *Inspire*, watching Anwar al-Awlaki videos online, talking about the caliphate and drones, talking about Syria and infidels. An idea was born into them. A grain. An atom.

A beautiful notion about the world. A vision for what it could be, the horrible mess that it was.

For months Hussein was gone from Shaheed's life. Then, one day, he came back, his beard long and unkempt, a new passion in his heart. As children they had never read the Koran. But now the book lay always open on the coffeetable of Hussein and Omar's apartment—the top unit in a condemned house with no heat and little insulation. Still,

When he wasn't studying the book, Hussein was studying forums and blogs. He confused 4Chan and Reddit threads by the mile. Mostly he learned there. Before they grew careful, grew new names, Hussein would send Shaheed links to his school email. A dozen or more a day. The arguments, most often, were childish and idiotic to Shaheed. Most he didn't even read.

After an incident at his apartment in his second year, two drunk freshmen knocking loose a tooth, blackening an eye, bruising his scrotum; after he spent a month in bed, refusing to move, Shaheed began spending nights back at Hussein's. They sat and smoked on the steep roof, and Shaheed felt safe beside his raging brother, who now carried a handgun beneath his shirt and towered over the sort of monsters who had ruined his life. It was a freezing winter, the snow heavier, the days shorter, the nights endless. They shared beer stolen from delivery trucks, smoked weed bought from Silk Road, snorted mystery powders Omar told them would clear their minds and set them free.

ISIS was born of opportunity. Born of hate and genocide. Born from the bodies of 200,000 burned and shot and left to rot. Conflict in Syria was decades old, but the civil



war began when Shaheed was in high school. He'd heard nothing at the time, and just as little since.

Bashar al-Assad, the power-drunk president of Syria, imagined his authority infinite and everlasting, and so it was. The British-educated politician, son of president Hafez al-Assad, had an army at his command that no one dared provoke.

Then a group of boys were caught with cans of paint in their hands. Deraa, a town tucked in the southern tip of the country, took to the streets over their disappearance. But when Assad caved and released a handful of political prisoners, the protests only gained steam. They had a victory and grew hungry for more. People from around the country joined in. But Assad balked. He refused to give any more. His hand grew heavy and fierce. Protesters, disenchanted, defeated, caged and dangerous. Grew violent, stoked by the terrorists and criminals Assad began releasing from prisons wholesale, to create chaos and discredit his enemies, to give credence to his own brand of violent justice.

At its heart it was a civil war. But also a religious one, the Alawite sect allying with Iranian Shiites and Hezbollah, facing off against the Sunni rebels. Belief against belief, the foundations so similar, the differences subtle enough to be quickly misunderstood. The violence spread from city to city, militias sprang up by the dozens. But they were massacred by Assad's army. His jets, his helicopters, his bombs, his chlorine gas.

"Do you know what chlorine gas does?" Hussein asked.

Shaheed shook his head and ashed his cigarette.

"It's denser than air. It was designed during World War One, to drop into the trenches and flush soldiers into the open. The Germans would sit and wait for the wind to

change, to release the gas and let the breeze carry it. It made these huge clouds, 50, 100 feet high. People would see it and run. Flee. Take the bullet in the back.” He took a drag, the bud lighting his face.

Hussein had laced their hand-rolled cigarettes with something strong and Shaheed could feel the dizziness burning his brain.

Shaheed rubbed his shoulders and looked through the scraggle of branches to the distant lights of Denver. This talk was still new. Not the anger, but the focus, the direction. Hussein had begun spending nearly every day at the gym with Omar. After work or before, on the weekends. And when they weren't at the gym they camped out in their living room scouring the Internet, pacing, pointing fingers toward the window, the world out beyond.

“It's just chlorine, the gas is. The Germans used it because they were making it by the tone, as a residual product in dye plants. The same shit they use in pools. But when there's enough of it, 1,000 parts per million in the air, it burns. Not your skin, but your eyes and nose and mouth, your fucking throat. But it kills you in your lungs, eats the tissue when it mixes with the water in there to make hydrochloric acid.”

Shaheed made a sound in his chest, to say he was listening. But he was hung up on the facts, the specific, the way Hussein could recount everything. He had set it to memory. Could he buy chlorine? chug until his stomach melted? or would he throw it up, like the sleeping pills?

“They look peaceful when they die, not a scratch on their bodies. But their eyes, if you know to look, the wet there, will make them burn, all that soft tissue dissolving away. It's terrible to see.” Hussein laughed and shook his head. “All those mother fuckers.” He

waved his cigarette out at the city. “I wish I could drop gas on all of them out there in the Dar Al-Kufr, let them suffocate in their beds, in their fucking condos. It would be amazing.” He turned to Shaheed, “A bullet is just so quick, so goddamn impersonal, you know? And don’t get me wrong, gas is too, but I could watch, I could stand there with a gas mask and just watch them choke on their own fucking spit.”

They sat in the silence and beauty of the idea, of the sick world that had only ever taken from them, having something—something great: their lives—taken back.

“But that’s beside the point. Assad dropped these bombs on whole cities and killed a quarter of a million people, and the world did nothing, just watched.” Hussein flicked his hand up around his face, smiled. “Obama said chemical weapons were a *red line*, then he didn’t do shit. Fucking hypocrite.”

Sunni’s were massacred. More than any others, they were hunted, shot, bombed, gassed. Those who weren’t killed fled. Their towns were bombarded. Houses became rubble. People became rot. They looked to the world for help. Fighting back the best they could with their meager resources. Helicopters strafed them. Jets bombed. Terrorists exploded in their neighborhoods. After too much, they reached out to the only alley they had: al-Qaida.

The tide did not shift, but now they had weapons.

Phisher

Graham sat on the couch while Walter carefully cleared Kiley's desk and began setting up his own equipment. They both knew they stood no chance of logging into Kiley's computers, which covered an expanse of desk: two towers, four monitors, external storage, backup power, things Graham didn't even recognize, all of it new and expensive. Walt opened two laptops and pulled a second chair to the desk in the cramped living room. To one laptop he plugged a Wi-Fi antenna, which he left sitting on the table, and began running aircrack-ng.

It was useless to go after Kiley's network—security being her job—so he set to work on the next strongest signal, which presumably came from one of the apartments below. The software made quick work of the network, decrypting the router's default WEP key in a matter of minutes. It was the strongest single in the area with a high pingback rate.

From the couch Graham swirled inside his head. The pain receded to the recesses of his mind, where it dulled and thrummed, present but separate. Kiley's apartment was cold and quiet. The only sound came from Walter tapping away at the keyboard. A picture of Kiley began to come together in Graham's head. He looked at the pictures lining the wall and pulled what appeared to be the common denominator, determined that this was in fact her, and realized he recognized her from pictures he had seen of Walt. His thoughts grew slower and more clouded. From the couch it was hard to get a good look at her, but he decided she was attractive, slim and boney. She was different than he

expected, than the stereotype so persistent that even geeks bought into it. She was blond and tan and well dressed, she looked strong, she looked present, she looked happy.

One specific image that hung above the desk where Walter worked was of Kiley and another girl. Behind them loomed a church, ancient and stone, maybe Notre Dame, on a bright, cloudless day. There was a photo, almost the twin of this one, framed on the wall of Graham's parents' living room. In it Graham's mother and father stood side-by-side, playfully stiff, with their hands clasped, in front of some church, some building in Europe he had no interest in. In fact he'd never thought about it before, any of it really. But it came to his mind as he sat, listening to the rhythm of Walter's typing, of wires unraveling, clicking into place. There was a magic associated with France, or Paris, wherever Kiley had been, those cathedrals, that he had never understood. A history had been preserved there, a culture, a lifestyle, an idea, it had all been set into the stones. He understood this. But what eluded him was why this mattered at all. What did people find for themselves in this past? The future lived in the vast, newly tangible planes of the invisible network of the internet. From his box he could dig his hands into this clay and mold and shape and build and alter everything there. And this plane was bursting at the seams and seeping slowly into physical. If you could navigate and manipulate the internet, the power to be found was expanding exponentially.

This he understood.

But here was Kiley, pinned to the walls around him, everywhere. What was it that she saw in the world? Was she simply hungrier than him? Insatiable? To imply that she saw something that he did not but should, would be to imply that there was something of

value in existence, that there was some purpose to this reality. Such concepts were alien to Graham.

“Does she like to travel?” His voice felt detached from his body, his mind slowing down.

“Who?” Walter didn’t look up.

“Your sister.”

“Oh. Yeah, who doesn’t?”

“Have you been to Paris?”

Walter turned and gave Graham a look. In return Graham pointed to the photograph. “That’s not Paris. I mean, I’ve been to Europe, but not Paris, and that picture isn’t from Paris. Terry wants to go there though. Talks about doing it after we graduate. Teaching English or something, though I keep telling him it’s not that simple. That the future is in Hong Kong.”

“Why does he want to go?”

“To Paris?” Walter shrugged. He had booted up one box and was in the process of warming up the second. “Because that’s what people do, Graham. They go to Paris. They fall in love. Read poetry and drink wine, that bullshit. It’s what people do.”

Graham nodded his head, silent.

“What about the Bataclan attacks?”

Walter worried his lip and exhaled loudly.

“I think that’s all I’d be able to see if I went there. The violence.”

“Your heads just in a bad place.”

“I’m serious.”

Walter shrugged, “People see what they want to see. And they want to see beauty, I guess. And it’s beautiful there. Do you know what beauty is, guy? People get a glimpse of a life that they don’t have, that they want, and it makes them feel good, because it makes it seem possible, like they can go home and change something about themselves and someday have that life.” He rubbed his palms along his legs. “They’d trade any feeling, fear or terror, anything, for that.”

They were both silent.

“I get sex,” Graham said. “I understand that. Lust. Maybe love, maybe family. But not that,” he gestured toward the wall of photographs.

The first computer chirped and a new window opened. Walt looked over his shoulder at the screen. “We’re online.”

For a minute Walter was silent as he logged into TOR, and one of several proxy servers he and Graham had set up over their year of communal activity. Graham had always been fascinated by computers. He’d taken to them at an early age and become adept at basic coding before high school. If needed he could write decent code for almost anything. The trouble was that Graham lacked imagination. He needed someone to tell him what to write, when to write it, why. To make money in high school he spent an afternoon skimming through several dozen files on Pastebin on how to jailbreak iPhones. Then he moved on hacking the rich and selling their data to Ukrainians. It wasn’t until his freshman year that he found something more: Walter.

Graham had encountered endless hordes of proficient hackers and coders in the virtual world, people he knew through only keystrokes, boxy green letters, and assumption, but Walter was the first true hacker he had ever met in the flesh and blood.

The two had never crossed paths online, but Graham was still surprised by Walt, by his overt aggression, by his boyish good looks and commanding presence, and his wholeness, the way he could fall into a crowd and disappear, be another body in the fold of society. He'd always pictured those he dealt with online to be chained to their computers, dysfunctional, so fully apart from the progression of the stupidity beyond their blacked out bedrooms.

He admired Walter more than anyone else, and he trusted him in equal measure.

“Get us on every IRC you can. We’ll declare an op.”

Walter glanced at several of the photos on the walls. “Maybe it’s just beautiful, maybe you can’t feel it until it surrounds you, Paris, I mean. Or maybe you’ll just never get it.”

There was a pause between them. Graham could see in Walter’s face the desire to say more, but the pity there too, the way he couldn’t meet his eye.

“Yeah,” Graham said. “Maybe you’re right.”

Painfully Graham stood from the couch and moved to the seat beside Walter. Both computers were humming hot already, running several meaty programs, and open to a handful of IRC channels and news outlets, their green scrolls of text cycling endlessly. The IRCs were alive, but directionless, tepid. Graham read nothing, the words bleeding together into a dull glow. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“How many people are on?”

Walter tabbed through several windows. “Maybe a couple hundred in total. Hopefully some people who can help.” Walter was logged in under his nic, <Hotelier>, and several people welcomed him.



<D-sick> Good morning, hotel. welcome home.

<tAll> yeah, welcome, welcome, buddy. You hear about this shit in Denver?

Walter's cursor blinked in the textbox, but he typed nothing, waiting for Graham, who had yet to login. In a matter of moments the greetings were engulfed by the clusterfuck of the IRC. Soon they would recede until fully deleted from existence—such was the setting on the anon server. The chats conducted in these channels, all housed on the same server, and while all anonymous, stayed consistently incriminating. While everyone present was assumed to be vigilant in routing everything through a proxy server to mask their IP address, on the most basic onion router at least, if anyone could ever be connected to a single handle, they could potentially be connected to any form of admitted work done by that handle. Thus the server was set to self-delete, much like 4chan, after several pages of full text. On top of that, the channels were secret. The only way of accessing one was by invitation.

While Graham took a moment and adjusted himself in the chair, Walter set up a new channel for the op, inviting a group of collaborators who would be instrumental, a variety of hackers and phishers and media hounds.

“What do you want to call it?” Walter asked.

Graham thought for a moment. “Op revenge.”

“Original.” Walter typed it out but then quickly deleted it. Typing instead, #opDeathHaters.

Graham nodded. He pulled the pill bottle from his pocket and struggled to open the top with one hand. Walter took the bottle from him and popped it open.

“How many?”

“Two.”

Walter tapped three pills into his hand and sealed the bottle. He gave Graham one.

“I need two.”

“I can see in your eyes that you’re still high as shit.”

“Fuck you.”

Walter tossed the other two pills into his mouth and chewed. Graham followed his lead, taking the pill dry.

The taste was bitter. Almost acidic and he fought the urge to gag. He was dehydrated and his body ragged, tired beyond belief. But beneath the fog of the high those things dissolved and he could survive.

He lifted his free arm and slowly typed the seven letters of his handle one-by-one. In an effort to keep his true identity hidden Graham, like many of the others in this channel, used several different handles, rotating them in and out at different times, keeping his admissions of activity spread widely across several invented personas. But before pressing return he paused, watching the blinking cursor. He deleted the letters.

Walter looked over Graham’s shoulder as he keyed in another handle. Due to the nature of IRC there are no passwords. A user must simply choose a screen name or use the automatically generated <anonymous> name. There are no passwords. No one owns any certain nick. Anybody can take over any handle at any time, so long as the other user isn’t already logged in.

<BoneyKnees>

Graham hit Enter, half holding his breath. The name hovered above the chat window.

“Don’t be a jackass, Graham.” Walter leaned back into his chair. Kiley’s apartment smelled sweet, like vanilla, or some other calm. They’d turned on most every light they could, but the space was still muted, the colors ivory and pastel. “No better way to fuck yourself over and make enemies.”

“No one can make things happen faster than Knees.”

“Yeah, but...” Walter threw out his arms. “How am I supposed to help when I don’t know what our plan is? Not to mention all the rumors about Knees being a fucking snitch. Or the fact that he’ll tear you open for this.”

“I don’t care, Walt,” Graham snapped. He had already begun typing. He may not have been a hacker on the level of Walter, but this, rallying the troops, raising moral, stirring up trouble, phishing, was where he felt at home, where he flourished.

“Wait till Knees doxes your ass tomorrow, puts your picture and your address and your mom’s address and *my* address, your social, your credit cards, all over Pastebin. Then tell me you don’t care.”

Walter stood while Graham tapped out and deleted several sentences, over and over. Grabbing the remote from the coffee table, he switched on the small TV in the corner.

“Can you mute it?” Graham said.

“Fuck yourself,” Walter quipped before muting the TV and falling backwards onto the couch across from Graham.

Channels flicked past, until the news.

Hacker

The snow sets in quick and light. Drifting through the skeleton trees. The banks of the river freeze. Flowers wilt. Children are born and live and die. Stray dogs snap over a limp form. The whole world closes in over the roofs of these small houses. Streets bend and constrict. There is a cold so cold your body believes you are drowning and drowns itself on nothing, muscles shutter violently, tear from entuses, freeze. The brain panics. The body swallows, gulps at air, but the lungs have closed themselves from the imagined water. Laryngospasm. Asphyxiation. I don't know where I am or where I'm going.

Shops are closed and quiet. I am alone, making tracks.

Later I will learn.

I pass hotels until I am exhausted, until I don't want to think. Until finally, at the Hôtel Gutenberg I buy a room. The woman at the desk carries my bag before me to the fourth floor, winding circles up the marble stairwell. She unlocks the door and I follow her inside. Neither of us turn on the light. She is French and taller than me. Her hair is wrapped in a bun. The floor creaks softly. She drops my bag onto the bed. The door shakes slowly shut. Light pools beneath the curtain and she walks to it.

*This room is my favorite*, she says, her English smooth, her accent soft, pulling open the heavy shades. *La Cathédrale de Strasbourg*, and the church is there. Huge and bright, a pillar through the snow. The whole city glowing in its sun.

We stand like this, silent, looking at the church, for what feels like minutes, until there is pressure, and finally she turns slowly on a heel, smiles, and brushes past, our bodies dangerously close.

Or maybe I am exhausted.

When the door clicks shut again, I stand alone in the silence, with the light. Frost runs along the edges of the window, works up through my palm, my arm, my chest, my neck, to those darkest corners of my mind. Where I am most afraid. The nothingness. I'm afraid death will be lonely.

At four in the morning, when the sun is first starting to bleed herself into the sky, I hear men in the hall. American and loud. I hear bodies against walls, laughter. I hope they will never leave. I love their dull noise. And I hate them, as people, as ignorant.

I hate them for their terrible parts.

But I'm jealous. From my bed I listen and stare out the large picture window, picture their bodies so loose and large, so young, so at ease and happy—happy enough to be discontent with a handjob, happy enough to laugh down the cries to shut the fuck up.

I can't sleep so I'm out early. There is a light snow and low fog, the kind headlights rise through, one car at a time. It's quiet. And I walk all the way from my hostel to the Rhine, watching the men with shovels, riding in the backs of trucks, scraping clean the sidewalks.

Everything is closed and I think about Phil, though I'm not sure why. I want to ask him all of the things never to ask. I want to understand him, to know what drives him, what drove him to a war, someone else's war, a war of defense. Maybe I am looking for him.

I watched the videos, the journalists, the beheadings.

I wonder if Phil had seen those and decided that enough was enough and that his body was worth such a fight.

But that would mean that one life had not been enough, that two and two thousand had not been enough, but that there was some number, some magic death toll that made people take notice.

Really, I know that it is just American lives that are counted.

I am sitting on a bench, kicking the reddish gravel, and there are people everywhere and the fog lifts and the snow tapers and a man with hoops of Eiffel Tower keychains tries to sell me everything. I sit there watching things pass without knowing it, until I am starving and hot and my skin is warm and pink, despite the freeze, and I am afraid that I will never come back.

I force myself to eat in a small café. I put whiskey in everything and pop painkillers. Numb is a feeling, the safest option I know. The weather warms, but not by much. But there are people, everywhere. Days pass and some nights I sleep, drunk and high, a body removed from itself. I feel myself stay silent. My voice a wasted thing.

There are museums, Petite-France, endless meandering streets. It snows more and money dwindles. Everyday, I keep the flash drives in my pocket, these whole lives rewritten, broken down to binary. We, at our cores, are so small, so minor, no more than a handful of gigabytes. No bigger than a thumb.

Everyday I get lost.

And I feel safe in that lost, because when I am lost that is all I am.

It is inevitable then. Our hearts. That Phil is there one morning. Standing all alone across the street, at a newspaper stand buying cigarettes. Snow on his shoes, hair wild, eyes swollen and red.

Am I here to learn what it means, or learn to trust that it means nothing?

I cross the cobblestone road and he turns. The sun is out, glimpsing through clouds. He is unwrapping his cigarettes and he nods like he has been expecting me.

*Cigarette?* he says.

He leads me to a small café, Pur Etc., a couple of blocks from the water, along the Grand'Rue, alone, just him and I. It doesn't look like he has shaved since I've seen him last and his thick hair juts out in awkward, endearing angles.

He asks if I want a coffee and orders two in quick French in a way that I can laugh at him. The girl behind the counter is beautiful, her face rounded and soft and her chestnut hair is pulled back in a messy way, and I expect Phil to linger on her. I watch his eyes to see him stare. But he doesn't. His face is slack and empty.

He picks a small table in the corner so we can look out the windows.

*I had to leave Paris,* he says, *I just kept thing thinking about the Bataclan and Charlie Hebdo.*

His eyes flicker, nervous and alive. He looks older. My stomach sinks. I wait for him to continue, but he just keeps looking at me. More men with more guns.

*A city is more than its violence, right?* I say.

I remember them both. I was in college still during each. Living a normal life. He takes a sip of his espresso and looks out the large windows that run along two walls of the

cafe. I watch a couple walk by, leaning heavily, safely against one another. Something like a bruise has sunk in under his lip. There is something strung out about him and I wonder if he's coming down from something.

*Depends on who you ask*, he says. He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen, tosses it on the table absently. There is the smell of coffee and bread. Christmas lights are draped along the window. *For the people it hit, the people who lost, an arm or a leg or a mother. For them, I don't know.*

*Did you lose someone?*

He shakes his head. Runs a hand over his chin, the stubble there. *But it got to me. I was in school. Studying literature*, he says with a scoff. His head is still shaking slowly. I want to agree with whatever he will say and change the subject. He terrifies me. Electrifies something in my body. Makes me tremble. But there is something in the way he's struggling for an idea that I can't stop. He asks, *Do you read a lot? I wanted to be a writer or something back then. When I saw that shit on the news I was just destroyed.* Our drinks come and he stops to look at the waitress. Everything about him is hungry. *I don't think I considered enlisting or anything, not until we went into Syria. But I was just so caught up with the idea of it. That there is a belief out there so strong, that you kill to preserve its... purity, I guess.*

He brushes his hand through his hair, says, *Do you believe in anything that strongly?*

For some reason I don't see the question coming and I'm taken back when it hits. Espresso has a taste I've never been able to stomach, but I sip at it anyways. I never meant to quit smoking. But after getting out my addiction was gone.



*There's things I'll fight for, I say.*

*Like what?*

*Like freedom. Freedom of speech. And the right to a fair trial. And the right to not be fucking spied on, I say. Civil liberties.*

*But you wouldn't kill for them? To protect the essence of those ideas?* he asks.

I don't know what I believe. But I believe my words will explode into this world, into existence, for forever maybe, and with all binary, there is a right and a wrong and an undoable.

Phil watches me with an intense look about his face that I imagine comes from a job where your life—everyone's lives—is constantly in the balance.

*I might die for them, I say.*

He nods.

*You went to war for them.*

The streets are crowded with people, passing us by. Light still hurts my eyes occasionally. And loud noises still hurt my ears. Touch burns my skin.

I'm looking for a reason to keep living.

*For your ideas, I continue, Or your beliefs or whatever. Doesn't that mean you'd kill for them?*

*I killed to protect a life,* he says and I'm struck by the verb and its tense, and again I want to ask him about war and the end of life.

*But not to protect an idea?* I say.

*I couldn't. No,* he shakes his head, *I can't see that far ahead. I can see a man with a gun to a woman's head, the bullet ending her life, and I can pull the trigger.* He pulls

out his pack of cigarettes and taps one into his hand. But he doesn't lite it, he just rolls it between his fingers, studying it.

He says, *Then there are the boys delivering IED parts and ammo.*

I say, *In the Sudan the militias see every little boy as a future threat.*

*And to kill the idea, you must kill the vessel,* he says, continues, *It's beautiful, to love an idea so fully, to believe in something so absolutely, that you can kill for it.*

*It's disgusting,* I say.

*Yeah,* he says, *From where we live, from what we believe. But who says we're right? Who the fuck are we?*

## Martyr

They call him the Invisible Sheik. For years only two faded images of him existed. Now there is a video, recorded in high-def. He is wearing all black in the footage, a traditional black turban and black dishdasha. His mannerisms unimposing, his beard full and dark, with hints of gray. He is believed to be in his 40s. From Iraq. Bookish and devout, a former clerk at a mosque. His friends called him quiet, insignificant. He gathered three degrees from the Islamic University of Baghdad. A PhD, maybe. Radicalized after the invasion when he was arrested and detained by American forces, treated like a terrorist and locked away with al-Qaida leaders. Likely beaten. Likely shamed. Likely tortured. Likely American made.

Upon his release he worked his way to lead the Iraqi sect of al-Qaida, openly defying Zawahiri's command. When the war broke out the Invisible Man went north to aid the Sunni under attack there. Allying with local rebels and winning quick ground. After years of fighting in Syria they turned south again, with their new, confident army, and pushed into Iraq, destroying the border to make way for their own state. For the caliphate.

They say he is smart. A tactician. Calculated, brutal, fearless. They say he was no one. A myth. A ghost.

On June 29, 2014 the Invisible Man took the stage at a mosque in Mosul to declare, again, the caliphate. The Islamic State. The beginning of the end. The first step toward the inevitable apocalypse. "And I," he said, "Am your leader, your father, your caliph. And together we will march on Rome." The video is the only known footage. He

is believed to have been born Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali Muhammad al-Badri al-Samarrai. The world though, calls him Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. He is worth \$10 million dollars, dead or alive.

“You have to care about this.”

Shaheed was dizzy drunk. The drop from the roof far, but he feared not far enough. He didn't care about ISIS or Syria or the Invisible Man or 200,000 bodies.

“You've got to get angry. Omar says the only real emotion is anger, the only productive emotion. You can do anything when you're fucking pissed. You're unstoppable.” Hussein finished his bottle in a long swig. “And how fucking cool would it be to usher in the apocalypse.”

“I haven't been to mosque since mom left.”

“But it's in your blood, brother.”

“I'm not even Muslim anymore. Neither were you.”

“It doesn't matter,” Hussein said, standing, snow dislodging and sliding from the steep roof in clumps. He wavered, pulled his arm back and chucked the bottle. It arced in the darkness, its green flashing briefly in a streetlight, flipping, and slapped through the windshield of a car parked across the street. “I'm fucking angry.”

From there the war went downhill. Sects divided further. More militias formed. The violence spread like poison in a river. Millions fled. The surge over the border to Lebanon or Turkey overwhelmed the aid available. Hundreds of thousands more aimed for Europe, drown in the rough seas.

The United States condemned Assad. Russia and Iran clung to him. All sides, claiming to be allied in the fight against ISIS, bombed the other's allies. More often than not they missed, rubble a civilian apartment block, a hospital. The armies entrenched in towns full of civilians.

“We test the limits of the ratio: how many dark-skinned civilians is one terrorist worth?” Hussein slapped Shaheed's shoulder. “How many?”

Hussein worked the weights, the bare metal nicked and rusted, while Shaheed watched the news on mute. He hadn't been to class in a week, his apartment in two.

He shrugged, “Ten?”

Hussein strained through the last of his set, his breath quick and measured. “No ratio can yet be determined because nobody gives a shit about us dark-skinned civilians. The U.S. and Russia will bomb whoever they want to kill whoever they can. Plus, no fucking news is coming out of IS right now, at least none that anybody is listening to.”

Shaheed looked down at his arms. His whole life he had been too light to be Arab, too dark to be white. Hussein was the same. But with his new beard his whole face seemed to grow more shadowed.

It was that day that Hussein first showed Shaheed pictures. First of the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz. The collateral damage. Aylan Kurdi's tiny body washed ashore in Turkey. What is to be expected from war. The villages in Waziristan.

Hussein tapped the screen of his computer, “And we sleep at night, little brother. This is the reality we ignore. This shit happens, these people, they live in constant fear of these beautiful fucking bombs, while we wipe our asses and watch cartoons. While we

jerk off and put bullets in our brains because we didn't get a promotion." He leaned back in his chair.

"Because why? Because we were born here by some stroke of luck?" He sighed and rubbed his eyes. To Shaheed he looked incredibly tired. "Fuck," he said. "Fuck."

Shaheed clicked to another page and studied the HD images of a boy's body, or what remained of it. The limbs mostly gone. The head mostly gone. The chest mostly gone. Only an arm and what looked to be a stomach remained. Far back, ten meters or so, the mangled frame of a soccer goal.

"It's too fucking rich," Hussein said. When he folded his arms behind his head his new muscles bulged.

Shaheed was struck by the ability to break the body. How simple it was to take it apart. We are just so many pieces. So many atoms of life. And we can be blown gorgeously apart, into nothingness, exploded beyond bone and blood, to matter and particles. Vaporized.

"I would love to get my hands on a drone—some day someone will hack one. Fly that thing over this city. No one would even know what to listen for. In the videos on YouTube you can tell when they hear it, they panic and fucking bolt, but they only get about two steps, cause it's way too fucking late, and boom. Here though, they wouldn't know shit, they'd let it smash in their dumb fucking skull."

Shaheed clicked to the next image. The page was in an illegible text he recognized from childhood. There were hundreds of photos. The villages changing to cities, to rural roads. The bodies changing sizes, changing amount remaining. But always the same smoking craters.

“So what the fuck?” he finally asked.

“So, wouldn’t it be great if we were all this afraid? Every single fucking person in this city. If we all walked around with that same fear of being blown up, of our little babies being blown up?” He looked thoughtfully at Shaheed, believing every word he was saying. “Wouldn’t it be great if we started *the war*?”

Shaheed thought for a moment and shrugged. He had never felt violence in his heart. In fact he’d shied from it. But the idea—the promise of showing the privileged the suffering he felt, the constant of it—flushed his chest.

Hussein leaned forward and snapped shut the computer. The apartment was cold. Shaheed watched his breath. The power had been turned off days ago. They stole Internet from the unit next door, let heat waft up from the floor below.

“Plus,” Hussein said, “We could help, in our small way, to bring about the apocalypse.” He lit up a joint. “And that would be pretty fucking cool.”

Phisher

It was by mishap that Graham found Walter and the tumultuous channels of Anonymous he operated from. It had been late in an evening during the second month of their freshmen semester. Six agents walked quickly through the fourth floor hallway of the dorm. Their shell jackets impossibly movie-like, so much so that several kids assumed it was some sort of pre-Halloween prank. A campus police officer accompanied the agents to the nondescript door at the far end of the hall and pounded. By the time Walter cracked the door and they shoved it in on him, Graham had crowded into the hall with two-dozen others, awed at the sheer absurdity of the scene. Walter fought back when they tried to pin him to the floor, squirming like a grounded fish, bucking two of the blue-suited against the doorframe. The scene was unnervingly silent. No one spoke. And Walter didn't so much groan. Graham felt like he was watching a film on mute, the only sounds the deep thumps of bodies smacking walls. It was almost as though Walter had been expecting it.

With Walter finally handcuffed they lifted him fully into his room and shut the door, leaving two agents and the campus cop in the hall. The two agents pulled notepads from their jackets and began taking quick statements and asking everyone to return to their rooms. Graham stayed.

“Hey,” a muscled female agent called from down the hall. “Back to your room.”

“What'd he do?”

The agent rested her hand on her hip and wearily walked down the hall. “You know Mr. Monroe well?”



Graham had only once run into the law after someone snitched on him for jail breaking iPhones two years before. He'd never been cuffed, but had driven himself to the station for finger printing, had gone to court and gotten a slap on the wrist, watched the four other boys facing the judge that day, all black, get sent to juvy one by one.

Graham lied, "Monroe? We're buddies."

She reached into her jacket and pulled out a note pad and pen. "What's your name?"

"Tim Berners-Lee. With a hyphen."

She wrote without looking up, without second-guessing him. He was young, he was white, he was handsome, enrolled at a top tier university. And how often were the feds trolled in person?

She dove in with a litany of questions.

"Does Mr. Monroe ever talk about his political beliefs?"

"He's really into Greenpeace."

She wrote quickly, far more than what Graham said.

"Has he ever expressed notions of distrust?"

"Like paranoia?"

The agent wrote rapidly.

Graham continued, "He's pretty distrustful of the Postal Service. He says his parents mail him cards but he never gets them. And he thinks his parents aren't his real parents. And he thinks DIA is a dormant government military base." Graham rattled off conspiracies. The agent kept writing. And after he'd exhausted all of his questions he thanked Graham, told him he'd been extremely helpful to an important investigation.

It was a troll's responsibility to be opportunistic.

In the end, after several hours spent in his room, they left Walter rubbing his wrists in his doorway, watching them file down the hall, with a bitter grin on his face. Days later Graham learned that Walter was asking around trying to find who had told the agents that he obsessed over the Fast and Furious arms program's mishaps in Mexico.

"What are you, a fucking troll?" Walter asked when he cornered him in the common room. Graham was bathed in the light of his computer, eating mac-n-cheese from a tupperware. It was well past midnight. "Jesus, I've never known anyone to pull shit like that off the net." A taller boy with cropped blonde hair and pressed clothes leaned against the wall behind Walter, clearly hiding a smitten smile. "I should kick the shit out of you," Walter said.

Graham felt his body tense, a cool running down his spine. He kept his face as absent as he could. Walter balled his hands into fists. Still the boy against the wall smiled.

"He's just fucking with you," the boy said, laughing more outright.

"I really am pissed!" Walter fired back. "They think I'm like a real government threat now, because of my *radical beliefs*."

The boy laughed again, making no move to stifle the pleasure he was getting from this scene. "Your name is Graham, right? Walter and I wanted to meet you. I'm Terry." He ran a hand across his chin. "We truly did find what you had to say about Walter here hilarious, whether or not Walt's being a good sport about it right now."

"Goddamnit, Terry."

Terry took a step forward and rested a hand on Walter's shoulder. "Ask him what you wanted to ask him."

Again Graham felt a sense of foreboding worm down his throat.

"I heard you like computers," Walter finally muttered, still fuming, his fists still clenched.

Graham nodded.

Walter said nothing, fumed, so Terry stepped in. "Walter was wondering if you dabbled in coding at all. I don't know the technical terms, but he's working on a rather, *secret* piece of code and he's a bit stuck, and a bit nervous be too active after the... *incident* the other day. He thinks they're watching him now."

"Because they are! And they'll keep watching me because of this asshole."

The code Walter was working on was a fail safe of sorts, though something more customizable and private. He'd been monitoring the feds and had been tipped off that he was going to get a visit. In his panic he'd wiped everything. Lost his whole hard drive. A reality he hadn't been enjoying since, despite the fact that it had likely saved him from serving serious time. Not to mention the fact that having a completely wiped system angers the feds even more. When they see a blank system they know they knocked on the right door and they set to work building their case. Graham had never met anyone as serious about coding and the net as Walter, and he'd nearly gotten him arrested before they even met. But still, he was proud of his joke, of any chance to make fools of the federal government, or anyone for that matter.

Hacker

Phil orders a coffee to go and pays and offers to buy me something, but I say I'm okay even though I feel suddenly hungry.

We leave together like it is the natural thing to do. He is tall even with his shoulders slumped. Neither of us invites the other to do anything, and we don't talk about other plans. We just leave, and walk side-by-side without saying a word.

We turn off of Grand'Rue to a street I don't know and walk towards the water. People are bundled and packing the sidewalks. We pass more cafes and hotels, gift shops, churches.

Soon he says, *A few days ago I woke up and she was gone.* He drags at his cigarette. *Anna, I mean.*

I have never been able to tell the difference between love and infatuation. Because right now I love him. I love everything I know about him. But mostly his closeness, the way the sleeves of our jackets brush from time to time, the way he stands over me, the way his coffee steams in the cold morning, the way he's no more sane or broken than I am.

*I'm sorry.*

*She'll be fine.*

But maybe that's infatuation: loving what you know, and not yet knowing the things you hate. Because loving everything that's loveable is loving just a fraction. It's like loving an idea.

Words are like any coding language. Every one and every zero is potential. A true and an untrue. And every line has a right order. Everything is important. And there is wrong. I have to think this, to remember the danger in my thoughts, in these sounds, in their push into the world.

He says, *What I mean is, what's it take? They break us down in basic, try to strip away our humanity and give us a collective brain. They make us believe that we can't live without each other, that everybody east of the Mediterranean is going to kill us. And then you get over there and they're right; you can't live without your battle buddy, and almost everyone is pointing a gun at you.*

*It fucks with my head. I've seen that shit myself, and I still can't believe it. Part of me feels split open. Like there are two halves of me and I don't know which half I am. I'm not either of them.*

We walk past endless shops, their glass windows sending back images of some stranger in a blue coat with wild hair, some alien, some monster here in the heart of Strasbourg. I look at Phil and see him lost somewhere.

It feels good to think of saving someone other than myself.

We walk in the cold until my legs hurt. We talk to fill some emptiness that we are both so obviously fighting. We talk to fill the void. Twice he stops to buy bottles of wine from corner stores. And we drink them while we walk. And I find a bathroom and crush half a morphine pill with my lighter on the porcelain sink. I told myself I wouldn't snort it anymore, but I'd done it outside of Alex's, so why not again? The body can do less to

protect the brain when you snort it. But I need it. First there is the burn, then, quickly, the warmth washing over my cheeks and down my neck.

In the mirror I wash away the powder and see a parasite. A woman with thoughts I no longer want to own. Where is the wolf?

I see incendiary. I see destruction.

And then children. Families. The ugliness of joy from the outside.

Even when I lived in Columbia, after I'd left my parents place, and pushed further and further into my quiet dark corners, annoyed by everyone around me, I'd still thought about a family. Never in the context of a man or woman, never hinged on that idea, that I must find someone to make me whole and give me a child. I just pictured that someday it might happen, that it might click into place and that that person, that partner, would be there and we would buy a house somewhere far away where the sharps of our faces would round and we would be invisible to everyone except each other, somewhere where we could start something that would make me different.

I'm afraid I'll hate my children.

A mother can destroy so easily. More than anyone, a mother is supposed to love unconditionally, support unconditionally, care unconditionally; imagine the damage I can do if I become a monster.

I remember once with Alex. A moment in her car one winter when we hit a patch of ice. She was driving and lost control, our bodies thrown, going weightless. The rush of inevitability. We slapped into a snow bank, powder shot up over the windshield. And the first thing she did was turn and reach for me, say, *Are you okay?* A few minutes later, we

were back on the road and I was shaking, terrified and bruised, yet feeling safe, loved, looked after.

Do you know love, Phil?

The sun doesn't set so much as drown, the light sucked suddenly from the sky while we walk aimlessly through the city. Streetlamps flicker to life. Christmas lights turn on. And with the dark comes the cold again. I button more buttons on my coat. And Phil keeps lighting cigarettes off each other and blowing great clouds of ephemeral smoke into the night.

*I worry I've done this before*, he says as we walk before the Cathédrale Notre Dame de Strasbourg, amid the crowds of people. *That it'll never be right.*

*What are you trying to undo?*

He looks down at me. *You shouldn't think I've got anything to undo.*

And then towards the end with Alex, the nights we would get drunk and I would force myself upon her, because she was—and is—beautiful. And we would fuck. And the next day I would feel her there next to me, not even breathing, afraid that if I felt her beside me I'd tell her to leave, because I could no longer get drunk on her. And I'd get up and shower without saying a word and she would be gone when I came out. And later, when we met up between classes, I would see in her eyes that nothing had changed for her, that it hadn't died. I could see that she wanted to say no to me, when I went for her shirts and her buttons, wanted to say *I can't this time, unless it's love.*

And now I know that that's just love. Just one more kind of the monster.

## Martyr

The thought of leaving weighed heavy when it came, because it kept coming. And each time it came heavy with guilt, with The Dread. Shaheed could just drive. Somehow he could find a way to sneak through the checkpoints on foot and steal another car in a suburb. He could find his way across some state line. Or he could go to Emily's. She would be home and she envelop him, offer a blanket and some warmth, and they could sit side-by-side on her couch, removed and safe, and they could watch the news together, gawk together, until it was over and they could turn on a movie, something mindless, and empty, something that would kill him with oblivion. Or he could drive until he hit a checkpoint and just get out and throw down his gun and let them take him, let them make him warm and, let him sleep.

But with the guilt there was shame. He was embarrassed to even think such weak thoughts. He could never leave his brother to die alone.

Shaheed parked the car a handful of blocks away from Margaret's apartment, beneath a large, skeletal tree and changed out the plates with another stolen set—anything to slow down the feds. He pulled the car's cover from the trunk and draped it clumsily over the vehicle, not bothering with the mirror straps. Next he covered it with scoops of snow. Everything would be unraveled in due time, he knew, but so much could trip them up, make them look in the wrong direction, for even a second.

*We can do so much with a second.*

Margaret's apartment was cluttered and warm, lit by several antique lamps. Books were stacked at random on shelves and scattered randomly across the coffee table. The



space was full with potted plants and trinkets and pictures, like a home should be. A cat was waiting for him by the door when he stumbled in the door and it rubbed up against his leg.

Hussein was leaning against the kitchen table and Margaret was washing her hands. The bag was open on the counter, the IV tubes unspooling from the depths, the bags of blood he'd stolen earlier stacked beside it. She had taken off her coat and sweater and was left in a sheer tank top. Her back and arms bare and well worked. Shaheed saw her age in her limbs. She didn't look back at him.

Hussein nodded at his brother.

The water ran throaty over her hands, the sound the only sound in the room. Her hands had gone still.

"How are you doing?"

Hussein kept Shaheed's eye and shrugged his shoulder, the pain evident on his face.

Shaheed could feel his heart racing through his limbs and finally he could consider it and he took a long, deep breath.

"He's lost a lot of blood," Margaret said without turning. "You can see it in his face, his lips."

"He wasn't talking to you."

"I know," she turned from the sink, her hands held up before her. "But I'm the doctor here."

"That means nothing here." Hussein pointed to the floor. "Here, you nothing. You are a tool. And once you are no longer useful..."

Margaret looked unmoved.

“What’s to stop me from just letting you die then?”

“I’ll kill you right now.” Hussein lifted his empty hand and made a gun with his fingers.

Margaret looked at the threat.

“You think I don’t know men like you? You think you’re special?”

“Shut up, woman. I’m not afraid of you.”

“You’re boys, children, with guns and rage. And, what? You think this will make you immortal? Get you into *Firdaws*? That somehow you’ll make a difference in this world?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you’re going to change *anything*.”

Hussein’s fingers wavered in the quiet room.

“I’ll cut out your tongue.”

“I could scream right now. Someone would call the cops. You’re *jihad* would be done.”

“It’s the same thing here, Margaret. It’s not just your life on the line. We’ll kill them, one-by-one.” Hussein dropped his hand and carefully unzipped his blood-caked coat. “Or we’ll just blow up your whole fucking apartment.”

Shaheed watched the change in her face, the way her muscles ticked and she bit back a sob. Her strength had impressed him. She was fearless for her own life. But her weakness was that she cared. He pitted her for that.

Shaheed could feel the weight of his own suicide vest.

Shaheed knew she couldn't know much about bombs. Surely they could destroy her apartment, maybe the unit above. But not the whole building. Not with these shitty homemade things. They were meant for themselves, for Hussein and Shaheed. It was luck if they got anyone else.

"Just tell me I'm wrong then," she said. "Tell me this," she threw her hands wide, gesturing toward the whole city. "Tell me all this violence and murder is worth something."

Shaheed was struck by the sincerity in her plea.

Hussein swiveled his head, stoned on morphine. Shaheed pictured him killing her right then. Her body tearing open and thrown backward. He waited for the scream, the limp, another absence, another death, another victory. Especially someone so ignorant.

"We're doing it out of love, Margaret," Hussein said.

She leaned back and braced herself on the counter, not quite cowering. Then she did something funny: she closed her eyes, as if to say, *if I can't see this then it is not real, I can't die.*

"Open your eyes," Shaheed said. His voice was almost caring. He surprised himself. When she did, slowly, he said, "More people are going to die tonight. Nothing is going to change that. But you," he paused, scared almost by the strength in her face. He swallowed. "You don't have to."

She stared at him, her eyes unblinking, glittering with wet, until he looked away in shame.

It made him sad, and angry, the mindgames Hussein was playing with her. And her, her unwillingness to see the truth. He felt pity for her. Somewhere there was fear that

she was biting back, a fear that her cowardice stifled. He knew this because there was no way that she was stronger than him. It wasn't possible.

She was in denial, he decided. Like all Americans, always. They led whole lives of denial, consuming until the hollows in their chests were full of material ignorance.

“Do you understand what you're doing to people?” she said, glancing back and forth between the two of them. “Not the people you've killed, but the families you've destroyed, the children you've orphaned.”

“Don't lecture us,” Hussein snapped. He was slowly dropping into a chair. His face had grown even more flushed since Shaheed had gotten to the apartment.

“Nothing justifies what you've done,” she whispered.

“Do you know how many your drones kill every year in countries America isn't even at war with?” Shaheed asked.

She met his eye, her head tilted some. She was sweating and her hair had matted to her forehead. “Do you?”

The words burned. Doubt flooded his face. He wanted a number to shout at her, a fact, a figure, he wanted to show her the pictures of the bodies; better yet, he wanted to show her the bodies. But instead he saw his brother, dying before his eyes, blood pooling on the white tile beneath his chair, gore caked in his clothing. Instead Shaheed said, “We need your help.”

“We don't need her help. We don't need anything from her,” Hussein said, slapping his hand against the table.

“Please help him,” Shaheed said.

She did not move.

“Shut the fuck up, Isaac!”

“He’s going to die. Look at him. Please.”

Hussein raised the gun and pointed it at Shaheed.

“Take care of him, give him the blood.”

She stayed motionless. Shaheed held his hands out toward his brother, “It’s why she’s here.”

“But we don’t need her.”

“We do. You’ll die.”

“I’ve changed my mind, I’d rather die than be saved by an *infidel*.”

Still the language sounded false from his brother’s mouth, these new words, this new war.

Shaheed looked to Margaret. “He’s going to die.”

“Don’t be so fucking weak.”

“Help him.”

“He’ll kill me,” she said suddenly, pleading to Shaheed.

“Without me who would you fear? Look at your life without fear, you do nothing, you watch TV and shop for expensive clothes. Without fear you are a waste, you don’t have anything to live for.”

“Put down the gun!”

“You need me.”

“Let her help you, Hussein. If you don’t let her help you it’s over. You’ll die.”

Hussein looked at him. “Then you finish this on your own.”

“I can’t,” Shaheed said.

“Don’t be weak.”

The gun wavered back and forth between Shaheed and Margaret. Suddenly Shaheed felt unsafe with his brother, like he would not hesitate to pull the trigger. He felt a spike of The Dread. It could all be over in a matter of minutes if Hussein shot her here, in this quiet apartment complex. They could die. All of them. He could die.

Why couldn’t he be fearless?

“That’s not the plan, Hussein.”

“The plan is fucked.” He laughed.

Shaheed was confused. His brother was belligerent. Completely senseless. “No it’s not,” Shaheed said. He was angry. The plan would only be fucked if Hussein shot her here in this kitchen. But he didn’t care about the plan. All he felt was the fear of being all alone. Shaheed wanted death, to die a martyr or whatever, but he was terrified of dying alone.

His weakness made him cringe.

“Dying now would be easy. It would be cowardly.”

Hussein grinned darkly and set down the gun. “How sick and dumb you sound.”

“We’ll take her car in the morning,” Shaheed gestured to Margaret, who sat still on the floor, removed and empty. “Load up our shit and head—”

Hussein cut him off. “South. To the border.” Hussein caught his eye, gave him a look that said, *quiet*. “She can help us and we can escape.”

Shaheed stayed silent. Confused.

Hussein turned to Margaret. “You help us and we’re gone. We’ll leave the city. Nobody else dies.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“If you help me now, we’ll walk away. No one else will die.”

“Bullshit.”

To Shaheed the lie felt childish and bold, but Hussein kept with it.

“What have you got to lose?”

“You’ll kill me either way.”

Hussein eyed her and sat down his gun, beaten and tired. “Yeah,” he said,  
“Maybe. But if you don’t help now, I’ll kill you now. If you do, maybe you’ll live. Then,  
there’s a chance.”

Phisher

“Jesus,” Walter whispered. “It’s on every fucking station. There is nothing on but clips of this mall burning.” He cycled through channels, the scene flashing by from dozens of angles.

“It wasn’t a fire,” Graham said.

“And they keep talking about them being Muslim or ISIS or Al Qaeda. Earlier I heard them saying some shit about how *dark* their skin was.” Walter shook his head.

“This fucking country man.”

“They were *dark*. Or Arab. Something,” Graham said.

“But still. Fuck. The leaps we make. No one talks about what drives a man to this.” Walter paused. “You saw them?”

“Yeah,” Graham said. “I think.”

He could feel Walter looking at him, his worried eyes boring into his head.

Graham looked up from his screen. He’d spent a half hour crafting his message. On the TV a woman stood in a bright jacket, both hands clutching the microphone. Behind her, in the distance, was the mall, stark and unnaturally lit. The scene was chaotic. But this harsh wasn’t enough; a dozen tickers swept across the screen. Graham couldn’t focus his eyes to read anything besides the headline, which hadn’t changed since he’d seen it in the hospital.

“Including those gunned down after the bombing, the total number of deaths is now 11,” the reporter was saying. Her face looked worried. But Graham wanted her destroyed, barely held together. He wanted to see her crack and cry. This was a tragedy,



how could anyone hold it together? “With an estimated 200 plus hospitalized, according to the DPD Twitter.” She looked down. “Again, these men are still on the streets, with the intent seeming to be to continue this horrific spree of death and destruction. If you have any information at all, or if you see anyone resembling these men, do not hesitate to call the number on the screen.” Then it happened, she went to turn, to open herself up to the scene behind her, and her foot caught and she stumbled, “Goddamnit,” the camera jerked and and the shot went black, cut back to the studio.

Graham looked at Walter and their eyes met for a moment embarrassingly vulnerable, and they both glanced away.

“Are you alright, guy?”

“Can you turn it off?”

“I need to know what happened.”

“Then read about it online, I’m just sick of seeing it.”

“No, I mean with you, Graham. Why are we doing this?”

Graham didn’t normally spend time with Tom. And he hadn’t told Walter that he was, that Tom had been there. They weren’t estranged, Graham and Tom, but they weren’t close.

Walter had no idea.

“We haven’t done anything yet,” Graham said.

“Don’t avoid me,” Walter snapped.

“We have to do the right thing. The cops are scattered all over the place. They don’t know where to look. They don’t know shit about tracking people online, and right

now that's the best bet of finding these guys. Odds are they are holed up in one of the hundred thousand houses in this city, just waiting for the moment to strike."

"The feds can do the same shit we can. They know the tech."

"But they've got mountains of bureaucracy to break through. We," Graham slapped his chest with his good hand, "we can mobilize now."

"You sound fucking crazy."

"If we have the power to help, we have a responsibility."

"And if we get someone killed? If we get killed?"

Graham stared at Walter. "If we can stop them from setting off another bomb."

Graham turned back to the computer. "I need to focus, Walt." He read back what he'd been writing. He was meticulous, disgusted by the slop others produced. What was terrifying about poor grammar? Who would follow someone who couldn't even muster up the time to do to spell check?

They were chaos. They were the Internet Hate Machine, as Fox so endearing named them. But Graham knew that in the middle of havoc, calculation was necessary. No one would take them seriously if they didn't appear tempered, precise, surgical.

Despite himself, he needed these things.

He had to help. He had to use his power to stop the violence. He had to do what was right.

"You know I'll help," Walter said.

Graham said nothing. He could not be stilled.

"dear fellow anons,

We have been violated. Our safety has been compromised. Our blood has been spilled. While the spectacle of a local government falling to its knees has been joyously amusing, violence against us, the innocent people of Denver, will not be tolerated.

What these men, these *terrorists*, do not understand, is that they have poked the hornet's nest. We are everywhere. We are everyone. And it is our bodies bit by screws and nails, it is our heart on the operating table. Yet, they expect us to roll over and die. They expect us to be weak and full of cowardice. But they expect this because they do not know us. They do not know that Anonymous is humming beneath the surface of Denver, of America, of everywhere.

We were a sleeping giant.

And now we have been kicked awake.

It is time to act, brothers and sisters, anons uppercase and lower, it is time to strike back, to show these terrorists just how mean our bite really is.

Tonight the government has failed. Laws no longer exist. Our brand of justice is the only brand. Use whatever means necessary. Find these bloodsucking leeches, extract revenge.

We are legion.

We do not forgive. We do not forget.

Expect us.”

It was not his best work. But it was hard with his head so fogged, the fingers of his lone hand so numb. It was hard when he knew not all of it was right. He didn't want

anarchy. He didn't want any heads on a pole. But he wanted these men stopped. He quickly created a gmail account to use as contact info.

Graham clicked enter.

Walter leaned over his shoulder and read. "*Extract revenge?*"

"We have to stop them."

Walter returned to the couch. "Yeah, but what the hell does that mean? We're going to find them and hand them over to the feds."

"We're going to stop them, by whatever means necessary."

"Jesus, you sound like a fucking op slogan, Graham. Don't just keep saying the same shit. Tell me something new."

"You said you'd help me."

"And I will, you know I will. But people are crazy man. You know first hand how nuts some of these internet jackoffs are. They'll go vigilante, fucking shoot somebody, maybe even the *wrong* somebody."

"Look at what these guys have done." Graham gestured toward the TV. "How many more people are going to get killed before someone stops them?"

"I'm all for tracking a digital trail, I'm all for doxing them, and owning them, and then turning them in. Let the feds get in the shootout. Let the feds arrest the wrong guy." He stood and walked to the small dining room table and grabbed an apple from a bowl there. "You say you want to do what's right."

Graham stood up. He needed a shirt. And dry socks. "I do. And what's right is making sure no one else gets hurt."

Walter took a bite of the apple. “Do you really want another vegetable on your conscience?” he asked.

Graham snapped. Fuck Walter for bringing that up. “No, I hope they kill them this time, I hope they show up with baseball bats again, but this time I hope they don’t stop when he pisses himself.” Graham stopped at the mouth of the hallway. “I’ll drive them there myself.”

“That’s not right, guy.”

“Well it sure isn’t wrong. Tonight one life *is* worth ten.”

Walter leaned against the wall at the mouth of the short hallway, leaned into Graham’s anger. “What happened today? I know you were there. I can see that you’re hurt. But there’s something you aren’t telling me. I’m not fucking stupid.”

Graham pointed to the TV. “That.”

“To you? I don’t see any shrapnel in your legs. Did you see it? I just want to know where you’re coming from, Graham.”

“They hit me with their car.”

“Nothing else?”

Graham clinched his fist. No one could piss him off like Walter. “Nothing else? Fuck you!”

Walter backtracked, “Not like that isn’t terrible, I don’t mean it like that.”

“Nothing else,” Graham said, pushing past him and starting off toward Kiley’s bedroom.

Walter said nothing and made no move to follow him.

His sudden movement brought the pain back, to his heart, to everywhere. Where he wasn't broken he was bruised. He buried himself in the knife-sharp humming from his shoulder. There was something other than the unfaceable. A heaven of sorts. The snap of bone, the openness of marrow. Tommy. Tom. If it hurt bad enough Tom wasn't dead. No one was dead in the hurt, no limbs had been torn clean off. In the hurt there was nothing but the hurt. He fell against the wall, knocking a picture from its hook, let out a small groan. Tommy was dead. He put his hand on his broken shoulder and pressed, pressed until night started to swirl around his vision, until he was alone. He was safe in the darkness.

Walter was talking. Graham could make nothing of the sounds, could find no words in them. So he said, "I'm fine, I'm fine," and took several shaky steps into Kiley's bedroom. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. The darkness receded until he finally found his breath.

Hacker

We walk the Quais twice, circling this small island, following roads that are empty of people. We finish a third bottle of wine and mostly stop talking. Phil buys another pack of cigarettes. Then, we are turning down a street I haven't walked yet and suddenly the whole city is new. We are drunk, gliding from streetlamp to streetlamp; the golden hue of safety. We pass smokes back and forth and I can taste his wet, I inhale him, that left over air from his lungs, and the smell churns my stomach, turns me upside down. We stumble over the cobblestones; the drunk and the high feel dangerously good. I can feel myself edging closer to some precipice. But Phil is deliberate to not touch me, to let only our fingers brush as we trade drags and pulls.

Then, we turn a corner to an empty street, and I look up and we are the youngest things, among the centuries and preservation, the bygone; the most destroyed.

Phil stops at a door, another door at the base of another building among all the buildings in Strasbourg that all look the same to me, all the same in a way that makes the city repeat, feel at one and cohesive. He punches in a short code and I follow him through another door, past mailboxes, over worn carpet, and up six flights of aching stairs. Lights sputter to life as we pass and die in our wake. We make circles to the top, until I am not sure I want to be here with this man, until I'm holding to the railing, feeling ready to topple over, down six flights, to the hard collapsing darkness below. Then there is his grip, firm on mine, his fingers biting bruises on the flesh of my arm, pulling me back, over the railing, up the last of the stairs. He says things that I don't hear. Or maybe he is singing. A song I don't know. My heart hammers and builds until my vision darkens. He

is pulling harder, guiding down the lone hallway, my feet dragging in his grip. At the end he unlocks three bolts on a heavy door and pushes me inside the room, his grip loosening. He pushes with his palms until I am sitting amid some softness, a couch, and I fall all the way there among blankets and pillows.

The room smells of must and cigarettes. He leaves the lights off but my eyes adjust. There is a small shower in the corner beside a sink. A small closet, opposite. A table and chair set that fold flat to make space for the couch to fold out into a bed. A hot plate and coffee maker. A window cut into the steeply slanted roof over a narrow counter. Through the frosted glass I can see the lights of a cathedral.

He drops his keys loudly on the floor and sets to the buttons of his jacket.

*No*, I say but his drunk fingers keep working. *Please*.

Suddenly his face is all shadow and I can see nothing there. No trace of his mind. The coat falls to the floor.

*Stand up*, he says.

There is little room between us. Feet. He backs against the counter, only two more steps. He could reach me with an arm.

*Stand up*, he says again, his tongue loose, his lips wet.

I shake my head. He is not between me and the door, but he could be in one move.

I am here because it is so easy to die. It is the easiest thing in the world.

I don't say: *I shouldn't be here*.

And he doesn't say: *You're right*.



And neither one of us apologizes. I have learned that the language of fear is silence. And I am silent.

But I won't close my eyes. From his back pocket he pulls a bottle of something, drinks the last of it, refastens the cap and lets it drop. Next he pulls his heavy sweater over his head, carefully undoes each button of his flannel. His jeans, his socks, until he stands in a white shirt and black boxers. Then he slips off the shirt. He is nearly naked and I am angry. At him, and this city, at the world for pushing me here. I am angry at these men. Then he pulls down his boxers and kicks them from his feet, drunk, he stumbles backward, and catches himself on the counter.

When he rights himself he looks different. He is femur-thin. There are shadows of ribs, veins mapping him. The inward bend of his legs. His penis. The wheezing breaths, the wet in his lungs. It would have been easy to not follow him here. It would have been easy to never see him again, to stay on trains until I hit sea, catch a plane to some corner of the Earth where no one would ever have ever found me.

He stands statue still, bent under some great weight, a silhouette in the ambient window light, as though he might take one step back and vanish into it.

Then, softly, he says, *This is what you're afraid of. This*, he says and points to his head. *You and everyone else. This is violence. This is terrorism.*

He is swaying, the slump of drunk.

*To kill ideas*, he says, dropping his finger from his temple, letting it cover the whole of his body, *they kill this*.

Then, he falls back, hitting the counter hard, the noise loud in the small room, and slides to the floor where he sits, knees to his chest, head lulled back, staring off into some

other universe, where we are different people, where the lights stay off and we shut the door and come together, work off our clothes together, strip ourselves together, make some greater truth than the breakability of a body by a knife, by a gun, by a mind. Where we kiss, hard from the beginning, desperate like we are. Where I can be small with him, and he can be small with me, where war has thinned and hardened him, until nothing on his body was wasted, where his arms are around me and I am up against the door, and the that light comes from the window is golden, from the cathedral, from god. Where after a time I am naked and he is naked and his hands are on my breasts and my thighs and I am touching him too and the breath I hear is hungry and whole. Where on the bed he doesn't bother with protection, because the world is a place fit for children, where life is beautiful and a blessing to create. Because there is nothing that ever need be between people, because togetherness is still a purity. Where I don't hate this war-torn man huddled on the floor because I have so much leftover anger after hating everything else in the world and nowhere to put it. Where love doesn't mean being afraid.

In the morning the sun ignites on the wall over the bed. I lay awake and watch it, the yellowness of it, as it crawls down the chipped paint toward me. Phil is asleep on the floor beneath his coat, his head heavy on the wood. His clothes are scattered around him. And I lay on the bed, holding my breath—maybe forever, until I die, to hold onto the peace of this first feeling, the moment before the fear returns.

From where I lay I can see nothing but sky through the slanted window. The clouds are thin and light. But mostly it is blue, a crisp blue, deep blue that looks like summer. It is warm beneath the down comforter.

Phil's chest rises. Ugly tattoos I couldn't make out in the dark dot his muscled shoulders and back. The ink is splotched and fading already and I am certain that he got them on a tour, in some haphazard way.

I have the feeling that if I don't move, if Phil doesn't wake, that I can stay here forever clinging to this painless second.

When Phil wakes I hear his breathing change, go silent, slower. But he doesn't move or say anything. And neither do I. We lay like that for a long time, the both of us acting asleep, him on the floor, me on the bed.

*I was in prison most of last year*, I say, my voice a whisper, a shake.

He rolls his head slightly to look up at me. He fishes the cigarette pack from his jeans and lights one. Smoke wafts through the early light.

I regret saying it almost immediately.

He inhales and says, *Me too*. I've got no idea what he means.

The cigarette crackles. After a moment he sits and pulls a mug from the counter to ash into and tosses me the pack. He is even thinner in the light, his back pocked with scars. Dark, wispy hair running down his chest.

He makes coffee in his underwear. While the water boils he washes his face in the sink and runs a hand through his hair. The sun hits his skin and his weight draws groans from the floorboards.

I want him to say something. I feel like he is ignoring me. *Have you really been to prison?*

He doesn't look back at me but says, *I've been arrested. Juvy, drunk tank.* He splashes another handful of water on his face. *But no, not prison.*

*I don't like what you did last night.*

He leans his weight against the counter and stares out the window. *Okay.*

*Okay, what?*

*Did you talk to Anna or something,* he says. *You two exchange emails?*

I say nothing. Silence, now, is a weapon.

There is a nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the counter and he unscrews the top and pours several fingers into a coffee mug.

*I don't mean to do that shit,* he says. *It's not in my heart. Or my head, or whatever. I don't know where it comes from. Maybe my mind is broken. Sometimes I just lose control.* He drinks most of the mug, maybe all of it.

My head splits. I left the rest of my painkillers at my hotel. My skin is damp. I want to leave.

*I think the bruises scared her the worst,* he says. *You know? In the moment she panicked some. But not like in the morning, in the mirror.* Finally he turns to face me, but meets my eye for just a moment before looking at the floor. *She called me a monster.* He worries his lip. *I called her a whore. I didn't mean to. I was probably drunk.*

He brings the mug to his lips again.

*On her neck,* I say.

He rubs the ceramic over his teeth, the bumpy clicks send shivers down my spine. He nods.

Out the window there are birds. All of a sudden. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Impossibly high, so that they are just specks from here, clapping over the blue, utterly silent. When the first vanishes beyond, two more appear. And it keeps on. Until I feel like I have witnessed some aberration of the world, something I was not supposed to see.

*It wasn't really me, Phil says setting down the mug. I mean, it was. It was me. But a version. Something someone else created, that I had no part in. Like God, there in my hands. Like He wouldn't let me stop.* He turns back toward the counter. His voice drops and he says, *Do you want any coffee?*

*Sure, I say. Then, Were you afraid to die?*

Phil looks over his shoulder at me. He pours two cups pulls a loaf of bread from the mini-fridge beneath the counter. A knife from a drawer.

*In Syria?*

I nod but he isn't looking at me anymore.

The knife works softly through the loaf. The sound is comforting.

*Sometimes yeah, he says, Sometimes no. I think mostly the movies have it backwards. I was afraid most when there was nothing to do. So much of the time we just sat around, bored. And when you're bored it's easy to get scared. But out on patrol, in a firefight it shuts down, your brain, I mean. It just flicks off. You don't think.*

He says, *You go numb after a while. Then the only thing that can make you feel is getting shot at.*

Then he says, *And fucking, I guess.* And he laughs

I envy him. His laughter is a wedge between us. I thought we had both been robbed, I thought we had lost the same things. I don't know why I thought that. But now it's clear we didn't.

And for this I feel guilty.

With the coffee and bread he walks to the bed and stops and I hesitantly move, slide over and make room for him beside me. He hands me a cup and props himself against the wall. When I sit up I can see the sharp rise of the cathedral. I am careful to make sure our bodies don't touch, that there is room for this rotten guilt.

*I'll tell you the worst thing though, he says, chewing a bite of bread, The worst thing is this guy I know, McIntyre, during my first tour we were out on patrol and he took stray round to the helmet that knocked him clean out. We got his ass back on the coyote and he ended up being more or less okay, except for the fact that he knew that he was supposed to be dead. He chews bread and washes it down with coffee. See, in his mind that slug should have dropped another quarter of an inch and made mashed potatoes of his brain, but by some sick twist of fate it didn't. Higher ups wanted to ship him home, but we only had two weeks left before going stateside, so he stuck it out with us. And back home, we get off the plane and turn in our rifles and come out, to this little parade to all our families holding signs and cheering for us and I see him looking around for his wife—they'd gotten married the week before we shipped out—but she wasn't there and he figured, she must have just overslept—it was early a.m. So he hitched a ride home and when he gets to his apartment he realizes he doesn't have his key so he knocks and knocks and there's nothing so he kicks down the door and the place is empty save for his clothes and a handful of boxes in the garage.*

He takes another sip of coffee and clears his throat. We are both looking out the window at the empty sky.

*Mcintyre, took this as the sign that he was right about that bullet, that it really should have blown his head off. It was supposed to, and his wife had known it too. He pictured her packing up the minute that bullet was fired in Kobani. From then he knew it was only about finding another bullet to do the job right.*

He takes another bite of the bread. I study the outline of his jaw, which is sharp and churning. It is strange to be so close to someone. I can smell the alcohol in our sweat, the hint of smoke.

*Did he find that bullet?*

Phil makes a deep noise. He says, *The funniest part was that I was right beside him. Me and Rodgers and Johnson and Martinez and bullets were kicking up sand everywhere and McIntyre was the only one to take a round. It's fucking random. They weren't aiming for him. They were aiming for us. They wanted us all dead. It's all so damn indiscriminate.*

He seems unfazed now, by this story. But it's clear that he's talked about this before. This has become a story, something very far away from the man in the bed beside me, with his ugly tattoos and sharp chin. If it's a story then it is not the past. Stories make sense, there is logic in them, they exist in a place in time. All these violences we know are not stories. They are explosions of senseless loss and hurt.

Alex told me once that a story is the only way out.

I met with my lawyer twice. He was from the ACLU, who took a special interest in me. He was alone that first time, with a notebook and a recording device. He told me

I'd been in supermax for 63 days, that it was already April. For a long time he only asked questions about solitary and how I was doing. I was ashamed of my hair then, it had already fallen out, and I had trouble meeting his eye. But I did my best to answer his questions and stay interested. At the end he stood and took a step back. Normally people shake hands, but we couldn't do that there. And I was grateful for that. My skin felt burned and open, all nerves, like the only thing I would ever feel again was hurt. He said it was nice to meet me and said to stay strong, and he said everyone sent their love and he said he'd be back. But I didn't believe him. I felt forgotten again the minute the door closed behind him, before they even uncuffed my hands from the table and led me back to my dark little hole.

I'm not sure how long I waited the lawyer to come back. But eventually he did and I was surprised again.

I'd spent a lot of my time thinking of everything I wanted to explain. I had decided right off that I wouldn't lie. So when we got down to it, I did my best to tell it how it happened. They were not afraid to keep me here, without warrant or just cause or even a trial, so what could the truth hurt. I was fucked either way.

I say, *You know, in a way Rotors and bearings build borders now.*

Phil doesn't know what I mean, so I say it again and he frowns.

*Light and strong and well-balanced rotors. Magnetic bearings. They are the consolidating forms of power in the 21st century.*

He tells me not to be so cryptic.

*To separate uranium 235 from 238 you have to build a centrifuge that can spin at 100,000 RPMs.*



*And it's 235 that makes the bombs, he says.*

I nod. Outside, over the cathedral, the horizon is splitting like an egg into morning.

*And power, I say.*

He grunts somewhere low in his throat. These things are important to him in complicated ways. *And power*

I nod again. We are close in a very far way. The space in the bed between us is cold and foreign. Our bodies warm and separate.

*But first you have to make it a gas. Then spin it apart. The 238 is heavier. It clings to the walls so you vacuum out the 235 from the middle. But it's still a mess. So you do it thousands of times.*

*So you need thousands of centrifuges.*

*And to make those you need rotors and bearings. It's not even the science or the uranium. It's just that some countries can't make it spin. They can't pull it apart.*

*And your hair, he says, rolling his head to look at me.*

The question in him scares me. I want to say: *They pulled me apart.* Because they did. My hair is cropped short, ugly and awkward and just to my eyes again. He shifts his body, resting his plate in his lap, his mug between his legs, and holds a flat hand before my face. And, without thinking, I close my eyes, because it is so sudden, and he moves so slowly, like we are holding our breath, and his fingers graze my scalp, push up the tender-thin bangs, gently over my forehead, and further, until his hand cups the back of my neck and I can feel that our faces are just inches apart.

I haven't been touched like this since I was arrested. Not with any sort of care or affection. Not even by my mother. And still, now it burns, his hand on my flesh.

When I open my eyes the light of the world is upon him. The air is gone from the room. And these sins, the weight of them, press fissures into my sternum.

There is some safe in this moment. In the briefness. In its ending. That it might come again. But whether or not it will, I don't want him to save me. I don't want anybody to. I want to mine my own salvation from the marrows of my bones. Still, though, I can feel him, the weight of his ruptured soul—that twin of my own—kneading into the muscles of my chest, the warmth of his bruising fingers seeping from that tender at the base of my neck through the fire of my blood and straight to the straining chambers of my heart, that torn organ of inevitability. It is his hand and his warmth, but it is my body. It is my fight, the flicker of flame in my soul. The thought is fleeting: he won't save me, but maybe he can help me save myself.

Martyr

Shaheed helped Hussein out of his coat, out of the bulky vest. It was a slow, excruciating process, watching his brother fight back tears. He hung both over the back of the kitchen chairs. Margaret started by loosening the belt from Hussein's chest. The sullied shirt Shaheed had used as gauze slapped to the floor, heavy with blood. Helping Hussein stand she guided him onto the table. Shaheed pushed the papers there to the floor and removed the empty cups and plates and Margaret laid Hussein out, his knees kicked up at the end, lifting his arm above his head. His skin shined in the light, the blood thinned out, wet still beneath the wound and dried at the edges. Shaheed had never seen so much.

From the cabinet under the sink she produced a large medical bag with a dull symmetrical cross on the side. She dug around inside the bag.

Without warning she splashed alcohol across his chest and Hussein cried out, his entire body going tense. "You fucking asshole," he seethed. She said nothing and began prepping an IV.

"What's your blood type?"

Hussein said nothing.

Her face stayed unchanged. She looked Shaheed and gestured to the pile of blood bags. "Jesus. Give me an O negative."

Shaheed began going through the bag, struggling to read the labels.

"Where did you even get those from?" she asked.

Neither answered her.

When he found two bags of O negative he sat them on the counter beside the sink where she was working a fresh needle into an IV in the light.

“These are too cold,” she said pressing her hand to both.

“What do you mean?”

“It can’t be so cold. They’re practically frozen.”

“Well, warm them up.”

“How? You can’t just microwave them.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t. I don’t know. Because it’s a goddamn microwave.”

Shaheed took a bag from her hand and threw it into the microwave, slamming the door. “How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, guess.”

“I honestly don’t know, people don’t do this.”

“Guess.”

“Thirty seconds.”

He clicked a button and they watched the microwave light up. Inside Shaheed could see the lettering across the label, neat and blue, spin its small circle. This blood had come from another life. One he knew nothing about. Would it make his brother stronger? Would it infect him?

He had learned in a lecture that the typical blood donor was an educated, middle-aged white male. A man with a job. A man with money. A man with time to kill, with a savior complex. A man who could heal the world with his body, with his blood, who

thought the world could use more of his beautiful blood. A weak man. A man to be pitied.

Twice more he ran the blood through the thirty second cycle—the floppy red bag spinning slowly before their eyes—before Margaret approve of its temperature.

With practice she pulled blue gloves over her hands and took a deep breath. Shaheed watched her stare at Hussein’s wretched body. She tapped two pills of Tylenol into her hand and he swallowed them dry. Then, using a watch she pressed her fingers over his wrist and counted his heart rate, which she wrote on the back of her glove. Next she took his temperature and blood pressure.

“He’s in bad shape,” she said to Shaheed. “He needs more than just blood. He needs fluids and x-rays. The bullet passed through but who knows what it tore up in their. He could bleed out internally.”

“Just start with the blood.”

From her bedroom she got a wire coat hanger and draped the bag from the ceiling fan. She swabbed alcohol over Hussein’s arm and found the vein. She was practiced. With a flick of her thumb the tubes filled with a stream of dark O negative. Hussein seemed not to register. He lay with his other arm draped over his face and his eyes closed.

Shaheed watched carefully for the slight rise and fall of his muscled chest. He knew Hussein had passed out when she started with the thread and needle. She stitched the entrance wound with ease. With Shaheed’s help they rolled Hussein onto his side. The exit wound was a mess of torn flesh. She muttered to herself and Shaheed fought the urge to vomit.

From her bag she produced a role of gauze. She pulled the fabric out and began forcing it into the wound.

“Does that just stay in there,” Shaheed asked.

She shook her head. “It’s for the battlefield. It helps stop the bleeding until you can get the patient to a hospital.”

Once the wound was nearly overflowing with gauze that she pressed deep into Hussein’s shoulder, her fingers disappearing into the black-blood, she methodically stitched the patches of skin back together.

From the bathroom she retrieved more gauze and medical tape and she wrapped the whole of his chest.

Hussein’s blood was all over, spotted across the floor, smeared along the walls near light switches, on the counters of the kitchen, pooling and trickling off the table.

“This is the bare minimum. He needs real treatment,” she said, stepping away from the table. Her hands were covered in blood and her hair had fallen from its ponytail. “There is likely internal bleeding. He needs to go to the hospital. I need the right tools.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Could you have done more?” Shaheed asked. He stood at the threshold of the kitchen, his knees shaking.

“Not here. Not with this.”

He swallowed, his mouth was dry, his head ached. “Have you been to war?” he asked.

She shook her head and snapped each glove from her hands after taking Hussein’s pulse again. “But I worked with DWB.”

“Then you understand,” he said. “You understand what this country does. The hospitals they bomb on *accident, by mistake*, because of *misinformation*.”

She ran her arm over her forehead and sighed. “What I understand is that men, like you and like him,” she pointed to Shaheed and then Hussein, “and like a million others will spend your whole lives *looking* for war.”

Shaheed shook his head. She was much older than him. The age of many of his professors, the age he last remembered his mother.

“I don’t believe your cause or any other is worth killing for,” she said. “But I hope you die for it.”

## Phisher

There is so much that can seem right in the heat of the moment. This wasn't the first time that Graham worked with anons to try to vindicate a victim. He had done it enough to get sure of himself. But the one that stuck with him had been an assault on a woman. A needless and violent harassment. A man had picked a woman in trouble, a woman at random, she was young and struggling and depressed. And he had pushed her, spamming her email, her facebook, her internet-everywhere so that her phone buzzed through the night with violent suggestions, with pictures of people killing themselves. He urged her to do the same. Then emails became facebook messages, emails to her work account, text messages, letters to her house. She reported things to the police and nothing happened. They promised to pass along her complaint to some proper authority. But nothing happened. She pressed again and again and always they did nothing, said sorry, said, *it's just the internet*. And finally the man began dumping her life on Pastebin, posting links to the nude photos she'd taken just once, for that one, stupid guy. It was just a matter of days from there. Until she broke like he wanted. Until she did the heartbreak upon herself.

At first nothing even happened. There wasn't even an investigation. Just a small cry of help from the sister she left behind, a plea that someone do something. So Graham did, when he saw small a short segment of the drama on the news. In a matter of days, with Walt's help, and Knees' help, he had an address, and in the same instant that he found it, he posted it to an anon Twitter. *Make no mistake*, the message read, *this man is guilty of murder*.



It was two days time before they knew they were wrong. The address had been right, but the man had moved and his apartment, in Houston, had been quickly rented. On that second day two men showed up at that door with masks and baseball bats and beat the innocent man into a coma.

By the next day the correct address had been anonymously forwarded to the Houston PD. The correct man was arrested and plead guilty to the minor infraction of harassment, innocent to the charges of hacking, and went home with time served and a year of probation.

The man in the coma died the same week.

Graham told no one. In the private IRC channel he shared with Walt and Knees they agreed to forget. And that was that. They buried it in the lonely hollows of their chests. A guilt with force to guide his hand.

Hacker

*My hair, I say, fell out in the dark.* But what I'm talking about is a virus. The things we'll do to survive.

Phil looks at the ceiling and says nothing for a time. I feel as though I've told him so much and he says nothing for minutes.

*What I mean though, Phil looks at me, Is that he found it outside a bar in some shit town in Tennessee. It didn't even kill him. Just tore up his insides so that now he can't live without a machine that digests his food.*

He smiles an off little smile.

*What do you want to do,* he asks.

I shrug my shoulders, *Whatever sounds nice.*

*No. I mean really. What do you want? What do you want to do?*

I'm not sure what he means so I shake my head.

*It's important to want something,* he says, *Everybody's got to want something.*

*I don't know what I want,* I say.

*They tell you that in the preseperation Don't Kill Yourself classes they make us take after each tour,* he says. *I've been to two of them. It was the same shit both times. They talk about keeping busy and making sure you've got stuff to do, stuff you want to do. So if you've got to work forty hours a week, make sure you go out and see a movie or knit a blanket or tend a fucking garden. Do something for you. So, Brittany, what do you want to do?*

The sound of my name startles me. He keeps his eyes on mine, so I look away.

*I don't know*, I say, because the only I want is to not kill myself. Other than that there is nothing.

Then I remember and say, *I want to find the music.*

Phil looks at me sideways.

I say, *It's from this poem, I think. This girl back home said it to me once and... it just really stuck with me.*

*What did she say?*

I know I won't get it right. I say, "*We must admit that there will be music despite everything.*"

Looking at Phil I realize I don't know what he is going to say. With Alex I can guess. With my mother I can know. But here, with Phil, I have no idea. I'm not sure what kind of man he is.

*It's a song?* he asks.

*A poem, I think.*

He makes a noise in his chest. I watch him chew the words over with his whole body. We are still in the bed. Somewhere in me there is a goldening sensation that I could stay here forever.

He frowns, *What do you think of it?*

What scares me is that I used to know what I thought. I used to be angry. I cared about things, little things and big things.

*I don't know*, I say.

He makes that low noise again, *You'll have to let me know when you figure it out.*

We fold up the bed and he sits in the hallway while I shower in the cramped stall beside the sink, we get dressed, slip into our coats, and lock the door behind us. Phil asks me again if there is anything I want to do and I say no again. After that he wears a worried look for a long time as we walk from the apartment toward the river.

The city is busy and we have trouble walking side-by-side, so I fall in behind him. When he lights a cigarette I can taste the nicotine and I have a flash of a craving.

I've always worried about cars and children. I want to raise a child in a place where the cars are less violent, away from freeways and winding mountain roads. A place with trains and buses, where there is a sense of freedom early on. People talk about how easy it is for a freedom to be taken, but really they don't know. To them freedom is the right to carry a gun and protest. For others it is sunlight.

What kind of world is this for a child?

The women here are beautiful. They wear bright reds and dark shades and walk with impossible posture, with pouts and brand name handbags. It is a type of pretty that I have never been interested in. But I can't help but take notice of them. I imagine their husbands and girlfriends and secrets. We're raised to believe that this kind of beauty is never lonely.

Several times Phil looks over his shoulder, to make sure I am still behind him, and this makes me feel young and I dislike him for it. I follow him straight for several blocks. We turn right after a time and continue. As we cross streets I catch glimpses of the gap where the river sits, and the metropolis beyond. And still further, the hint of mountains, the looming presence of something greater.

Phil leads us to a bookstore that sits across from the Rhine and we sit at a small wire-iron table and face each other. Over his shoulder is Notre Dame, some smaller version of it. People mill about around us, tourists mostly, waiting for the shop to open in a half hour. I watch a couple take pictures of themselves and Phil pulls out his phone. I haven't seen him do this yet, but I watch as he taps away at the screen.

I had withdrawals from the internet.

I can see myself in the hazy reflection of the shop window. I have never thought of myself as ugly. I have never thought of myself like that. Like anything. Never beautiful. But now, as I sit, I am unhappy with the person looking back.

My hair is short. I still can't get used to it. My mom bought me special shampoo the day after I got home from the darkness. It was supposed to make it grow back thick and strong, but it burned my skin pink, my scalp and my hands, the corners of my eyes. She took me to get it trimmed too, to a place we used to go to when I still lived at home. And when they came at me from behind with the shears—the sound of it, their hands, the sharpness—it was too soon. My mother was there beside me, knowing, so that I watched my pain on her face, sitting there, aching to reach out, to hold me but knowing that her touch hurt, that her arms burned, that my body had become a raw of exposed nerves.

The woman saved as much of my hair as she could, but mostly it was a buzz, to the boney bulb of my head. And now it mostly still is—hanging down over only half of my forehead.

And my mother took off work. Two weeks to stay home with me. Spent the days she'd saved up to take deep breaths by a large body of water. She cooked me breakfast and lunch and dinner and sat in the snow-dusted backyard by the frozen koi pond praying

for me to do anything. The doctors said take it slow, but take it. And every day I could see her from my window, sitting on the edge of her lawn chair in her down coat, nursing tea, worrying her nails to the quick, a marvel of the capacity of the heart.

Then, one day, I disappeared.

Love, for a mother, is as raw and open a wound as me.

I had planned to call her by now. To tell her I'm alive. Her and my father. They are good parents, which makes it worse.

I can't see what Phil is doing on his phone, but I can tell he's reading something, scrolling up and down. From time to time he types.

I ground my teeth too. Asleep and awake, always. So she took me to a dentist. They put me under and did what they could to the cracked numbs. But I'm still afraid of what lurks in the dark hollow of my mouth.

Across the street is a small cafe and people sit at all of the tables that line the sidewalk, their chairs side-by-side and facing out. And it's still hard to eat. I keep losing weight.

Phil raises his phone and takes a picture of me.

*What are you doing*, I say.

He lowers it and taps at the screen again.

*You look nice*, he says absently. *With the city behind you and everything.*

I've never liked having my picture taken in the first place. But there is something about him doing it now, without asking, that makes this, what we are doing, so much more real. He is taking hold of this moment. Capturing it. Placing us within it. Giving us a gross sort of existence and I hate him for it. I want to be able to say that you don't need

it, that you only need to have been, *there*, to hold that memory, to know some truth about your life. But I can't. It's impossibly small. Something soon lost behind the couch, beneath the bed, somewhere in the violence of existence. Stolen. Drown out of you so that you are left hollow and blank and you haven't been anywhere or done anything.

They have that power. They can take that from you. Everything.

With the dark.

The dark where there is no hand before your face, where the dark of your mind bleeds into the dark of the room and there is nothing there, so dark you cannot even exist, because nothing does, and you're nothing, gone to nothingness, empty and undone and motherless.

He looks up and leans toward me, across the table, holding the phone out. I've never used Instagram, but I know it, and I see myself there, the grey buildings of Strasbourg behind me, the dark of the Rhine just visible near the top of the frame, all of the colors wrong. A bolt of panic runs through me, but I stifle it; I know that no one who sees this will recognize me. I don't look anything like me, like those photos that ran on the 24 hour cycle before I was forgotten along with Adam and Isaac and Graham and Terry and all of those dead and maimed. My mom told me they used two different pictures from my Facebook. When the news first hit it was a webcam shot of me sitting before my computer in my dark room, my hood over my head, my face expressionless—the perfect picture for an angsty hacker, shut away, pale, incensed. But later, she said, they used another one, from a trip we took to the Gulf of Mexico, a picture I didn't remember, of me in a yellow button up sweater with my bathing suit underneath, my hair

down and flicking in the wind. They used that to say I was normal. Or I had been, once, before the internet corrupted me.

*I thought you were pretty from the moment I met you on the train, he says.*

*Don't get sappy.*

*I like tough chicks, he says.*

*You were with Anna. You couldn't keep your hands off each other.*

*It was a fluke that I met her first.*

*I don't speak French, I say.*

*I like that you're angry.*

*I don't.*

The door to the bookstore opens. A tall young man in a button up with slim pants and leather shoes steps out and props it open. He holds the door and chats and laughs with the customers as they file inside.

When I turn back to Phil he is leaning close still, his face cocked and he is smiling a tight smile.

*Well, he says, wouldn't it be nice if we did everything right on the first try.*

I want to tell him that he doesn't know me, because he doesn't. But the way he won't look away feels nice and new and exciting and nothing at all like the Darkness.

How many lives do we get to live?

Phil lays his hand over mine. His phone chirps and he glances down at it, but quickly back up, the same dumb look on his face.



We're strangers. I can be anyone with him. If I choose right now. I can be someone who is not responsible, someone who has never been locked away and beaten and broken.

*Where are you going next?* I ask.

This pleases him.

*North*, I guess, he says, *I want to be in Amsterdam for New Years. I've heard its chaos, like nothing else in the world.*

I have no plans. In my mind, in some foggy image, I had stayed put wherever I landed, vanishing into the complex code of a bustling city.

Europe carries such weight on the tongue, in the mind.

*I have a friend who was there last year*, he says, grunting some.

He seems eager today, brighter. He pulls the small bottle from his coat and works the top, says, *We can cleanse ourselves in the insanity.* But I know he is already drunk.

Martyr

While Hussein lay passed out on the kitchen table, Shaheed listened to the sounds of the shower. He sat with his back to the door, listening to the groaning of the bathtub, he listened to the tonal shifts of the static buzz of water hitting tile and skin and limb. There was a window in the bathroom and he had told her not to run and instead of listing the horrible he would do to her, he was silent and she looked at him coldly. For Shaheed it hurt to see such blatant hatred directed at him, so close, their faces only feet apart. He was used to being ignored and disrespected, laughed at, but not so obviously loathed, so every time their eyes met he was taken back for a moment.

He had been going to sit in the bathroom with her.

But she had slammed the door quickly behind her and he had felt too tired to try to force it open.

It was easy for Shaheed to see, under her defiance and anger, the fear, so clear on her face as she maneuvered her body always away, from his, to stay as far across the room, from him, as possible.

But he liked the way she smelled, like something sweet and fresh, all layered with a thick scent of skin and sweat, so he had tried to stay close, to carry his body softly, his shoulders slouched, to stay at her level, to draw her near. What kept her, women like her, from loving men like him? Sure, he was younger than her, but not by an impossible margin. But it wasn't even the age, he knew, it was just her, women like her. To them, to women, he was lesser, somehow. Despite how he dressed, and how he carried himself, and how often he got his hair cut, he felt himself apart from the men he wanted to be, the

men who found themselves in these down-comforter beds, between these bright, insulated walls.

He stood and tested the handle. The door eased slightly from its jam. He let it go further, let the space widen far enough to let his eyes fall over the form behind the shower curtain, the form all skin tones, all form and no particular definitions, the rounds of head and breasts and ass, the straight of arms and legs, all undoubtedly bare, he let the mist come over his face as it poured from the bathroom and into the hall. He let himself get hard. And he made himself hold his breath. He let himself watch the body, defeated, the arms run over the head, through the thick mop of hair, let himself hear the slaps of water thrown from her. Until suddenly the form stilled, mid-motion—two bodies caught naked and hurt and shamed. His eyes could not take enough. But there was a sickness running like cold water through his chest. Like that moment of first love with Emily. He knew he didn't have to leave. She couldn't make him do anything. He felt the gun in his jacket; he could do whatever he wanted. But there was a part of him that did not want to be that sort of man, even though it was a man he had become, the man he had chosen. He was not ready to take fear in place of love.

He let go of the handle, left the door wide open, and left the bathroom.

Hussein was moaning, sedated on the table. Shaheed had folded a blanket beneath his head. Standing close, Shaheed saw the steady breaths of his brother. He was angry at him, at everyone. But most of all at himself.

He walked across the room to the couch that sat facing a small TV. Exhaustion came quick, his limbs filling with wet cement.

He only realized his eyes were closed when he heard Margaret's steps. He opened them to find her standing barefoot at the mouth of the hallway. She wore a plain t-shirt and tight jeans. He couldn't help but marvel at her feet, the way they rolled across the carpet as she stood motionless. Her hair was damp and curled, wetting the collar of her shirt.

"Do you have any food?"

She shook her head.

"Would you like to sit down?"

She made no move.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She shook her head.

"What?" he said. "What is it that you hate about me?"

"How can you even ask that?"

"You don't understand what we're doing."

"There is nothing to understand." Her hands shook at her sides. Her lip quivered.

"You're disgusting."

"Do you think I'm a monster?" Shaheed asked.

She did not hesitate, "Yes."

"What if I told you I didn't kill any of those people at Fashion Plaza?"

"Just because you didn't pull the trigger doesn't make you innocent. You didn't spend 18 hours today pulling screws and nails from the legs of children. Amputating—"

"There is too a difference. I didn't detonate either of those bombs. I swear."

"But you're here, doing something, helping *them*; holding a gun to my head."

A question was implicit.

The gun rested heavy on his leg. He could end this conversation whenever he liked. He shook his head. “We didn’t want this violence. But sometimes it is the only way to teach people the lesson they need.”

“What fucking lesson are you teaching?” she said. “And nobody will ever listen to you like this. The only thing you’re doing is making more hate and getting more people killed.”

“Please don’t yell. Hussein needs rest.”

“Where did you get these names? Shaheed and Hussein.”

“They’re names of strength and power.”

“So you’re a *martyr*? And what’s he? Hussein doesn’t mean anything.”

Shaheed was annoyed. “Hussein was the son of Ali, the first of the holy imams.”

Her mouth opened and she shook her head. “Did you dedicate your *bay’ah* to Baghdadi?”

Shaheed was confused.

“Did you pledge your allegiance to him? To ISIS?”

“Don’t act like you know about us or our cause.”

“Hussein is a Shiite name. ISIS is Sunni. I mean, Jesus, you don’t even know what the fuck your names mean.”

“Shut up,” Shaheed snapped, suddenly aware of his name, of Hussein’s name, the names they had chosen for power, to reinvent themselves under. “You don’t know anything.”

“Your names mean nothing. They’re Googled nonsense. They’re meaningless.”

The anger came quick. “Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re wrong.”

“Then tell me how I’m wrong! Tell me you’re more than a fucking child.”

She couldn’t know what she was talking about. She couldn’t know more than him. “You have to take the name you deserve. We deserve names of power. Hussein was a leader of Islam. You have to take what’s yours.”

Her face sank and she shook her head. “Who did this to you?”

Shaheed was surprised, speechless for a moment. “You did. Don’t you get that? You did this. You brought this upon yourselves.” He thrust the gun at her, accusing.

“But why? Tell me why.” Her voice was a plea.

“To teach you a lesson.”

“You keep saying that. What fucking lesson?”

He was frustrated and he couldn’t find the words. Omar had prepared him for this, made him repeat things for hours, with a gun to his temple, until his voice went raw. “Because you need to be reminded of your ignorance and your weakness—that you, you fucking people are not gods.”

The adrenaline came and went hard. Shaheed’s body felt ragged and beyond exhaustion. He had never felt anything like it. The way his brain cleared in an instant and he could see everything, literally everything around him, the smallest details sparked to life. His limbs became weightless and everything else fell away, a tick of the secondhand at a time, it was like life became a movie and he could slow it down to see the perfection of the frames.

But there was only so much adrenaline. In the slightest lull he was gone, suddenly in Emily's apartment, back to that first house he'd shared with Hussein, back to some time when there'd been structure and he was safe. Without the adrenaline his mind could not handle the situation, so he fell away, fled the reality.

The silence was the worst; when they were safe for the immediate future. As soon as this thought hit it felt like warm water pouring over his body. His everything grew heavy. He sank further into the chair. It became almost impossible to keep his eyes open.

Hussein was still asleep on the table where they had left him, the IV dripping life into him. Margaret lay across from him on the couch, facing the cushions. Shaheed was afraid that she was not asleep. He had been watching the thumbs of her ribs rise and fall through the sheer fabric of her shirt, but he was afraid she was faking it so he fought to stay awake. Minutes kept slipping from him and he'd start awake, his gun in hand, pointing it at the empty room before him.

Paranoia.

He had wanted a family and a good job and season tickets to the Rockies. He wanted those things with Emily. UD had given him a full ride because of his SAT scores and because his parents were gone and his aunt who'd half raised him was dead and his brother was his guardian now and those sort of stories looked great on paper. But a full ride wasn't housing or food and he ran through his savings before Christmas break his freshmen year trying to make friends and keep up with the money of everyone in his hall. And he would never ask Adam for money. He wanted to marry a blonde, to sleep with lots of blondes and get a car that would scream its way through stoplights, a girl and a car that would make people look at him, would prove that he wasn't as invisible as he felt.

He wanted the cliché. The American life and he hated himself for it. He wanted a loud stereo and a big TV and happy neighbors and vacations and a dog, two dogs, he wanted subscriptions to magazines and the ability to say yes, and he wanted to be wanted, to be envied, to be looked at, stared at, fucking loved.

He wanted to be the man he was with Emily, when they laughed together and everything seemed trivial and life was overflowing with crossroads.

From far off, from so far, dulling to a soft snap. His heart exploded in his chest. The gun was in his hand. He swung it around the room. The pounding echoed deeply in his head. He sucked air. There was no one, the lights were still on and he was alone.

When he looked down he saw Margaret had rolled over. She was facing him with her eyes open. From across the small room he could see the red rims; that she had been crying.

“Are you going to kill me?” Her voice was soft and resigned.

Shaheed opened his mouth. *Yes* sat there, in his throat, but he could see that she expected that, she expected him to say *yes*. And it was true. How could they leave her alive? It would undermine all of the work they’ve done. And what was death anyways?

“I thought you didn’t care?”

He had, in a way, admired her for not thinking of herself. He had liked that she hadn’t begged for her life. She had only acted when they’d threatened others.

And hated it, because, in truth, he knew he could never be so strong, not really, not down deep, in his sick, weak core.

*Who am I.*



“Of course I care,” she said. “Just because I’m afraid to die doesn’t mean I’d let *you* make me afraid.”

He was here, showing the world that he was not who everyone thought he was. The world wants terrorists to be terrorists. The world expects them to be. But still, they are less surprised when a good man dies quietly, with the anger in his heart, than if he dies at the hand of his anger, his belief, still this shocks them more. So they expect us to be terrorists, whoever we are, everyone, everywhere, so to surprise them we will show them how right they are.

But how could he sit here and be everything she expects?

*Who am I?*

*Who is she?*

They were here to show America its’ sins.

Then she said, “I know you don’t want to be here.”

“What?”

“You’re not one of them,” she said. “He’s your brother, you’re just following his lead. I understand that. But you’re not one of them. I can see it. You’re not a monster.”

She was whispering and she glanced only halfly towards Hussein, belying her intent.

Like only he was the danger.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said.

“You don’t have to do this.”

He said nothing.

“*You*, Shaheed, *You* don’t have to.”

This made him angry. He was one of them. How could he not be? He was no longer someone like her and if he wasn't one of them, one of Hussein and Omar, then he was no one, again. He could never be no one again.

“I know what it's like to hurt, to lose your family.”

He knew she was stretching, grasping at straws. She had half risen, leaned towards him, her arms veined with her weight, her feet and ankles bare and pale. Her hair was loose from its bun and falling over the frail of her cheeks.

“You don't have to do whatever you're planning.”

He couldn't be no one. Not again. Not ever.

“We do,” he said. “We have to show them what it's like to live in fear of an invisible enemy, what it's like to have your home reduced to rubble.”

She shook her head. Tears came to her eyes. She pressed a hand over her mouth.

“The world doesn't have to be this way.”

But it did.

He stood and she leaned away and he moved towards her with the gun in his hand, to make someone of himself.

Phisher

Kiley's bedroom was small and lit by a strand of ropelights that were draped half way around the room. The walls were covered with hazy paintings and photographs of cities and monuments that Graham recognized. Kiley had a twin bed, a small nightstand and a chest of drawers. Trinkets covered everything, cluttered her space. The floor was littered with clothes. Graham eyed the underwear, the bras. He thought of her breasts. Her naked. They had never met but right now he loved her. And he knew he could keep loving her, that it was possible, without a word, wherever she was. It was a nice feeling, the certainty of this. It made something about the violence of the night, the violence that had exploded into his thoughts, bearable.

There was a context for everything.

But how could such discrepancy exist.

Standing in her room he knew that violence was born of love. That these bombs detonated out of love, or the lack.

Graham leafed through the clothes in her closet until he found a sweater that would fit him. It was clearly a man's, knitted and fraying. He took off his red shell jacket and caught himself in the mirror. His skin was pale and bubbled with deep colors. Running down his right hip, where the hood of the car had clipped him, was a bruise that ran over his ribs and under his armpit. He unzipped his pants and pulled the waist down, the bruise went lower, almost to his knee. In the center it was a dark purple, black in places, from there it shaded blue and finally some sickening yellows. He let his pants fall all the way to the floor, then he tugged down his boxers, fully naked, and ran his fingers

over the wound. The slightest touch stung. He traced several of the cuts that had split his skin all over from hitting the pavement. Most had been clumsily cleaned. The pain was everywhere, in some way, big or small. All of it was the feeling of being completely alive.

The coloring ran up over his shoulder. Most of the broken flesh, where bone had cut him from the inside out, was neatly hidden beneath a bandage and the bulk of the cast, which was strapped to his chest so his arm couldn't move at all. And on his head, a cut ran along his hairline, and back over his ear. His eye was black. His pupils dilated. Dried blood filled his ear and he picked at it, realizing he could hardly hear from it.

He wanted to cry. To lay down and close his eyes and fall asleep. He wanted to not wake up for days, or weeks, or ever.

This was the feeling of being alive.

He pulled up his pants and drew the sweater over his head and tucked the empty sleeve into his belt. He pulled on his jacket again. The aching wouldn't stop now that he understood it, not until it was healed, not until he was rebuilt, forever scarred into his new self.

In the closet were several more men's shirts. And in the drawers, pairs of pants, boxers. They weren't things that Graham would wear. But he touched them anyways. The room was Kiley's, the photos, the bedding, the collection of miniature elephant statues—it was a piece of her, a face, and were we any more than collections of faces, selves represented in words and objects, space and tone?

There had been a girl, a girl with men's shirts in drawers. Graham's shirts. Another space he had boxed and shipped into the recesses of his thought. A place he was afraid to go. A place ignored. Rote with guilt.

Guilt. A word he hadn't come across yet. Felt it maybe, but not named it, not knowingly. But it came now. Like everything else. Now. Here, in this stranger's bedroom.

But did that mean love? Had he loved her?

Her name was Kat. And even that had been pushed from his mind, turned foreign in his mouth. From the start he'd hated it. Hadn't quite expected it when it came from her; her in everyway small: her thin, her breakable, her brown hair, her angular features. She had come in to the coffee shop where he camped, stealing wifi and free refills. For months he watched her order complicated drinks and sit at the table beside his. For months they didn't talk. Until one day when she asked him to watch her things, which he did, idly, for the few minutes she was gone. When she returned she asked if he had ever been to the shop before.

She'd never before noticed him.

"That's the problem with girls like you," Graham said later, "beautiful girls like you, you never see what's right in front of you because you've been taught your whole life that you are meant for something more, so you're always looking there, into some promise out ahead of you." He'd been angry then.

She still had his shirts. And more, he was sure. Things he didn't miss. But pieces. She was older and shared a place with her sister off campus, a cramped two bedroom house. "Softer," she would say, "I don't want her to hear." Nothing had blown out. Things had crumbled and they had fought. But everything was slow, a decay, a mistrust, then eventually, a quiet. When she was finally gone Graham hadn't hardly noticed.

But in truth she came at night, in the dark of his bed, in the place between wake and sleep, when he was free of himself. She was there. There had been other women in his life. And Kat hadn't been the longest. But in these darkneses it was her he thought of, a pair of moments that had tattooed across his mind, memories he didn't even realize that he needed.

There she was, beside the emptiness. But after, listening to his own lonely breath, some sad would wash over his damp skin and he would think of other things, to feel better, and safe again. There had been a weakness with her, with her too-large army surplus coats and black tights, with her cotton panties and colorless bras, the way she talked about pussy and cock and fingering herself, her wavy hair and perfect grades.

He didn't understand beauty. And he didn't understand any sort of love that did not overwhelm him. Once the rush of lust, the love of thundering heart faded, he felt nothing.

And now he took a breath. What did he feel?

She was there, apart of him, a skin he couldn't shed.

There was blood beneath his fingernails. He could hear Walter typing rapidly in the living room, the old house creaking. He had heard a professor once say something about love, about her husband easing the insufferable truths of the world. Graham liked that idea in Kiley's bedroom. He ran his hand over his pocket, but his phone was gone. He couldn't call Kat without asking Walter.

This divide only urged him on. He wanted to hear her voice. Walter could drop him off at her place and he could tap at her window like he used to, and she would grin through the blinds. He could take off his clothes and curl into her blankets and she could

kiss away the bruises and breaks, hold him, her body, her heart, her breasts against his cool back.

Kat could save him like that.

“Graham,” Walter called from the living room. “They got an ID.”

Hacker

We walk through the bookstore and he skims the titles with his finger. This city, to me, feels like a fairy tale, a dream, like the picture books full of colorful thatched roofs and dark wood. In here the ceilings are low, Phil ducks beneath cross beams, there is the smell of a fire, and warmth that pushes over me. I watch the women who mill about us, all of them thin and bright with fashionable hats and scarves and smiles. I feel so removed from myself. Like I'm watching through a screen. The books rise to the sagging ceilings, from wall to wall. The whole building seems heavy with books, with pages and ink and words and thoughts and love, like it might all collapse.

Where would I be then?

I look at their children, bundled in bright down coats, bubbling French and laughter.

A child is a way to last, to leave a mark.

Phil moves through the shop with a stupid look on his face, laughing and talking to people—everyone speaks something close to the same language of ignorance and Christmas. Still, I find them all to be beautiful like I never have before, like people I want to look at forever, their cheeks damp and rosy, pushing past each other like friends and like lovers. All of it happening, whatever it is, just out of my reach. Out of touch. I am behind glass. I am here. I tell myself. There is excitement. And joy. And something so simple. And I can see it all, from so far away, from so outside. It can't touch me.



I've never read much fiction, but Phil walks the small circle of the bottom floor. He pulls books and studies them, asking if I've read this and that. The answer is always no. This doesn't slow him.

When he doubles back I stay in the corner pretending to look at a book in my hands. Somewhere near F he reaches for a book and a woman in a dress and heavy coat touches his shoulder. A small black hat holds together her dark hair. Her legs are winter-pale. Phil turns to her and they are very close. A pang of jealousy fires through me. Phil is not mine, though. Again, I realize that I don't know what we are or what I'm doing. They talk and when she laughs her fingers lull out for his arm and graze his sleeves. I cannot hear them. He holds up the book and turns it over in his hands. They are sharing something that him and I don't.

When we leave the shop we buy three books. I buy the one I held. Phil buys the one he talked about with the pale woman in the dress and I don't say anything. I am not jealous. I have never been. Jealousy is weakness. And I don't own Phil. I've known him for just a handful of days. Slept alone in his rented bed. Seen him naked and cracking open.

We walk west along the river and cross a nameless bridge. The whole time I look at things and try to find them beautiful, because I can tell that they are, ostensibly. I can see the symmetry. But I can't feel it. I want to feel it. I want to feel it like I suddenly want Phil fucking it into me, this beauty.

*This is the Musée des Beaux-Arts*, Phil says as we walk under shadow of tall building and into an open courtyard. He holds his arms out and does a spin. I am supposed to giggle and find him charming. I watch people watch him as he rolls his head

back as though the grandeur has overtaken him. His dark peacoat is fitted over his compact shoulders and his hair is parted on one side and pushed carelessly back. But Phil isn't so beautiful. He is reckless. Reborn of war.

All day he has offered me sips from the bottle in his shoulder bag. And I have joined him at the edge of numb, fighting off the withdrawals from my morphine. There are more pills in my room, but I want to fight through it.

In a way I like the broken boy more, the Phil telling war stories in bed, his eyes going empty. I can share that with him, like the girl from the store shared books.

Without asking he buys my ticket and we file through the line in the warm hall, strangers shaking snowmelt from their coats. Sunlight flitters through colored glass and splays across the floor in hints of the possibility of transformation.

While we wait I watch Phil connect his phone to the wifi and sift through his email and his Facebook and his Twitter.

He glances up at me.

*Sorry*, he says.

I shrug and look away.

*I don't mean to be on my phone*, he says.

*It's fine*.

*Do you need to check anything?* he asks, holding the phone my way.

The idea of telling him that I have nothing to check flits through my mind. And that the act of taking the phone from his hands would technically be illegal. Not that it matters anymore. I shake my head.

*Sorry*, he says again. His neck looks rubbery.

*I really don't mind, I say, softer than I mean to.*

*It's just a stupid habit, he says.*

*I'm annoyed by his claim of weakness. They let you have that thing in Syria?*

*He smiles a tight smile and looks down. It's like a drug. They've done studies.*

*You don't have to explain yourself.*

*But I want to. It's like a default setting in my head.*

*But you don't need to. You don't owe me anything, I say.*

*I had a girlfriend once who threw my phone off a roller coaster. He says, I pulled it out when we were doing that slow uphill part at the beginning. It was just like a fucking reflex, and she just grabbed it out of my hand and threw it without a word.*

*I can't help myself, What'd you do?*

*When I left her place the next day I realized I didn't know her number, and she couldn't call me, so I never saw her again, he says.*

*He laughs at the idea of his history.*

*Then he looks quickly around the large, loud space, the ceiling so far above, the crowds, the children, the bustle of city life. He says, It's hard to turn it off, all the training. It fucks you up. They tell you a bomb is always going to go off. They tell you that on day one of boot camp. That and that your battle buddy is going to take a sucking chest wound. And they just keep fucking telling you, until, soon enough, you believe it. And then when you're over there they aren't wrong. You lose your mind because the days when the IED goes off are the most normal, so the worst days are the ones when you run your convoy and it's quiet and no one dies.*

His face is clouded over and hands are awkwardly out in front of him, just held there, a brain detached from a body, the capability of such removal.

Then I surprise myself. I say, *I'm afraid of crowds. I always feel like something bad is going to happen. Like my subway car is going to explode. Or the guy next to me is going to pull out his gun and just start shooting people.*

*That's what terrorism is, he says. It haunts you. It's with you everywhere you go. That's when it's working.*

*So it's working.*

He nods.

*Did you ever want to be famous?* he asks.

I shrug.

*I mean did you ever want to like be an actress or in a band or a writer or some shit?* he says.

I say, *A long time ago I wanted to be a singer. When I was like ten. But that was never about being famous.*

*But it is, he says, We just want people to love us for doing what we enjoy. Which is exactly what being famous is.*

*What did you want to be?* I ask.

He smiles at himself and drops his arms to his side. The line is moving some and we follow it. We aren't even through the ticket line and I'm tired. I know we'll walk through the ancient hallways and stare at famous paintings and we'll blend in with the rest of the crowds, we'll take a picture and having the feeling of done something notable with our day, with our week, our trip, our lives, and so on.

*I was the mascot in high school, Phil says, We were the Lobos and so I wore this big wolf outfit with this huge, hot head, and ran everywhere, jumping off things and kissing people with my big wolf teeth. I just wanted to be loved for whatever the fuck they would love me for. I just wanted them to be looking at me.*

We'll wind up in people's photographs. We'll be strangers. But we'll exist, Phil and I. And no one will notice us, not really, because really, we're both already dead, the victims of war, of violence and terrorism. Because we are reminders of a hurt that no one wants to continue feeling, so they will avert their eyes and we will disappear into the pain and quiet of this great oblivion.

He worries his lip, *I think I'm a terrorist like that.*

Martyr

Omar had picked the building. Done days of research at the library seeking out the oldest, tallest residencies in the city. First there had to be underground parking. Then people, lots of people. Not just students, he wanted families. He wanted Christmas mornings. Sorting out the new from the old, the utter ritz from the renovated.

He started by finding the few buildings due for demolition in the coming years, “We’ll be doing them a favor.”

The Brooks Tower came by accident. Together they had narrowed the list down to eight buildings. Shaheed sat on the couch, beneath a blanket, watching them work. The news cycled in the background. They talked like he was taking part. It was still a game though. The Brooks, Hussein read, had been originally contended upon proposal for the instability of the loose pack on the site; something discovered when the land had been cleared of the two older buildings that once occupied it.

Omar nodded for him to elaborate.

“I read earlier, last week, about how buildings can do liquid... something during an earthquake when the ground beneath them isn’t packed tight enough, they collapse, liquidate or something.”

“Did they fix it?” Omar asked.

Hussein skimmed the article they had copied at the library. Details like this hadn’t ever made it to the Internet, lost in the shuffle of digitalization. Weakness and vulnerabilities swept into the stacks.

“They reinforced it with concrete, but people were incredulous. Looks like everyone forgot after a few years though.”

“What’s it mean,” Shaheed asked. There was a dark pit worming in his stomach.

Omar took the cigarette from Hussein’s mouth, the bud still orange, and placed it filter up on the table. Held it up right with only his thumb pressed over the filter. A miniature tower, burning from the bottom. “It means we put my van down there, by some columns, pack it full of fertilizer and gasoline, and,” he adjusted his finger. Smoke rose from where the ash was burning the lacquered wood of the table. “The whole thing will burn itself beautifully down by itself.” Omar pressed his thumb slowly, the insides having burned toward heaven, the whole thing collapsing with incredible ease.

Phisher

“They IDed the one that was killed,” Walter pointed to the TV where two pictures were side-by-side. One was a scratchy image capture of a large man in dark clothes with a hat pulled low, half his face uncovered captured from the cctv video. In the second was a man, presumably the same man, wearing a button up shirt and holding a soda, looking down the eye of the lens, with a simple and relaxed grin. Walt left the sound muted but the headline was clear: *Deceased Bombing Suspect Identified as 29-year-old Jonas Thompson.*

Graham recognized the face. Had seen it, with the hat pulled low, just feet away, loosing shots into a crowd. He had seen Jonas go down behind the car, out of sight.

Deceased.

Bile rose in his throat and he rushed to the trashcan. There was little in his stomach left to heave out, but his body was raked, shaking. And soon Walter was behind him, with a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s just my concussion,” he said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “I’m fine.”

“A concussion doesn’t mean you’re fine.”

“But I’m telling you I am.”

“You should be resting. Or at the goddamn hospital, guy.”

Graham ignored him and stood on his shaky legs and crossed to the computers. The IRC channel was alive with activity. There were nearly 200 people in the channel. Information was flying down the page. Thousands more had come and gone. Several



people had tasked themselves with doxing Jonas, or The Motherfucker, as he had been dubbed, and someone was rounding up zombie computes for a brute force hack of his facebook, gathering as much CPU as they could.

Graham recognized several of the nics, but most were randoms who wanted to help, intrigued by a post on Reddit or any number of the hundreds of other channels. He scrawled out his IP address and signed up for the brute force, some form of Conflicker that would round up zombies; at the moment he had no need for processing power.

“The feds will have his email and password pretty quick, if they don’t already,” Walter said.

“Bureaucracy is fucked, Walt. Even if they do they will be cutting red tape for two hours before they can do anything. We’ll find them before sunrise.”

Graham felt hope. They had needed a foothold, a starting point, anything, and they had gotten something better. They could use Jonas, crack his facebook and get his email; an email is the goldmine and they could surely mine it with 200 sets of eyes in a matter of minutes and find the next clue. All they needed was a name, another email address, a student ID, a phone number; with any of that they could spread themselves wide, a spider web out over the city, monitoring its every breath, and find anyone. Walter knew someone who had claimed to have a zero day, someone who honestly might; with that they could potentially unlock unlockable doors. By sunrise they would have the other two bombers and any other conspirators, their names, their emails, their facebook and Twitters, their home addresses, where they worked, their cellphone numbers, their bills, the names of their family members, their families’ addresses, their girlfriends’ addresses, their every fucking secret. They had bested Scientology. They had shut down major

credit card companies. They had taken on whole countries, three letter agencies. This chaotic band of anonymous geeks could track down two kids.

Graham ran his hand through his hair, the cuts and bruises stinging. He could feel the tension unraveling. They were about to do something incredible.

“I want his fucking head,” he whispered.

Hacker

When night hits we walk towards Barrage Vauban to see the city lights. We haven't eaten in hours, drunk and hollow, so we are hungry and tired, and even though it is cold I feel disheveled and sweaty.

This part of Strasbourg feels less beautiful.

*What happened with that kid?* Phil asks.

We had been silent for a long time, just walking and looking and breathing, like people in something together.

*The kid you told me about on the train,* he pauses, *The one you said you killed.*

*I didn't kill him.*

*Okay,* he says.

*Not like that, anyways. I wasn't there. I wasn't even in the same state.*

He says meanly, *Did you drop a book off your shelf and they fell dead?*

I feel our bodies drift apart.

*Did you kill anyone,* I ask.

*You're smart,* he says, *You're liberal. You know you're not supposed to those questions.*

I'm hungry and irritated and I need to let something loose from the coil in my heart.

*I'm good with computers,* I say.

He's silent, listening.

We pass small cellphone repair shops and fruit stands and a florist. The city is quieter here, and darker. As far as I can see there are no tourists. Directly across from us, on the opposing sidewalk, a couple holds hands, the woman carrying a large paper bag with a baguette bouncing against her shoulder. The cliché is extreme, and there is the flutter of anger. I don't want to be her. Not really, but I want that life, the simplicity.

I know then that I want to go home—home, wherever that may be—someone. But Alex is the first person in my mind. Which is wrong and unrealistic. Still, in my body I feel a want for a soft bed and down comforter and a cat, a want to wash vegetables and listen to the radio with the window open and not be so fucking destroyed.

I want to be safe.

I say, *A man contacted me—not just me, but other hackers too—looking for help. He wanted to stop something bad from happening.* I've never really talked about it. Not with the lawyer. Not with my mother. *I usually don't mettle in shit like that. I liked the puzzles. I like solving problems and having the advantage. I like what I could do there. If you know how, you can control just about anything.*

*What'd your parents think of this?* he asks.

*They aren't naïve,* I say, *though they didn't know the extent of it. Not for a long time.*

*My dad celebrated the day I enlisted,* he says, *threw a party in our backyard with all his friends. He wasn't even a vet.*

Then he says, *Keep going.*

*For hours I didn't help, I say, I stuck around the IRC and watched, poked my nose down a few rabbit holes, but I didn't do anything. Then the guy asked again. He asked just me for something he knew only I could do. It was coincidence really.*

*And how did they die?*

*A bomb, I say.*

He looks at me with sad eyes, and I expect him to know, to have heard everything about the attack. But he says nothing more.

Which makes me angry. I bared myself to him. I am naked and vulnerable and I want him to say something. Because in that moment I need something from him. And I hate myself for needing anything from him.

*Do you believe in God, he finally says.*

My mood is spoiled.

He takes a drink of the bottle and passes it to me, nearly empty, continues, *I don't either. So, odds are, without God there's no heaven. And no heaven means this is it.* He lifts his arms and gestures around us. *When we die it's fucking over. So what do we live for then? Our friends? Family? Sure. But what happens when they die?* He taps a cigarette from a pack and offers me one. We stop walking and light them. His face glows orange, his cheeks suck in. He exhales toward the sky and we watch the smoke disappear.

He says, *We're fucking erased is what. And everything we've ever done is winked from existence. How many billions of people have lived and died and been forgotten? If there's nothing after this, surviving in some history book is meaningless. We're insignificant. How many million galaxies exist outside of ours? How many billions of stars and planets? When we think of alien life we think of advanced life forms inundated*

*with knowledge and understanding, but odds are, they are just like us. Lost and impossibly trivial. Winks of existence.*

In so many ways I think he is right. But at the same time I don't want him to be. I'm looking for a reason to keep living, to stop myself from going back to my hotel room and finishing off the bottle of morphine. Going quietly into nothingness.

I say, *What if you're wrong?*

He shrugs his shoulders. We are walking again. *But that's why it's okay.*

*What?*

*Killing.*

He does not look at me, his stride doesn't falter. We keep walking easily down endless roads. The bottle is empty.

*Let's get a beer, he says, A beer and some food. I've never liked war stories. They fucking bum me out.*

After we eat and Phil drinks, we make it to Barrage Vauban and gaze off at the city lights, the merging of rivers, the light and the dark. A Christmas market is winking closed and people linger in the smell of burning wood and sugar. We walk through the rows of white tents and watch the families with candy and bags of ornaments. And we watch the workers pack up and shutter the tents with tarps. Then we turn after the last tent and it's all there before us again, the city rolled out and off the edge of the earth, like the darkness is in retreat, like we will be safe for the rest of our lives. And, then, before I notice, Phil takes my cold hand in his cold hand and there is a flicker of life in some space near my heart.

Martyr

When Hussein woke Shaheed and Margaret were in the bathroom. She stood with her back to him while he peed. Everything would be easier if they had handcuffs or rope, something to tie her up with.

Her body had sunk into itself, her shoulders boneless and empty. Shaheed watched her from the corner of his eye. Her breath rattled through her, her lungs tin cans.

Shaheed heard clearly the thump of Hussein rolling off the table. Margaret did too, her body tense.

He had taken two full liters of blood.

Shaheed pushed Margaret out into the hallway. Hussein stood in the middle of the kitchen, everything about him so shockingly repulsive, the blood brown and red and covering him so fully. His back was hunched and his face tight with pain and anger. His chest was patched with deep bruises and cuts.

Margaret stayed at the end of Shaheed's arm, motionless.

Shaheed met Hussein's eyes and for a moment everyone was silent.

It was beyond late. Dawn was only a couple of hours away. Dawn when it would finally end. Christmas morning.

"Take this out of me," Hussein said to Margaret, holding out his right forearm where the IV's two veins were attached.

She didn't move.

"Pull them out yourself," Shaheed said.

"I want her to do it."

When she moved it was like something crashing down, the way her body ticked forward into her first painful step. She shuffled along. Shaheed couldn't stand to look at her.

“We need money,” Hussein said.

“What for?”

“We can escape,” Hussein said, “All we have to do is find a way out of downtown and we can easily make it out of the state before they ID either of us.”

Shaheed didn't understand. He was annoyed with Hussein's games. Why was he suddenly giving up?

“Then where do we go?”

Hussein worked his jaw. “Mexico?”

“That's exactly what they'll expect!”

“You don't have to come with me.” Hussein was unwavering.

“You goddamn coward.”

Hussein glared at his brother. Then he gestured at Margaret and she finally stepped towards him and began unhooking the IVs. While she pulled out the two needles from his arm he ran his hand along her forehead, brushing back her bangs, hooking them behind her ear.

Her skin was pallid.

“But first we need money, for gas. For food. For buses and trains and every fucking thing. We need money and we need to get a move on.” Hussein looked down at Margaret before him, she had finished with the needles and she still held them both in her hands. “Do you want to come with us?”



“What about the plan?”

Hussein shrugged.

Shaheed could feel his chest tightening, the early signs of a panic attack.

“We’ll need your debit card,” Hussein said to Margaret. “I can’t tell you where we’re going, but it’ll be fun.”

Shaheed was losing his mind.

She wouldn’t look up at him. “You said you’d let me go.”

He shrugged. “Eventually,” he said. “And I said *maybe*. *Maybe* I would.”

“And what about the plan?” Shaheed asked again.

“She’s very handsome.” Hussein looked up at Shaheed. “It’s all a part of the plan.”

“My car’s not here,” Margaret said.

Hussein playfully slumped his shoulders. “I guess we give up then.” He let out a dark laugh. Like anything could stop him.

Shaheed suddenly felt adrenaline swell through him. They had done something, started *something* and now, after so much waiting Hussein was going to throw it away. Because he was a coward. They could do more. There was a plan. The *coup de grâce*, as Omar called it. It would make them gods. It would birth so many thousands of copycats. It would cement their place in history.

His confusion angered him.

Hussein, hunched, looked at Shaheed through squinted eyes. “You’re acting so fucking dumb, Shaheed.”

Hussein cupped Margaret's chin. "Will you make me something to eat. I haven't eaten all day. And something for my little brother too." He held to her chin, her eyes blazing, for seconds, a minute, her hands balled, his fingers pressing deep into her cheeks, until he let go suddenly and she stumbled back. For a moment she wouldn't turn away from, she backed slowly towards the fridge, watching Hussein, as though she expected him to come for her again. "Something vegetarian," he said. "We don't eat meat."

"I'm going to keep going then," Shaheed said. "I'll finish it on my own." He had been promised his death and he wanted it, badly, more than ever, to disappear in the rubble at the bottom of the tower.

Hussein pulled a chair up beside the blood caked table and sat slowly, easing his wounded body into the chair. Shaheed admired his strength, the way he bit down on the pain, swallowed it whole.

"You're going to come with me," he said.

"But we're not done. I'm not done." Shaheed didn't know why he was arguing. He had wanted this. He had wanted to be finished with it since the moment it began. Before it even did.

"Neither am I," Hussein said. "Trust me." He thought for a moment, and said, out of nowhere, "Wouldn't it be amazing if I killed you, after all of this, if it was me."

"We take our handsome friend here," Hussein gestured to Margaret, standing motionless by the refrigerator, "And we get some money from an ATM. As much as she's got. Then we hit the road. Catch the morning traffic out of the city. Save it for another day. We'll be heroes where we're going, little brother."

Shaheed was angry and confused. His brother was making no sense. But something about his calm, the cool way he spoke, sent a chill down Shaheed's spine.

Hussein sat the gun on the table. "But first I need to eat."

Phisher

Where to start. We started. Our strength was chaos, our recklessness. Our audacity.

First, we had a name, a man. Jonas Thompson. The hundreds of us.

Started with the facebook. With social media. We were thankful for these outlets; they were our most precious tools. We were thankful for our cultural obsession with self-image, for our impossible desire to be looked at and thought of and loved for.

Because here, a man, buys guns and builds bombs, intends to ravage a city, kill hundreds, thousands, and can't bring himself to delete the easiest link back to his truths?

The key was to move quickly. The feds were chasing the same set of breadcrumbs. But there were more of us. And we were quicker.

The facebook—when we found his, using the name and picture from the news—was ripe. There were thousands of friends. Thousands of pictures. Dozens of videos even, even one of him firing a rifle in the woods. There was so much there. Years of Wall posts. And surely, once we hacked it, there would be years of chats and messages of some value, some clue to these other men, still loose, still wild, still out for blood.

Quickly, we divided, like water through boulders, filled every crack and crevice.

Priority one was break into the facebook. People are careless and desperate to look beautiful. They will do anything. It was likely that he bragged to a girl, it was likely he was even so stupid as to be friends with the others, that their lives were just waiting in his friend list. So many of us poured through this list, looking for faces and clues. We spread everywhere.

Jonas Thompson. Employee of Quick Flip Realty. Former employee of Tito's Gym and Boxing, Finance Resources, Quality Care Finance. Fan of Tito's Gym and Boxing. Associates degree in Business Management from Aurora Community College. Chatfield High School. Born and raised in Colorado. Mother, Janet Taft. Father, Jim Thompson. Sister, younger, Angelica Taft. Friends of so many. Fan of Tec9, Kanye, Slayer, Five Finger Death Punch. Fan of America's Liberation, UFC, Small Government/No Government, Exist (spelled in the group's photo with letters made up of assault rifles), The Knights of New America, Pussy Nation.

Somewhere, an email address was found. Word spread for a botnet and ten thousand computers were put to the task of brute forcing a password. The risk of email, we know, was that you can have as many as you'd like. Conduct all your business in one place. Your sex in another, social media in another, family and friends in another. Other zombies were put to the facebook as well. These computers, the so many thousands of them caught in drive-by-downloads, brainwashed quietly—your computer, without you ever knowing—to do our work, to give priority to us and our tasks; so many thousand chained to some central heart, pumping their strength there, to our endeavor, to dictionary: repetition, using all this CPU to punch in a million individual password attempts each second, literally using the dictionary of words and letters and numbers to algorithmically work its way through every possible combination in existence. There are billions of trillions of combinations. But those numbers are narrowed by the password's given parameters: there must be at least one capital letter, a number, a symbol, it must be at least six characters, no more than 20. These helped us. So many minds put to such good use.

The problem with brute force was it's messy and obvious to anyone who was looking. Thankfully, everyone tonight was distracted.

And the problem with the facebook: the feds were surely already in. The wannabes, the white hats in Virginia.

Thank god for the so many of us.

The brutes went nowhere. An email opened and was trashed quickly, with nothing at all important to be found, expect another email chained for password retrieval. Then, that one was set to. No combination of the first's password worked and we were impressed to an extent, that there were, at one point, thoughts in this man's head.

Relief came from Tito's Gym and Boxing. We followed this trail to a website for the gym, and, really, it was as easy as this: sent Tito himself an email from a fake address that appears to be from the *Post*, said we heard that the terrorist Jonas frequented his establishment, and that we'd love, just love, to film an interview with him at his gym, in front of a sign that says Tito's Gym and Boxing in huge letters, that we would be gentle with him, that we didn't blame him, that we just wanted to talk about the kind of man Jonas was, maybe give Tito, subtly, some publicity. Some of our potential questions, we said, were attached in this file. He clicked almost instantly on the file, from an administrative email no less, from the computer, even, where the company's records were stored. From there it was easy: the RAT downloaded and in minutes we owned the computer, the establishment, Tito himself. The list of gym members, somewhere around 400, was buried openly on the desktop. Scrolling through, we had a gut feeling that another of the monsters was hiding somewhere amongst the nondescriptness.

If only the feds could have kept up with us. The thought is laughable, because there are thousands of us. We are everyone. We are everywhere. And we can do anything.

It was painfully easy.

Hacker

We buy a bottle of rum from the corner store. We haven't spoken in nearly an hour, just walking aimlessly back to his apartment. But the silence feels easy. I am imagining his hands on my body. And I hope he is doing the same.

I am afraid but I want it. And I think I want him. Maybe there is order in the world and I found him for a reason. Maybe not. Either way he is the man I am walking beside to a rented room and a tiny bed.

He works the locks on the front door. The cold has gripped us and my limbs feel stiff as we start up the long stairs. At each floor moonlight spills in from the lone window. Maybe somewhere out there are stars, those billion planets. There is a theory that we have never met extraterrestrial life for a reason. Not because they do not exist, but because to travel hundreds of millions of miles through space you need nuclear technology, and any society that has developed nuclear technology has annihilated themselves.

I have no doubt that we are not the first.

On the top story the floorboards groan as we step quietly to the end of the hall, as he drunkenly works the heavy locks, as we step into the darkness and neither of us turns on a light, as the door shuts and we stand breathing, shifting our weight, until finally he kneels and unknots his shoes, removes his socks, and I do the same, as we shed our jackets and layers, as our eyes adjust to the darkness, to the dim of the moon, somewhere out there, as I peel off my shirt and bra and he inhales and slowly pulls his own shirt over his head, and I work the buttons of my jeans, as we both stand naked our bodies feet



apart, the whole building settling in around us, maybe sinking further into the earth of this small island, resilient after so many wars and centuries, after so much violence, as he lifts and arm and I say, *no*, and he stops until I step forward, the violence of noise, our existence, and take his hand, as I hold it in mine, trace the callouses, the nubs of nails, as finally, I draw him toward me and press the cold appendage to my cheek, as he grows hard, as I run his palm down my neck, over my bones, my breasts, my tummy, my back, my hips, to me, to inside, to my warmth, as I tell him I don't have much to give, much warmth, and he whispers that he is sorry for what he's done, as his other hand comes slowly, as he steps and draws our bodies together, as I finally begin to feel, the ghostly trail of his palm, something like pleasure, something, as his hand presses to my back and my face falls into the nook of his shoulder, as I feel his hardness against me and will desire, will want into my heart, it is not him, I know, but to feel, to know I am in control, of my life and my body, as we step together toward the bed and his knees buckle and he sits and inches back, the bed groaning too now, and I climb on top of him, push his hands back, over his head, as neither of says anything, as we both inhale, as I take him, as I settle into him, him into me, as we are one and I am over filled with anger and hatred for the world, for men, for Phil, for every man who has ever laid a finger on a woman, as we find a rhythm, his hips hardly moving, his eyes open and unblinking, the darkness there, swallowing up this sound, the groaning bed, the groaning floor, the settling building, the sinking island, as I refuse to stop until I can feel him, feel lost, destroy myself in the oblivion of pleasure, until I can disappear safely inside this hallow cast of self that I can my body.

After, he lays heavy beside me, breathing until I am sure he is asleep.

I had expected to find sand on his body. I'm not sure why, but I imagined it around the roots of his hair, around the backs of his ears. I expected it to have clung to him.

I feel like I have been aimless. I feel like nothing has happened to me here. I have met Phil and found something in that, I have seen things people don't. But I have the feeling of having watched it all tick by, like a train sitting still at the station while the world rumbles past out the window.

I know what I want to do, in some far off, hazy way. And I know who I want to be. I want change and I want to act it.

I think of Alex and her new life, the new things I hope I didn't ruin.

In the morning I'll get my things from the hotel.

Martyr

It happened again on the stairs.

Hussein had dressed in clothes taken from Margaret's closet, a man's, on hangers pushed to the far reaches. Beneath the new sweater, the lumpy, explosive vest.

They had eaten the mushy pasta with cold, flavorless red sauce and taken their things and started together out the door. Margaret's car was still at the hospital and the plan was to risk driving their busted vehicle there, or within a few blocks, to trade them out and be on their way.

Hussein limped in front, down the hallway and to the stairs, Margaret behind him. Shaheed in the back. They twisted down the stairs, the back and forth of them, for two flights. Shaheed could see the stains of dark, gore and violence, that covered Hussein, even though they'd washed him with a rag in the bathtub. And same with Margaret. Only less, dots peppering her hair and the skin at the base of her neck.

Then, suddenly, almost without sound, there was the man, running headlong into Hussein. Skipping two stairs at a time, rounding one flight and turning right into Hussein as he reached the landing. Their bodies didn't actually meet. The man frozen, wavered, drunk, and stepped back. The mess of it all didn't seem to hit him too quickly. He wobbled almost happily. But it did come, the sight of them, and he took another step back.

Hussein pulled the gun and the man put his hands up. It was comical in a way.

Shaheed heard Hussein shush the man gently, like you would a child.

The stairs were tight and Margaret was blocking Shaheed from going down—it happened in a matter of seconds anyways. Shaheed pulled his 9mm from his waistband.

Hussein held a finger to his lips and smiled at the man, a friendly smile, lowering the gun some. He stepped closer and said, “Our little secret, okay?” His smile was so big, even from Shaheed’s awkward angle.

And the man against the wall, curling into himself, frozen, slowly cracked, his lips peeling up, the hope taking over: he would live. He righted himself, still against the wall.

Hussein put the gun away and the man visibly sighed, laughed slightly even, seeing all the humor, the absurdity of it.

And Hussein went like he was going to pass the man, continue down, let it all simply go this happy way.

Then there was the knife, quick into the man’s stomach, and the hand over his mouth. The blood came bright in the florescent light of the landing. The knife stabbed quickly, over and over, two dozen times in a flash so that there was nothing left inside the man and when Hussein pulled his hand away from his mouth and slipped a set of keys from the pocket, the body, emptied, slid quietly to the floor and they all continued down the stairs, the only sound Margaret sobbing into her hand, the laces of her untied shoes slapping the wooden steps, one after another.

The shattered, empty face flicked before his eyes. Shaheed had buried it. He had told Hussein nothing of it.

Earlier, before driving to the hospital and finding Margaret, Shaheed had expected an alarm. He stayed crouched by the shattered glass door of the blood bank blocks from the abandoned house where they'd hidden out all day. He waited for the blaring sound of alarm, but instead, there was the unnerving sound of silence. The lights were out. He looked over his shoulder, around the small back lot again. It was still empty. Behind the dumpsters was a tall fence, and behind it were the second stories of a block of houses. He looked at their windows, feeling like he had walked into a trap of some sort, certain he was being watched. They were waiting for him, just inside the door, to leap out and grab hold of him, overpower him, strip him, beat him, make an example of him. He could feel it. He raised the gun.

From somewhere around the corner there was the whine of an engine.

Shaheed poked his hand through the glass and unlocked the door, slipping quickly inside. As the door shut behind him he raised the gun again. The darkness closed in around him. He forced himself to breathe. Doors lined the hallway. He moved without knowing where to go.

He passed one door, two, three. Then, there was the squeak of shoe on freshly waxed floor.

Shaheed turned and pulled the trigger even before the man had come fully into the room. Three panicked shots. All of them hitting, throwing the body against the beige wall, slamming the head partway through the plaster. The retort impossibly loud, but the impacts dull and empty, just twitch of the old limbs, a shoulder shaking, the stomach punched in, the head yanked back.

Everything said run. Screamed it.

But Shaheed couldn't move. He just watched the body come to a rest, sitting against the wall, as though sleeping. A body a sleep. A portion of the head destroyed.

Run.

But nothing. He willed his feet to move. He willed his body to do anything. Just breathe, don't stop breathing. Run and breathe. But he did neither, nothing else.

The noise rang in his ears. It was so loud. The police would come.

Hussein would die if he did nothing. He would bleed out, alone, a martyr of nothing.

And he was running. Over the foreign body in its green jumper, down the hallway, over the vacuum cleaner, through one door and another. He rifled through rooms as he went until finally there was a locked one. He kicked, the blow running up his bones, cracking in his knees, against the firm, unmovable. He kicked again. And again. And again and it gave in a splinter of wood. Inside the rooms the fridges were locked with deadbolts. He used the butt of his gun to batter them off. He threw pints of blood, one from each of the neatly labeled bins, into his backpack. From the shelves along the walls he grabbed IVs and needles and gauze, without even looking, throwing it into the open mouth of his bag, then he was running again, out through the door and into the snow, his tracks so obvious at first, until he leapt the fence and cut through the narrow alleys between the closely nestled houses. He ran the alleys for several blocks, thinking only of putting distance between himself and the body, his feet slapping the snow, slipping from under him on the patched ice, soaked and cold. And when his lungs felt like they might burst he slowed to a quick walk, zigzagging only away, until he was lost.

At the mouth of an alley he down the block to street signs he didn't recognize. He didn't know where he was or how to get back to Hussein. But he had blood, heavy on his shoulder. He looked down at his hands and expected, almost, to see blood. Instead, they shook uncontrollably. Each blink brought the head, destroyed, that lifeless form. Shaheed wanted to tell himself he didn't mean to. But what did intention matter anymore? And besides, this is what they wanted. Random, fractal violence with the capacity to take any life at any time. And besides, a body was a body was a body.

Phisher

400 faces isn't very many. Not in the scheme of anything. Ruling out the women it was down to 254 names. We poured over them quickly, a group of us. Everybody took ten faces. First, was the matter of finding the face. Tito was up to date on nothing. It was a matter of minutes to work through his computer and find financial info, tax forms, and membership records. But there were no photos. Just names, birth dates, credit card numbers, phone numbers, addresses (surely stolen by someone among us, for later, to be sold).

We laughed at Tito, sitting alone in his quiet house, because how could a man like him, who runs a gym and is willing to rat a customer, not be terribly alone, waiting for a reporter, for a fame, that will never come. We didn't like Tito. We pitied him. It is not his fault but we are angry and our anger needs a body to rest upon. We ransacked his computer, for letting a monster exist within his ranks. Uploaded the files to a server and wiped his whole computer clean. Empty. Byebye, Tito.

The records he kept made the pictures easy to find. We had enough information to dox everyone. If the whole ordeal hadn't been a scramble to beat the feds, we would have probably given up for the simplicity of it. The dumbing down of our talents.

We each took ten because ten was manageable in a hurry. The obvious place to start is facebook again. Many of the names required only a quick search through those who have liked Tito's page. Others still we found easy on the site. Most even. Those not registered there, we found on LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, several more on



personal websites, and some even at the college, where their pictures were under a faculty page.

The first step was collecting a photo, one with no other people in the frame. Which, if necessary, meant cropping others out. Then any other information we didn't already have. Married. Single. Employer. Political incline.

Since time necessitated, we created a Google doc. The idea of registering this information on a Google server was a bit unpleasant, but the simplicity of it outweighed any personal logics or worries. And the information piled quickly, filtered once, by whoever found it, because we had pictures to go off of, from the mall and the parking garage, blurred faces, whole bodies, intelligible, but nonetheless usable in counting people out, even if on shape alone. Some shapes are so obviously not others.

In an hour we had 29 faces left in our doc, three of whom, lacked a picture. 29 potential murderers.

How easy to find a person. To find people. We are not the government. 15 years ago even, such feats would have been impossible. Your lives are impossibly free, to be collected, exploited, fetishized, studied. For what? For you to be studied as a monster? Investigated for murder under no law whatsoever. Simply for your metadata. Simply because your digital footprint placed you on the corner where the crime occurred. Guilt by proximity, by shoe size.

It's beautiful, isn't it?

We're beautiful.

Like a botnet, like so much CPU working toward the same beautiful end.

The internet, the great equalizer.

We are feared rightly. By citizens and governments alike. Because their power is checked by ours. Because we are everywhere and every one. Beside you now. Looking through your files, at the pictures of your child, at your medical records, the texts you sent drunk on Friday night.

Do the feds have 29 names? Have they been anywhere near Tito's? We can see that they have not, not anywhere in his digital world have they existed. And now his computer is clean, and who knows if he kept backups.

The debate is long. We debate size, and face, we discuss skin tone, haircuts, and some of us are racist and ought to burn in hell, but we are fighting a good fight. We are afraid to delete anyone for the fear of letting the condemned escape. But we change their status and rearrange the names, to try to get a top ten. All the while, some of us search for faces for the three faceless ones.

We have dedicated ourselves to this trail fully. And there, is of course, we know, we admit, the possibility that it is wholly wrong. That Jonas Thompson does not know his fellow monsters from Tito's Gym and Boxing. Or that he is so much smarter than we think. This fear is deep within us. Because we are so smart. We worry that maybe he is as smart as us. Because if he were, months ago these three men would have separated, cut all digital contact, crossed paths never, spoke only at preselected meeting points in person, never emailed, never texted, made sure their trails never intersected, all to make this, their hunting, a sporting challenge.

There is a software running, off a smaller zombie army, that is scanning body type, measuring heights with shadows and angles, the curve of shoulders, the width of chests, the length of legs, the distance of steps, comparing them with the security footage.

Some photos are only of upper bodies, but still a sort of magic is happening. The 29 are dwindling. We are down, with this hacked software, down under ten, including the faceless.

Hacker

Tomorrow is Christmas.

Strasbourg has been good to us. It has been a quiet place, and we have found a rhythm among the tepid flow of life; sleeping in late, making love in the mornings, sharing instant coffee and wine or whiskey or whatever we last bought and the comfort of silence, toast and peanut butter. Sometime in the afternoon we walk, we have walked all over this city, aimlessly, getting lost amid the winding streets and snowed trees, leaning on each other. At dusk we eat, wherever we are, the cheapest food we can manage, and beer. We tell stories of who we are not, and lives we could have led, we talk about friends who were never born, and the people we never lost. I have created a version of myself that is not so destroyed. And I imagine Phil has done the same.

As we walk down the Christmas lit streets, we are characters. People who have lived our lives, but not us.

Back in our tiny room we take off our cold clothes and crawl beneath the blankets and smoke and drink. In the bathroom I snort morphine. And one morning I woke to find that Phil had snuck out in the night and bought pot from a kid outside a Carrefour. Later, together, we buy what I think is opium—its identity lost in translation—and smoke it together in our small room with the window cracked and the stars, too many of them, puncturing the darkness.

It is the obliteration of self.

High, we make love, we fuck, for what feels like hours, our bodies dripping, exposed, given over to the ecstasy of foreign pleasure, to the freedom of oblivion.

Today, though, I am alone. Phil woke early and left a note saying he was going to call his family. To expect him gone for an hour or two.

While he's out I count out the last of my morphine pills. The last of my sleeping pills. I have enough of both to get me to the end of the week. Back home it would be easy to send a RAT to a hospital and come in through the backdoor, write myself all the digital scrips I could ever need. Hospitals are famously easy to hack. And here it might be easy too, after figuring out the language barriers in the system—at its core, the language of the internet is one all its own.

Instead, I snap a blade from one of Phil's razors and carefully cut each pill in half. If he keeps supporting our extraneous habits, I can make these last until Amsterdam, where I assume everything will be easy to find.

Today though, I'll go to a pharmacy.

For an hour I lay in bed watching the sunlight crawl across the wall, up over the bed, over my limbs, until it warms me and I inhale it.

I don't have keys but I shut the heavy apartment door behind me and check to make sure no one else is in the hall. On the street it is strange to feel alone. The cold air wraps over me. The day is clear, the sky blue and everywhere. At the pharmacy I buy Chlor-Trimeton for five Euro fifty and take one of the chalky chlorpheniramine pills and half a morphine tablet and wash them down with bottled water and an energy bar. I'm not hungry, but a full stomach helps the morphine work itself more deeply into the system. Chlorpheniramine is no more than allergy relief medication, but in conjunction with an opiate, it works as a potentiator, drawing out the effects for hours.

The streets today are more full. The snow has been shoveled and shoes click on the cobblestones. People dart in and out of shops carrying colorful bags. Taking part in the commercialization of love and family via capitalism.

But isn't this what I want? To learn to be part of the world again?

I decide then that I will buy Phil something. Without much question he helped me withdraw the rest of my Bit, turn it into Euro. It won't last forever, but it will get me through another two months maybe. So a gift isn't out of the question.

Martyr

The car was well used, hail damage pocking the roof and hood, but it started happily, everything about it still warm. Shaheed inhaled the lingering scent of a just-smoked cigarette. He sat motionless behind the wheel, reeling, the sight of the body, another lifeless pile of bones. Beside him Margaret shook. Hussein behind her. Their bags stacked next to him.

With the man's keys, finding his car had been a matter of clicking the unlock button in the small parking lot.

Shaheed felt sick.

“Still want to keep going?” Hussein asked sarcastically.

Shaheed didn't look up. He studied his hands. He had scrubbed them clean inside Margaret's apartment, the water scalding his skin. But still, in this dark parking lot, he could see the stains, patched, rust colored, something brighter beneath the nails.

“You're so fucking naive, little brother,” Hussein continued. “Plain dumb. Christ, I wonder how you made it this fucking far.”

“You want me to be strong, I'm trying to be strong.”

“Smart is strong. Sometimes strong is strong, but mostly it's smart. And smart you are-fucking-not.”

The anger flashed suddenly through Shaheed. His hands took hold of the wheel and squeezed, torqued with all his strength, as though to rip the whole thing apart. Nothing so much as gave.

“But you've done better than I expected.”

“I hate you,” Shaheed said.

Hussein laughed.

Shaheed meant it. It made his veins burn hot, the tips of his fingers on fire.

Hussein wasn't his fucking father, but still, he talked down to him, like he had so much to offer. He did it to get into Shaheed's head. Shaheed knew it. And it worked.

Disappointment was a serrated and gruesome weapon.

Shaheed felt his whole body twitching beneath his skin. He found Hussein in the rear mirror.

“You blow her brains out right now and we'll finish this, just like you want, little brother.”

Margaret's head was bowed, her body leaning noticeably away, her face hidden behind a veil of her wavy light hair.

“Here,” Hussein leaned between the seats and pulled the gun from Shaheed's pants. He took hold of the barrel and held it out to Shaheed, the handle slick and wet and red.

“You want to be strong? This is what it takes to fight this war.”

Shaheed couldn't look away from the gun. If he looked up he'd see her crying. So close. So alive and wanting none of this. Wanting only to be home, cooking dinner, working on a glass of wine, listening to the hum of TV, to be safe and normal while the world fought its wars somewhere else.

Hussein took a breath. “They kill freely. Women and children. And call it collateral damage. But they mean it. Their bombs keep falling, little brother. And the way I see it is, you can either drop those bombs, dig some graves, or take an eye for an eye



and even the playing field, show them they bleed just like we do, just like everyone does. Nobody wants to see this. Nobody believes it will happen to them. But they need to see what it's like. You hear me, Isaac? They keep dropping these bombs, the Doctors Without Borders hospital, saying, *sorry we hit the school, we were aiming for the daycare next door*, and it's always fine. So if you believe that it's worth dying for, if it's worth your life, then it's worth hers."

"They won't listen." Margaret straightened herself some, still so obviously afraid to move, her hair cluttering her face, her eyes ringed with red, everything about her destroyed.

Hussein shifted to face her. "People listen to bombs. They're too loud to ignore."

Shaheed's stomach dropped. He didn't want her to bring something onto herself.

"They'll talk about you, about all the people you've murdered, they'll talk about why you did it for a month, if you're lucky."

"You're an expert then?"

A weak smile flicked across Hussein's face.

"I've seen it. People forgot about Jahar before he even went to trial."

"It's not us that matters, Margaret. It's the violence. The Weakness."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "It will only be about healing. About triumph. Then people will forget and it will be healed through forgetfulness. The only people who won't heal are those who actually lost someone." She paused. "It's not right, I know. But it's the way it is."

"You're foolish to think we'll be the last. Look at us. Look how beautiful we are. People will love us, the beautiful brothers who took up a war for those who couldn't fight

for themselves. People will be inspired by us. They will see how much can be done in one night.”

“No. No, they will see monsters. That’s how they’ll play you. They won’t even show your picture.”

“There are plenty of young men who want monsters in their lives.”

She gave her head the tiniest of shakes.

Hussein laughed again softly. “What’s the goddamn difference?”

He looked back to Shaheed, the pitiful humor of it all still there on his twisted face, and settled back into his seat. “I’m done following Omar’s *plan*. That’s what I know. I believe in this fight, little brother, and I’m going to live to fight some more.”

He took the gun from his brother, the liquid warm, squeezing between his fingers, the sound wet, the city listening for what he’d do next.

Phisher

“What if they’re brothers?” Walter asked.

Graham, from the couch, his face lit in blue, looked up from his laptop. “We checked. Jonas only has a sister.”

“No,” Walter said. “What if these two, the other two, are brothers. Think about it.” He clicked open several photos on his monitor and swiveled to the side so Graham could see. “Jonas is older... I mean, I’m not sure. But he looks it. He’s bigger, carries himself with a handful of years on the other guy.” He pointed out Jonas in several pictures, ones posted by every news outlet in America.

“You can’t know that.”

“I know, but just hear me out. What if he is, and he convinced two younger guys to join him. What are the odds that they aren’t related? Right? It’s crazy to think three separate individuals could keep a plan like this secret.”

“The Boston Bombers,” Graham said.

“Exactly. Brothers. And then, Columbine,” he said, referring to the 1999 school shooting. “Those kids told everyone. When the dust settled it came out that like a dozen kids had had an idea that something was going to happen. One person planning a shooting is one thing. But even then, people seemed to know it was coming. But *three* fucking people.” Walter raised his eyebrows.

“So what. We don’t have any brothers here.” Graham gestured to the list of names on his laptop.

“Right. But brothers can have different last names. And why not take what we have. We’ve put ourselves to this path. So, why not run with it, check everything we can.”

“So take these names and, what, mix them up?”

“Exactly. Do facebook searches, pairing one guys last name with everybody’s first. See if we get a match.”

Graham was exhausted, his head ragged. His shoulder too. Painfully. His thoughts were sluggish and fogged, and he feared he was dangerously high. So the idea of simply searching facebook for last names sounded easy enough. Doable in his present state. He agreed.

Walter lingered, staring at him.

“What happens when we find them, man.” He ran his hands through his thick brown hair, the curls jumping back into place. “The cops are in panic mode, chasing down a thousand tips, manning roadblocks. Cell reception has been spotty all night, the lines jammed. At best we get one patrol car, at worst we don’t even get the call through.”

“That’s enough, isn’t it? One car?”

Walter shrugged, his face haggard. His eyes red-rimmed from the harsh light of pixels. They’d been working for nearly two hours. “They really pulled this off. They put a city into total chaos. And got lucky as fuck with this snow. They couldn’t have asked for a better day.”

Graham turned back to his computer. Walter was right. Things couldn’t be worse for Denver right now. With such violence on the loose, it was only a matter of time before it got worse, before a building came down.

They plugged names. Each of the 29 left on their list into facebook, many of which had been done by others. Online, the op was still running. Someone's botnet was running a facial recognition search using every photo they could find from the bombing against each of the individual profile pics. But Graham and Walter went back to facebook. The easiest tool.

Graham's whole body ached and it felt impossible to be doing anything with accuracy right now. The names ran together in his head. A blur. But he sat and scrolled through, whispering the names into existence, hoping that the right name might stick in his head.

He read the names of the men on their list, looking at their profiles, Michaels and Johns and Jacks and Bills and Adams and Teds and Aarons and thought all of them monsters. All of them were killers. He could see it in their small pictures. He could see it in their eyes. They had the capacity. But who didn't? After all, what did it take truly?

"You know," Walter said, hunched over his screen, eyes squinting, "they think they're doing the *right* thing. Just like you."

"But they're not. They're delusional."

"I know, I'm just saying. Because I think it's important to say. It's not black and white, right and wrong."

"Sometimes it is, though. Tonight it is."

"You don't know anything about them, Graham."

Graham sighed. "You're right. Not yet I don't."

“We’re no better than the feds right now, you know that? This is mass surveillance. We could make anyone guilty. Forget due process, we could have them shot dead in the snow, tonight.”

Graham ignored him. Consequences could come later. Right now it was about simply learning their names.

Even though it was possible that they had barked up the wrong tree, that neither of the other two bombers went to this gym, he could sense it, he could sense them. He looked at the faces, he had been there, but he hadn’t quite seen them, had he? He had nearly forgotten that he’d been there.

“I can’t fucking think straight,” he said.

Walter turned to face him. His back was straight and his face was oddly set. Something was bright around his eyes. “I think I have something.”

It had only been so many minutes. Graham was incredulous. “Who?”

“I just,” he stumbled, his eyes darting around the room, his voice rising. “The three without pictures. They don’t have the same last names as anyone else on our list, but if you could see it it’s so fucking obvious. Come here.”

“How?”

“I just searched last names. I just changed their last names. I just guessed. I got lucky.” Walter was shaking his head. There was a new nervous energy.

Graham stood slowly, pain striking through him and walked to the desk, looked over Walter’s shoulder at the screen and saw it instantly. The two pictures side by side, they were brothers. Adam and Isaac Hana. He was certain almost immediately. They had both been on their list, Adam with a photo, Isaac without—his last name listed as Ganim

in Tito's database. But together, side-by-side, he saw it. Despite their smiles, their tans, their slight beauty. Adam, arm slung over two girls, grinning, shirtless, beside some pool, handsome, easy. And Isaac, in a sweatshirt, in a dark room, his face blank and empty. But still, only a boy. Born and raised, it said, in Colorado. American. But dark. The faces of terrorism. Like America expected. Like it wanted. This was how walls got built. How religions got banned.

He felt pangs of recognition for Isaac, but brushed them aside.

Graham couldn't find his breath, let alone the words. To be looking at the men, the men who killed Tom.

"So now what?" Walter said. "We find emails, Twitters, Google accounts. Banks? Addresses? They aren't at home and we can't fucking hack a phone in time to make any sort of difference."

"All we need is general area. Then we can get out there with the wolfhound."

"We'd have to be within a mile. How the hell will we do that?"

There was a space in Graham's head where the painkillers had taken over and emptied him out, where he was hollow and the world was quiet and gone, dark, nothing.

Walter was pointing at the screen, his mouth moving.

If Graham followed this darkness he could find this nothing state and he could be free of so much there. Truthfully, he could sleep, he knew he could, if he sat or closed his eyes even, right here, standing, it would all be over. He wouldn't wake up. Not really. And even if he did, it wouldn't be the same, he wouldn't be the same.

"Graham."

Walter, sitting beneath Graham, was looking up at him.

“Now we find them.”

Walter bit his lip. “Why not just report them to the feds, let them track their phones.”

“They’re too smart for that. Odds are they are using burners and encrypted chat. That won’t work. *We* ’ve got to find them.”

Walter didn’t budge.

“If you don’t do it, I will,” Graham said.

Walter’s eyes narrowed. Graham knew his friend had almost no reason to concede. He knew he wasn’t thinking straight and he knew Walter was likely doing the right thing. But still, something inside of him wouldn’t relent.

Walter let out a slow breath and used his admin status to cleared the thread. He made their announcement, that they’d found the two men, and he posted everything they had so far. A few anons argued. Claimed that Walter and Graham were wrong. But most saw it, agreed with the facial and body shape, with their sizes, with this new truth, and a new hunt was set in motion. Anons went for addresses, every profile imaginable, bank records, school records, police records, vehicle registration, phone records and numbers, some set about finding their phones to crack them.

These were things that normally took days or weeks, that would take miracles to accomplish in a night.

And for nearly an hour they succeeded in nothing. And when they got a bite, it had nothing to do with the names Adam and Isaac Hana.



Hacker

I spend most of the day wandering aimlessly between shops. Finally I settle on a simple brown sweater that says nothing more than, *I was thinking of you.*

On my way back to the apartment, I walk by a cafe. I'm already cold, chilled to the bone, and it is already dark and quiet and Christmas Eve, and on the TV I see American news, so I slip inside. A man wipes glasses behind the counter. A woman types on her computer in the corner. I watch the TV some.

*Que voulez-vous?* the man asks.

The menu is doubled, rewritten in English.

*Un thé,* I say.

He taps on the register and the price appears on the small screen. Wordless he turns and picks up a glass. I count out coins from my pocket.

It's been a year. The anniversary is now, back home, with the time difference. I hadn't remembered until now, my legs suddenly wavy with amphetamines and nerves.

On the TV it is happening. They are playing videos and people are talking, but the sound is off and the subtitles are in French.

*Can you turn it up?*

The man looks up from the tin of tea and cocks his head.

I stumble and try to rephrase, but can find no words.

*Augmente le volume.*

I turn and the woman on the computer smiles. The man walks to the TV hung on the wall and the room fills with noise. I take my tea and sit, a table away from the woman.

*Merci.*

*Of course,* she says. She is French and gorgeous like we want French women to be. As I look at her I want to be jealous. I want to look at her and see her gorgeousness and feel angry that I do not look like her, do not have such full lips and high cheeks, such pert breasts, such smooth skin, but I just see her and feel nothing. I can recognize her there. But I'm broken. I want to be jealous so I can be normal. I want to be a girl. A human.

*Such a tragedy,* she says. She lowers the screen of her laptop so that there is nothing between us and we watch the TV together. The man behind the counter watches too. *I remember the place where I was when I found out.*

I look toward her again, but she is staring at the screen.

*Funny how you always remember.* Her accent is disarming. *Like there is a stamp of tragedy onto our minds.*

When she looks over at me, across the empty tables, I try to smile at her.

*American news is important here. We fight this... this war together. Against terrorism and these people who are terrorists.*

*But they were kids,* I say.

On the screen there are pictures of the wreck, the three bombed out cars smoking in the empty intersection. The black SUV rolled and exploded. The blue sedan accordioned. The snow mysteriously absent from the photo. The trees scorched. The ash.

The voices on the TV discuss the mother and daughter in the sedan, ignoring the curfew and on their way to visit family in Colorado Springs, the teenager on his way to work at Starbucks, like he's dead too. Margaret. They talk about telematics systems.

*Yes, she says, but what I mean is France and des États Unis are in this fight together. They bomb us and shoot us in the workplaces too, at the Bataclan, in Brussels. For the same reasons. Because we are... happy.*

*It's not just one reason, it's not a blanket cause. They were kids, depressed and indoctrinated, alienated by a capitalist system, preyed upon by a psychopath.*

Yes, she says, nodding.

The man says something in French and she responds.

Then, I'm there, on the TV, the same picture as before, the one from my Facebook, my hair long, past my shoulders, my skin tan—not tan, but full of life—my eyes glowering. In the original Alex was there, beside me, holding a red cup, and she was laughing at the serious face I was making. Now it's a forced portrait. My mock anger turned real by perspective.

I look away, out the window, and hold the mug to my face. Feel the steam.

It wouldn't take much for the woman to recognize me. I know I've changed, been scarred into a new person, but surely there are pieces of me that haven't changed, that she could pull out of my face.

In the glass is my reflection, streamed with rain and blurred Christmas lights from across the street. I don't even recognize the girl there.

*Il est comme un film*, the man says.

The woman agrees.

The volume is on but still low and I hear the reporters say that I am missing. That this girl here, Brittany Sea, has skipped bail, that there is a warrant out for her arrest, that she is a fugitive.

They cut to a reporter on location. She is in front of my parent's house. There are lights and vans and other reporters. I hear nothing of what she says. I can't help but stare at our house. I'm certain my parents are inside. They must be. Though the house is dark. All of the windows black. I can see it, over the reporter's shoulder, dark and empty.

The French woman looks at me, and begins rifling through her purse. Does she recognize me? Does the barista? What if they call the police, jump me and tie me down, lock the doors until the cops arrive, and I am jailed and beaten and put on a plane, locked again in the endless dark?

The reporter in front of my house says I am nonviolent. That I am young. That I was last seen in Columbia. To call, please, this number. That my family is worried. That I am only a girl. But that I am a fugitive. That if I get on a computer I can crash economies, rob banks, kill with keystrokes.

The world should be afraid of me.

I think the truth in this thought is that I would die. I would kill myself. And it wouldn't be the first time. Not for me. Not for American hackers. They pushed Swartz. Right before our eyes. I was younger then, but it still cut deep, his body swinging from a rope. A statement. It was him saying, *look, look how afraid of us they are? they push and push and push, threaten and bribe and claw, because they are afraid of what we can do.* He was a message that I listened to.

I could be a statement too.

My body could say: *Look at how they treat us, us that they don't understand.*

*They are afraid of our power. They can't stop us.*

*Puis-je fumer ici*, the woman says, gesturing to the rain.

The man behind the counter shrugs and she lights her cigarette.

What if Alex is watching? From her new life in Paris What does she think of me?

Love is a fragile thing, breakable, slick and impossible to hold firm with two hands. She told me about another girl once. Before all of this. We were in at some bar. She lingered on the details: a girl from her 17th century European history class, with blonde hair.

*Why are you telling me?*

She was drinking a coke.

*I don't care who you fuck. Fuck whoever you want, Alex.*

I remember she looked at the wall, like there was a window there to somewhere safe.

*Because*, she said, *that's what normal people do in relationships. They're honest.*

*They talk.*

Like I was not normal.

Really though, I know that Swartz wasn't never meant to be a statement. He was defeated and sick. We made him a statement. We put that on him.

The man behind the counter pulls something from the back room and walks out to join us. He grabs a chair and pulls it to the space between our tables. The bottle is half full and he pours three short glass, pushes them towards us.

*Pour nos amis. Pour ceux qui souffrent et de pause au cours de ces petites vies.*

*La vitesse de Dieu*, he says, lifting a glass.

The woman raises hers.

I look down at mine, the liquid clear and thick, the glass gleaming in the dull light. Swartz was no martyr. He was a result. Me, what would I be? An example? A consequence?

I raise my glass and lean in.

*Tâchons de ne pas céder.*

We toast.

*Oui, oui*, the woman says.

*Une cigarette*, the man says.

The woman passes him the pack across the table and he taps two out, sliding the second across my table. He uncorks the bottle again and pours us all more.

I'm worried that someday Alex will be able to erase me. That she already has. I'm worried that she will meet someone else, some others, and fall in love and be happy and I won't hurt her anymore. Because, in truth, I love that she might be aching. That our love might still be etched vulnerably on her heart.

I'm worried she'll forget me and that she'll be the last to know the person I was. The one I still feel lurking somewhere in the hollows of my bones.

The man raises his glass again, and we toast once more, to something grand and smart, and drink like something will be fixed.

Martyr

Margaret hadn't brought her phone. They hadn't thought to make her. So Hussein pulled his iPhone from his backpack and found a slew of ATMs near by.

Shaheed drove slow through the snow, trying not to attract attention, though the streets were empty. The sirens were far off, but the firecrackers were popping closer, louder, from all around, the city dancing giddy on its own exposed nerves.

The first ATM, outside a bank on 18th, went quickly. Shaheed was able to pull up beside it, close enough so Margaret could get out and Shaheed could hold the gun to her while she withdrew the money. Each ATM had a \$200 dollar limit, so they'd hit as many of them as they could in the next hour, then drive as far as they could get, Hussein said, ditch the car and walk beyond the ring of the police net. Find another car. Drive. They'd learned to hotwire cars on the Internet. Nothing new, only decrepit cars, conveniently, ones no one could track with OnStar.

The plan had been to die at the Brooks Tower. A new fear was blossoming in his stomach; that he would not get to die. That he would have to bear the brunt of life, the fallout of all this awful they were creating.

"I need food," Shaheed said, after they had collected money from four ATMs. They'd eaten at Margaret's apartment, but he could feel his blood sugar plummeting quick, fading in tandem with the adrenaline.

He could hear Hussein zipping through the backpack behind him. First one pocket, then another. And another. He grew nervous. His condition wasn't serious. Not life and death. Not ever before. But he would slip, slowly, lose energy and strength, and

finally, eventually, consciousness. He could die. Though he'd never feared it before. Not until now. Not until tonight. This stupid moment.

"We'll buy something at the gas station," Hussein said, gesturing down the road. "There's an ATM there anyways."

Shaheed pulled the car up beside the pump. Hussein had decided they should fill the car's tank just in case they could slip through the roadblock. There was no way each and every road could be blocked. They didn't have the manpower. It wasn't possible.

Hussein slouched low in the car. They couldn't be seen together. Not even with their shaved beards and dyed hair. So he stayed in the shadows of the backseat.

Shaheed stood with Margaret outside the car, leaned close as she entered her information and activated the pump. Shaheed took the nozzle and slipped it into the tank. Margaret took the card and look at him wearily.

"I don't want to say it," he said.

"I won't do anything," she said.

"I trust you," he said. "But if I see you say anything to him. If I see your mouth open."

He let the threat linger in the cold. Christmas lights roped the windows of the small shop. Snow fell quietly and crunched beneath their feet as they shuffled side to side awkwardly.

She looked up at him, her eyes dark and clear. "You'll what?" She rubbed her hands together. "Say it. I'd like to hear you say it, Isaac."

The name surprised Shaheed, stunned him almost. He looked down at his feet, shame enveloping him. "Go. Be quick."



“You can’t take anything else from me. I’ve got nothing.” She lifted her arms out wide, as though to say, *see, see, I’ve got nothing at all for you, nothing you can take at all.*

But he knew the truth.

And he didn’t want her to make a scene. He could see the man behind the counter in the store, behind a wall of windows packed with beer and cigarette posters. He seemed to be reading, oblivious to their presence.

He took hold of her stretched arms, afraid to touch her again, and pushed them down to her sides, pushed her gently back, away from him. “Go,” he said. “Please.”

And she went and the gas tank filled until the nozzle thunked and the flow, the sound of rushing, the only sound he could hear though he hadn’t even realized it, stopped, and it was hauntingly quiet. Maybe somewhere the sound of a motor. He watched through the windows as she pulled money from the ATM in the corner, grabbed a handful of candy from the shelf and two bottles of water, took them to the counter, smiled once at the man, keeping her head low, lower, handed him the card, took it back, took the bag, turned, and with the man behind the counter watching, watching the way her hips swayed, the way her shoulders curved, from the shop, the bell above the door tinkling sharp over the snowed parking lot, walked straight towards Shaheed, her eyes rising only to see his feet, to pass him by. It was so easy. Had gone off without a hitch. She opened the door and dumped the bag in the seat.

“I have to pee,” she said. “Give you another chance to kill me.”

Shaheed look through the car’s window at Hussein. His eyes were closed, as though he were sleeping.

“Unless you want me to piss all over the car.”

“Okay,” he said, taking hold of her arms. “Come on.” And she came, her body right beside his, not pushing back at all, just moving there next to him, like two things in harmony.

And they walked together silently, in peace, for a moment.

Phisher

The truth was found simply enough and it was found via ATMs. Someone from far off, the other side of the world, came forward with a map, a JPEG, of Denver, with four locations circled. Four ATMs.

The anonymous email read simply, *who would be using so many atms tonight?*

“It’s bullshit,” Graham said.

They sat together looking at Walter’s computer. They had questions, but both had the sensation they would go unanswered.

“He’s the guy.”

Walter meant the guy he knew with a zero day.

“It’s too much of a coincidence,” Graham said, standing, pain engulfing his body.

“Finding where these guys are has been the only thing you wanted for hours, now we might have it.”

“Might. Exactly. I don’t bite. He’s a troll. Besides, how the fuck could he do it?”

Walter ran his hands through his hair, knuckling the skin of his forehead. “Let’s think. If the zeroday is Microsoft that helps a ton. ATMs run Microsoft. But that wouldn’t work for direct line machines. The only way in would be through the bank, they own the host computers and everything is done by direct four-wire point-to-point. So those are out.” Walter leaned toward the computer and traced a finger along the screencap of the Google map, reading street names. “But let’s see. These ATMs aren’t in banks. I don’t think at least. So, what? Probably gas stations? And those machines are dial-up.”

He pressed his palms to his temple and smiled, satisfied. “They’re dial-up. That’s how he did it. They run through independently owned host computers, but they do it through dial-up. It’s out dated. All it takes is running a bad package to the host computer and boom,” he let his hand fall and slap the desk, “you’re in for that whole network. Probably isn’t a huge network, in order to accommodate traffic volume, so he would have had to hit the computers in Denver once the op started.” Walter tussled his hair again, pleased with himself. “If anyone could do it, its this guy. I trust him.”

“I don’t.”

“Do you trust me,” Walter said. He leaned back in his chair looking up at Graham. “Besides, what’s the worst that can happen? We call it in and the police check it out. Right or wrong no sweat off our backs.

“Plus,” Walter said, “This is what we are, this is why we work, the fact that there are so many of us gives us that luck. Sure, we have skills, we know how things work, but look at almost any op we’ve done, so much of it has come from luck, in one form or another, by just having so many goddamn people.”

Graham shook his head. “We have their names.”

“And they aren’t doing shit for us. You know how long it would take to hack each service provider, sort through their data, find these guy’s names and find them on a map?”

“People have done it.” He pointed to the IRC channel on the screen. “We know people who have done it.”

“Not in a night, guy. Its weeks of work. Months.”

Graham looked at the floor, chewing his lip. “Fuck.”

“Why not try?”

The only sound, for several moments, came from the whirl of the computers.

“Fine. But I want to go.”

“And what? Sit at one of the ATMs? Watch them take out some money?”

Graham paced around the small room. “I don’t know.” His feet were sore, his neck was sore, his everything was aching. He longed to lie down and let his mind clear, to feel Kats hands, Kiley’s hands, maybe, run along his temples, feel fingers kneed his ears, feel his whole body succumb.

“Just call it in.”

Walter first tried just dialing the phone, but the cell networks were overrun with activity. Everybody had tips, everyone wanted updates from the police, everyone wanted to let family know they were okay. To get around the network jam Walter linked his phone in with the wolfhound and used it to ping his call to a distant tower, one not inundated with traffic. But even then, the 911 lines were busy.

Minutes were ticking by. The waiting was driving Graham crazy. He could feel the bombers escaping.

As Walter ended one call and prepared to redial yet again a second email pinged on his computer with another JPEG, another map, two more ATMs circled. In the body there was another pointed and cryptic message, *you’re moving too slow...*

“If he’s right we have to go. We can’t keep sitting around.” Graham stood suddenly, tipping his chair over. “Jesus Christ, we can’t let them get away.”

Below the message was a link and four numbers.

“I’m not clicking this link. It’ll probably wipe my whole hard drive.”

“You said you trusted him.”

“I don’t trust anybody that much.”

“We have to.”

Walter cursed and stood. “I’m going to try the cops again.”

Graham pushed his chair out of the way and clicked the blue text and it took him to a crudely designed darknet site, a scroll of code that looked as though it were being directly ripped from somewhere else. Graham stared at the page while Walter tried the police again and again. Finally Graham pulled apart what he was seeing. It was the meta data snagged from the hacked host computers, just like Walter had said. On a normal day he would dump data like this and wipe his hard drive himself, simply opening this page could incriminate both of them and get them locked up for north of a dozen years.

Now though, he scrolled deeper. It was a list of days and times and locations for each withdrawal in the area. Then the final four numbers of the debit card used. The four numbers in the email, he deduced, belonged to the card the bombers were using.

“They’ll never answer.” Graham pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you trust him, let’s go.”

“No, you said we wouldn’t.”

“You’ll never get the police, not for another hour or more.”

Walter dropped his head and let out a short grunt. “Fuck it. Okay, but not without Terry.”

“We can’t wait for him.”

“I’ve been messaging with him. He’s already on his way here.”

Hacker

When I sleep I'm back in that cell. I can feel that it's a dream. But, still, I can tell certain it will never end. I'll never wake up. Like this life is the dream and my mind is forever trapped in the dark. That this is how it goes. Forever.

Phil is still drunk in the morning. At first I'm gentle, but he won't stir. So I shake him and still nothing. His skin is slick and distilled and I dress in the still-dark. It's Christmas. Before stepping out of the apartment, I swallow my two pill cocktail dry and zip my dark jacket to my throat, till the metal pinches the skin of my neck. Then, I take his phone from the pocket of his balled up jeans and slip from the door.

Outside, sky in the southeast is pink. A light drizzle falls, cool on my warm cheeks. My hands smell like cigarettes. I start towards the Rhine out of habit. It's the way we go every morning when we leave here, because Strasbourg is best by the water. At the corner I buy a coffee and some bread from the only open shop on the street.

For a long while I don't know where I'm going. When I reach the river I go west and follow it until I see the thick stone towers of the Notre Dame. And at first, the Christmas lights, the green and red, are still on, before day comes fully, but when I blink it goes dark, stone and grey, and I'm not sure it was ever there, those colors. Everything is a trick of the eyes, dark in a blink.

It's Christmas.

I broke my parole even before I fled the country. When I made up my mind that I was going to feel, I downloaded Signal onto my mother's phone.

The app is open source software that encrypts calls from an iPhone with ZRTP. My mother pays little attention to the complications of her phone, so it was easy enough to install.

Now, I fish Phil's phone from my pocket. My fingers are numb and clumsy.

But I do nothing. I watch the dark current of river. I can feel the rhythm of blood beneath my skin. The violence of it. Of my heart alone. I am terrified. But the feeling of the fear is familiar, married to my bones.

Signal downloads slowly and for a long time I resist the temptation to explore Phil's phone. As it stands there is trust between us. So far as I know. Some small fraction of it. But I don't know if he has anything to hide, if there is any trust to break.

There are names of women in his inbox. Dozens of them. But I read nothing. He owes me nothing. And there are pictures of women too. People smiling. Groups of them. Soldiers smiling, bulging arms slung over necks. Selfies of blondes girls smiling, blowing kisses. Different from each other. But not. And there are pictures of a boy who grows younger before my eyes as I scroll deeper into Phil's history. From young to younger. There are videos, but I withhold. Then, there is a picture of Phil and the boy together, standing on some porch, Phil in his camis, the boy in his arms, and I can tell there is something significant in this, a love, but more than that, a loss. A moment destroyed in its passing. Spoiled. Life, ruined, and left and gone.

The phone chirps when Signal is downloaded.



I pull a slip of paper with my mother's phone number from the zipped pocket inside my jacket. I have learned that even the things written beside the heart can be stolen.

For her the phone will ring like normal, the caller unknown.

It is early afternoon there. She will be home with my father.

The ring is foreign in my ear. Once and twice, and I am afraid she won't answer. The media have surely been calling all week, seeking interviews, pull quotes, anything about me.

But suddenly she's there.

*Hello?*

My breath catches.

*Hello? Brittany? Baby?*

I want to cry out to her.

She is here. I can almost touch her.

*Please be you, baby,* she says. She is beautiful. Strong and beautiful.

I need her to say the phrase on her screen, a pair of meaningless words, that will match those on my screen and confirm that our call has not been intercepted, dencrypted, and reencrypted.

*Just tell me you're okay.*

There is a click, a beep, a noise, something wrong.

Surely the NSA has her phone tapped. The FBI. I am a high value target for them. They are afraid of me. I am a threat. I am a cyberterrorist. An example waiting to be made.

I was foolish to think an app could keep them out. How hard would it be to corrupt an open source code for a few days?

*Brittany?* she says, *I love you. We love you.*

There is another click.

All I have to do is get her to read the phrase. But they could already have IDed Phil's phone. Finding where I am wouldn't be instant, but they could do it. I've made a horrible mistake.

*Know that, baby, know they can't take that.*

I can't find my breath.

I pull the phone from my ear. Her voice is beautiful and soft. We are crying together, silently.

*I'm sorry,* she says the moment before I end the call.

Phisher

Graham sat in the parked car in the lot across from the ATM. The cold pressed over the car and he kept the heaters on full blast. The snow had slowed; no plows had run. The worse the conditions the better, anything to keep the bombers trapped in the net of the city. He kept the radio on low and listened as disembodied voices chattered about the ever-tightening police web. Block-by-block the checkpoints were pulling closer. Soon, they said, police would be going door to door. Far off he heard the thin pops of fireworks.

Terry had arrived at Kiley's not long after the second email. Their plan had been simple. There were two remaining ATMs in the direct vicinity. They would split up and stake them out.

"What happens when they show up," Walter had asked.

"We follow them. We make noise, we make sure we don't let them out of our sight until they are arrested," Graham said.

Terry, who stood by the door with his coat still on, snow still in his hair, nodded and said, "Do what's got to be done to make sure no one else is hurt."

They found the keys to Kiley's small car on a hook by the door. Walter didn't want to leave Graham alone, but Graham had insisted, urged him to go with Terry. The ATM they were going to look far more likely to be the next one in line, and Graham would only slow them down. Plus, if something went wrong they would be less than a half-mile apart.

Now Graham sat in Kiley's car mile away from Walter and Terry, watching the sharp florescent glow of gas stations, waiting, nervous and unsure what would happen if Adam and Isaac showed.

In the back of his mind he wondered about the money. The bombers had promised jihad, so why did they need cash? He couldn't make sense of it. But then again, he couldn't make sense of anything they were doing. There were things he could admit to himself that he might die for: Walter, Kat, freedom of expression, maybe. But nothing he could imagine killing for.

Graham rested his head against the window. He'd urged Walter to go with Terry because he could feel himself breaking. All the movement, the activity, was drilling the pain further into his head, and he felt like he was going insane. He wanted to explode, to smash his knuckles on the steering wheel. Tear out of his body. Set something dangerous loose. And he didn't want Walter there to see him so destroyed. To see him cry.

Even breathing began to hurt. Each breath, a sharp twisting of the knife.

At some point, in the morning maybe, he would have to call his mother. She would likely still be sleeping. And she would be expecting him to come over for Christmas breakfast. And she would expect Tom too, with April and the baby. But Graham would call early, before she woke up, so that she did not have to go through a morning of planning what wouldn't come. So that she did not have a kitchen of food to be thrown out. So that he could tell her before some cop, before the news, so she could tell April, so April could prepare herself to raise a child on her own.

He picked up the burner Terry had brought from the dorms—they always kept a few preloaded phones around just in case. Walter and Terry had prograded their numbers

into the device. But his mother's number obviously was absent. He strained to remember the ten digits.

But through the din in his head he could hardly think. He felt dead, like nothing ever before, like there was nothing left to feel but oblivion.

Tom had tried to do the right thing. They had been there, Graham and Tom, at the mall. It felt so long ago, but when he blinked it was there, a still image of chaos, the noise filling his ears, his lungs, so he could not breathe.

They were there because they don't do enough together. Because Graham needed to get his head out of his ass, because he hadn't been home to their mother's in months, no excuse when she lived less than an hour north. Tom picked him up at his dorm and they drove to the mall, spent the morning pretending to be friends, like they had anything in common, like there weren't too many years between them to feel like brothers.

Graham had grown up thinking Tom a hero, chatting with him once a month on a sat call from the Middle East while he saved the world from terrorism.

But the right thing became less right.

And Tom came home angry and paranoid. Brought the war home with him, to their house, to his wife, to the bar.

Just that morning Graham had called him uneducated, and maybe worse, thought worse for sure, thought: ignorant republican, racist.

But now, shaking alone in Kiley's car, what did he think of Tom? Blood had never been thicker than anything before. And now he was the bastard, ignorant and ungrateful.

But Tom had been able to do something. He had run into the middle of the chaos, to help, to act the hero he had played in Iraq. He had helped. He had stopped one of them, saved who knows how many lives, with his bare hands. He had died for something. For someone.

Graham wondered if his mother might not survive. She had never been strong. Not in his eyes at least. And this, Tom, might break her. She had hated him for enlisting, had told him that if he died it would be needless. And now, here he was, killed by the war he couldn't stop.

Graham wiped tears from his swollen cheeks. In his chest he could feel something new. A new sort of anger. A sort of fearlessness. He had been seeking revenge all night, but suddenly it had begun to crystalize inside of him. He felt the urge to kill these men.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the glinting lights of a patrol car turning down his block. The radio had reported that the cops were taking anyone suspicious into custody. Without thinking, Graham shrank into his seat as the spotlight fanned back and forth over the streets, lighting up the interior of Kiley's car. The cruiser stopped, the light refocusing in Graham's empty car.

*Fuck, fuck.*

Over the lip of the dashboard he could see the car curve down his street. He killed the engine, afraid they would see the exhaust. His arm screaming, the pain working over his vision, he crawled into the back seat, into the floorboard, doing his best to keep the car from rocking. From the floor the light grew brighter until he was sure the cruiser was stopped beside him. He pulled his coat over his head and held his breath. The pain was

impossible. He'd taken another morphine pill, but he felt like he was going to pass out. He tried to shift his weight from his arm.

Outside he could hear muffled voices. Someone walked in front of the light. Through his coat he could see the brightness. He closed his eyes.

Even the darkness was glowing.

There was a chirp of static.

The form crossed back before the beam, then darkness, total—all through his closed eyes. For several minutes he stayed in the floorboard. Never did he think that he could have told the officer what he was doing, where to look, that he knew the names of the monsters. Instead there was only the fear that he would be caught, that his wouldn't be the hands clutching their slit throats.

His phone rang in the front seat. He sat up and scanned the empty scene around him, sickness in his heart, a blade worming about in his shoulder. He fumbled for the phone and answered it.

“Graham.”

“Walt.”

Walter was using the wolfhound to make direct calls between the burners, avoiding the flooded cell towers.

“Graham, I see them, we see them.” Walter was whispering madly.

“Where?”

“Check the activity, check it now, they're putting the card into the machine. There's a girl at the ATM and two guys waiting outside. Is it them?”

“It’s them, it’s them,” Graham said, before even pulling open the laptop on the backseat. The darknet site from the second email showed the real time traffic of the ATMs. The idea was simple, the mystery hacker had written a short string of code to automatically pull any new data and shoot it around the globe before dumping on this page. The update though wasn’t instant. The multiserver jump took time.

“Graham, I need you to make sure.”

“It’s loading.” He clicked refresh on the page. Clicked it again.

“I’m not fucking kidding. Do it now,” his voice was frantic. “We’re just across the street. They could see us.”

“Call it in.”

“Terry is, but it’s just ringing, too many people are calling. The servers are overloaded.”

“Goddamnit. Okay. I’m putting you on speaker.”

Graham sat the phone on the center console, still in the floor of the backseat. He opened a new tab and tested his ping back rate. He was online. But the darknet site wasn’t updating. He couldn’t confirm that it was the same card, the right people.

“Does it look like them?”

“I don’t know. There’s a girl. A woman using the machine.”

He clicked to the map they’d made with the data. The location of each ATM. The time it had been visited. All were bunched together, well inside the dragnet police radius surrounding the skirts of downtown. They could almost certainly move freely there, five miles away from the mall where the bomb had detonated.

He hit refresh.



Nothing.

“The girl is back out and her and one of the guys are walking around the building. Where the fuck are they going, Terry?”

“What?”

“The shorter one, they’re walking back toward the station. He’s pulling her into an alley. Oh fuck... Is he going to kill her? Jesus. Graham, is it them?”

“It has to be them.”

“Terry can’t get through, Graham.”

“Walter, if they get away they’re going to kill more people. More people will die,” Graham said.

“We can’t do anything. We can try to follow them when they leave.”

Graham could hear Terry in the background, cursing.

“Just tell us if it’s them.”

“It’s got to be them.”

“I want to be certain,” Walter said. “Before we do anything.”

Graham didn’t know what Walter meant, but he clicked refresh. Refresh. He clinched his fist until his fingernails broke the skin of his palm. In the passenger’s seat was the knife he’d grabbed from Kiley’s kitchen, just sitting there, the blade dark. And in the floorboard was a baseball bat Terry had brought from the dorms. But he couldn’t swing with just one arm, not really. It would be the knife. He could run. They were only a handful of blocks away.

It wasn't updating. He could feel the data pinging around the globe, from server to server, 670 million miles per hour, being rerouted at each server, electric blips humming through the air around his limbs.

"It's them," Graham said.

"Are you sure? Do you swear to god? I'm not going to get innocent people killed, Graham."

He watched the empty screen of his computer. "It's them, I see it. It's them, the card's in use right now." It didn't feel like a lie. Not at all.

"It's them," Graham heard Walter say to Terry. "What do we do? Do we follow them?"

Graham listened for Terry's response.

"Terry," Walter said.

Silence. More of it.

"Terry, what do we do?" Walter sounded desperate, scared. Graham was holding his breath. "Oh shit. Where did they go? The short one and the girl, they're gone. Fuck."

"We aren't going to get through to the police," Terry said.

"So we follow them?"

"We just can't fucking losing them," Graham said. "Please, please, please."

He heard the distant crank of an engine.

"What are you doing?"

"What's happening?"

"Get out of the car."

"No."

“I told you. We agreed. Get out, take my phone, when the call goes through...”

They sounded far off and Graham shouted for them, his voice cracking apart, filling his car. Walter.

There was a click.

“Terry, please. Don’t.”

“There’s no choice.”

“I’m not getting out.”

“I love you, Walter.”

“I love you so much. So much, don’t do this.” “They’re getting in the car.” “Go, go!” The pop of a handle. “Stay on the line until they answer. Look out for the other guy. Don’t lose him.” Graham’s chest tightened. He felt as though he’d been running for an hour. He was still shouting. There was the swell of an engine. Fuck, fuck. The whine. The rush of wind and flight. Then the heavy slap of metal, something deep and sharp at once, crunching; a buzzing. The first pop he heard first from outside, before it whopped through the tiny speaker of the phone. Then two more, three more, fuck, two more, through the phone and outside and he was scrambling back into the driver’s seat, choking on the pain. One final shot as the car turned over. He didn’t know exactly where they were, but he slammed his foot to the accelerator, swerved the car in the direction of the shots.

“Terry,” he shouted toward the phone that rested on the console. “Terry, are you there? Walter?” He heard the sound of the door opening. Terry!

Graham couldn’t make sense of what he’d heard. And he drove erratically, the car snaking from his control in the deep snow. He could hardly breathe. Had he gotten them

killed? Had Walter gotten out of the car? What had happened? Graham tried to visualize the map in his head.

He drove for far too long, seeing nothing, and panicked. Slowed and made a U-turn. He twisted the wheel in his grip, trying to tear it from the steering shaft.

From the phone he heard whispers of shouting.

He slammed the break and the car slid to a stop. He pressed the phone's speaker to his leg, muffling the sound, and rolled down the windows. Straining to hear. He heard nothing at first, then slowly, the wail of sirens. Finally. Hearing nothing else he sped off again, still unsure of where the hell he was going.

Blue and red streaked past parallel, a block to his right. At the next intersection he could see lights all over. He slowed again, and turned. At the next street he saw them. Two men in the middle of the street, a hundred yards away, standing feet apart. He could hardly make out Terry's curly hair and bulky, athletic form.

"Jesus Christ," Graham whispered to himself.

The other man was walking away from Terry, a gun in his hand and leveled at Terry, curled into himself and clutching his side. Both men were limping, shadows, both impossibly large, even broken, large like Tom was large, all muscle, all strength. Terry was going to get himself killed. What the hell was he doing?

Further behind, at the other end of the block, then Graham saw the first patrol car round the corner, onto the same street, its lights pulsing.

Graham should do something, anything. He should move. Scream. Run the man down. But he just sat. Frozen.

Two more cop cars, all of them slamming to a stop, the officers jumping from them, weapons raised. With the windows down Graham heard the shouting, everyone screaming orders. But Terry and the other man did nothing. Graham had to do something. Terry was right there in the middle of it.

The man straightened and the gun swiveled ever so slightly to the right and the darkness lit up, a cacophonous roar, the flashes of white unbearably bright. Something slammed against the car. Then another and he covered his head as the man went limp, his whole body, even as it lingered upright, the limbs going boneless, lighter than air for a beautiful moment, and Tom falling too—Terry. Graham couldn't make out his own thoughts. There was his brother. Amid the shadows. His face.

Graham was afraid to move. So he laid there, listening to the ring in his ear, the roar of his heart, painless, gone, the same way the night had gone completely still.

When he sat up both men were in the snow, a hundred shadows surrounded them, in dark suits, and people had poured onto their porches, houses lighting up, some of the officers were jogging up and down the block waving people back inside, everyone yelling something, and several more officers were handcuffing the boys on the ground, even in their limpness. Through the bodies, Graham couldn't see Terry, but he could see the emptiness of the other boy as they moved him about, patting down his chest and his legs, their guns still trained on him.

This is how it happens.

Graham flicked off car's headlights and pulled slowly down his street, past more people who had come onto the sidewalk. He took the first right, turned again, and again, his foot pressing harder and harder to the pedal. Panic overtook him. What had he done?

They were dead. The gunshots rang in his ears, shook from the base of his neck down through his chest, to the palms of his hands. His mind went blank, went dark, to terror, fear, brokenness, until there was nothing there, his heart thundering beyond its own capacity. There was only what was there before him, the road, blurring past, the violence of the speed.

Martyr

Shaheed and Margaret walked towards the gas station. The clerk inside was reading again. Oblivious again. The light spilled out from the windows, red and white and green, the whole place glowing in the darkened, snowy neighborhood. A beacon. There was a lightness about it all. He was being lifted.

Hussein called to him. He had stood from the car, in plain sight. Shaheed turned, still walking.

“I’m driving.”

Shaheed waved to him, a throwing off the thought, as Hussein limped toward the driver's seat. He was glad his brother was feeling better. Though much of it, he knew, was the cocktail of drugs.

Maybe they had done enough. They had cut deep, though maybe not deep enough. Before he had hardly cared, but now—now that Omar was dead, that Hussein had bled and bled, and he, Shaheed, had hurt so fully for this—he wanted to make sure the wound scarred and people to took note, listened, felt, feared, knew their weakness, their vulnerability. All it would take was a phone call. And he realized, as he walked with Margaret that Hussein surely still meant to detonate the bomb, only he meant to do so from across a state line. They had only planned to stay to make certain the bomb detonated; for all their strength, they knew they were not experts.

Then, certainly they would inspire others. They were beautiful and people would see that. And more would take up the cause, until someone actually listened. Until the bombings overseas stopped. Until the drones were grounded. Until they said sorry for the

school, for the 243 children, for the Kunduz hospital, for the war crimes committed. Until everyone was left alone, to die on their own, until Dabiq, until the apocalypse.

At first it had been a school for a school. But they couldn't get the plans right. It had to be a bomb. For effect. The US had used a bomb, hellfire, dropped from a drone. So they had to bomb. Big enough to get the day started off with enough terror. The Christmas play had been Shaheed's idea. He had seen a flyer for it. Omar and Hussein had praised him.

Omar would have been proud of them. He was gone, dead, but he would be proud when they finished. They had done well and they would do better. And they would inspire others, to fight again, maybe even against soldiers, continue to show the world that you cannot just steamroll the innocent with your military. To show America that she is not a god. That her people are not gods. That they are no better. That they are equal. Cut the same. Bleed the same. Lose the same. Suffer the same. Die the same. Make them grateful to be born—the sheer luck of birth—healthy and white and rich by all standards of the world.

Shaheed was proud, in the parking lot, as he slipped into the darkness of the alley and opened the door to the single bathroom for Margaret. She entered without looking up at him and he shut it behind her. It was freezing but he unzipped, the air cold on his penis, and urinated loudly into the snow.

The engine did not roar, so that he almost didn't hear it over the sound of his piss. The car was small and not worthwhile. But his stomach dropped. He turned, his penis still out, and watched the sedan slam into their car, T-bone it against the driver's door, throw



it sideways, the metal crunching sick, a screech, sharp, working over his spine. The glass popped from the windows. Snow kicked into the air, a fine powder.

Then silence. The sound of the red sedan's wheels humming, purchaseless, faster and faster, wanting to be cut loose, to drive the vehicle 80mph.

“Hussein!”

Their car lit up with the pops of Hussein's gun, the thunder. Shaheed ducked, stumbled behind a dumpster. He could see nothing except the blinding flashes, the light pulsing outward into the darkness.

Hussein fired twice more. Then Shaheed saw him fall from the passenger door. On hands and knees. His wounded arm collapsing. He crawled away. The door on the red sedan opened, a man jumped out.

Hussein shot three more bullets from his knees. The slugs thumping heavy into metal. His last, the slide locking back, the clip empty.

Shaheed zipped himself up, the act feeling absurd, pathetic, weak. He pulled his gun from his waistband and held it. He took a step towards everything. Then there, somewhere, was the sound of sirens. Impossibly quick. It would be a matter of minutes. *The Dread*. Maybe he could shoot the man from here. He leveled the weapon, but he couldn't see anything. Then the man came around the car. Hussein had stood, had begun to limp away, away from Shaheed, why away? Why not this way? *I can help!* And the man followed, his gate heavy, his body angry.

He was stalking Hussein. Hussein was prey.

They were too far now. More than a hundred yards. Hussein was moving so slow, so broken, his legs hardly holding him up, one step, then another, his feet dragging, a trail

of something dark in his wake, tripping, down the middle of the empty street, everything white but him. But the other man.

Shaheed's brain said, *run*, so he turned and ran, not knowing where he was going, just away. But then, Margaret. He turned back to the door, grabbed the handle and pulled. It was locked, the knob turning, but some bolt holding the door shut.

"Open the door," he shouted. He should have never let her go in alone. How stupid.

"Leave me the fuck alone," she screamed.

He grabbed the handle with both hands and planted a foot against the wall. She screamed more. He pushed off with his leg, his whole body pulling taught, lifting from the ground. He lulled and then surged. Something unseen splintered. "Fuck you!" she called, over and again. He surged again, felt more wood cracking. And a last time, the door tearing open. He lost his balance and she was on him. She swung once, twice, with something metal and heavy, and the thud darkened his mind. She raised her arms again and he grab out. Got her throat. Her eye. Pushed his thumb so deep the blood came. She hit his arm and he hit her face. Her body rolled from him but he kept hold of her hair, the long, beautiful blond, tore her back until she hit the ground and he rolled on top of her. He put his hands over her throat. She thrashed, but grew quiet. He felt his penis get hard. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you" he said. He could not tell how hard he was squeezing, only that her face was growing dark, purple maybe. Her one remaining eye grew large, like a grape, pathetic, pleading, the other split and pooled full of blood. It was wonderful. Her body twisted, writhed, rubbed against his cock beneath the fabric. His muscles were tight and on fire and he knew it was beautiful. She hit his face. Her arms were weak, but

he felt his eye swell. She hit again. She kneed him. But he was stronger. Finally she calmed, not her face, but her limbs, and her hand pressed almost gently against his cheek. Her face dying. Her weakness plain. Weak. Weak, fuck her, weak. He let go. He didn't want to. But it felt good. To bring her with in an inch of death and let her live, was to be god. He rolled off of her, into the snow, so that they were lying side by side, looking up at the dark sky, the snow drifting lazy under the streetlamp. His gun was close and he picked it up. She stood shaky, coughing, spitting up blood, when he grabbed her arm. Ran beside him down the alley, over the first chain link fence. Down another alley. At the mouth of another alley a patrol car pounded past, all sirens, scream, blue and red. They crossed one street, then another, just running. Shaheed's chest aching, burning. He had to be strong. Two more streets.

The storm came then. He had gone maybe half a mile. It sounded like a war. Like a movie. A hundred guns going off at once. For three, four seconds, then silence, echo, a ringing in his ears, the last of it, the barking of a dog behind the closest fence.

Hacker

Phil doesn't understand, but we pack our things, still before the sun is more than a warm pink rupture in the dark. I can't tell him the truth, so I lie until I am breaking down. I tell him I can't be here anymore. I need to move. I tell him it's in my head.

*I can't get my money back for this place, he says. And we have it for another week.*

But I'm afraid they are coming. In truth, I am afraid they are already outside, waiting to arrest me the moment we step onto the street.

*I'm sorry, I say. I'm so so sorry.*

It's maddening. The paranoia. It's absurd, feeling as though they are listening, everywhere, watching everything I'm doing. It's laughable. But the power is there. And you're a fool if you don't believe it. But to look like such a fool is painstaking. It can make you crazy, and they want it to.

*I'm sorry, I tell him. I feel claustrophobic.*

He is not quite gentle. Soft but curt, inconvenienced by my weakness.

We have no destination ahead of us.

The metro is quiet, and we sway, side by side, alone, heavy with our oversized bags, while I search for a way to fix this.

*Not many people have France like this, he says.*

*Like how?*

*Like a drug. Like freedom from the truth back home.*

He is nostalgic already, his eyes focused somewhere beyond our small train. I am destroyed by him, to know I am not a truth, I am some freedom from reality, I am a ghost, a lie, something lesser.

At the train station he says, *where too?* and I count our cash because I am now afraid of his credit card, or anything else with his name because it was his phone.

The trains today are rare because this is Europe and it is Christmas and no one wants to be working, so we buy tickets for Amsterdam because he wants to go there anyways and walk straight to our platform, down to our car, and up the empty rows, to a pair of seats facing each other. I'm not sure what we are headed toward, but I feel like a fugitive again. Though now I can truly feel them there behind me, snapping at my heels. And I am afraid that I have boxed myself in, that I have nowhere to go.

Martyr

Shaheed held her wrist as they ran. The snow made their steps heavy and high. Slower than he would have liked. His ears were ringing. And his thoughts were scattered.

Hussein was dead.

Mostly, he was angry for running. He wanted to die. The feeling wormed through his chest, hollowing out organs, leaving emptiness, oblivion. But when he faced it, the Dread over took him. Paralyzed, he could do nothing, let alone die. Like he should, like he wanted. He was a coward. Weaker then than he has ever been. Of that, he was certain.

They ran for blocks. His lungs and legs burning. Most of the houses on this block had gone dark. Their shades pulled. Gun fire was rare here, an anomaly, a terror. People prayed when they heard it. Locked their doors, turned out their lights. But a few houses still shown, their Christmas lights glinting off roofs, framing windows.

Shaheed had to stop. His lungs were screaming. He pulled on Margaret's arm and she pulled back, but slowed. He let go and dropped to his knees. She stood over him, looking down, blood ringing her eye that she kept it shut. He had done something terrible to her face. Bruises were darkening.

He pulled out his burner. He couldn't see the skyline from here. But he knew he would hear it. After the blast, a shockwave would roll out through the city. People would feel it for two miles, maybe more. The earth would jolt.

The phone number was preprogramed in. Hussein had given the phone the name *Apocalypse Now*. In Shaheed's hand there was nothing funny about it. A dull, dead joke. Shaheed had no idea how many people actually lived there. But at 42 stories, there were

enough. He wasn't even supposed to do it. Omar was. Or Hussein. They hadn't even really discussed Shaheed making the call. They had programmed the number into his phone as an afterthought. A contingency, but said nothing about it.

But they were dead. His brother was dead.

He hit call because he didn't know what else to do. How many rings should it be? He watched the screen, the cheap phone said *dialing*. The earth would shutter. Then, then he could do it; he could defeat The Dread. The detonator was in his shoe. It was crude. A nine-volt battery with two wires taped to the electrodes. Take the wires. Fish the matching pair from inside his vest. Connect black. Take a final, deep breath, see the colors, feel your impact, the world you've thrown out of rotation. Transmute.

The phone rang once. Margaret stood above him. She was breathing heavy.

"Who are you calling?"

She had grown too bold. But somewhere, here at the end, he could admit that he liked her. She was brave. Not fearless, but not one to abandon her beliefs for her life. And he liked that. He respected her. In this space between rings.

There was nothing. Another ring came and passed, a small whisper inside his ear. His whole body was cold, run over with it. Margaret was talking but he heard nothing of it. The entire city had fallen away. All he knew were these rings. How many should there be? In his mind it was one. As soon as the phone connected, the channel opened, the circuit completed. Just like the thing strapped to his chest.

But here he sat in the silence. What if it had gone off and he had simply not heard it? Was that even possible?

4,000 pounds of ANNM substitute. Mostly fertilizer, collected painstakingly by Omar over the course of months, before Hussein and Shaheed had ever really even met him. The ANNM mixed with gasoline. Nitromethane all alone does nothing. It needs an oxidizer. It needs ammonium nitrate.

They had planned 5,000 pounds. To match McVeigh, to do at least what he did—hopefully more. But once loaded in the van the vehicle ran so low on its axels it couldn't drive.

It would be devastation. More so when the building liquefied and came down.

It would be like the movies.

The call connected to the automated voicemail. Shaheed hung up. Dialed again. There was a pop from somewhere not far off. So many kids with fireworks, running into the streets, setting off small, colorful bombs. The thrill of the true violence. They could play war, play hoodlum for a night. Another light arced up a few blocks over, a tail of red sparks, a small white pop and the ghost of smoke.

The phone rang. Two more fireworks snapped off.

He called the number over and over. But nothing would happen.

Margaret stood still beside him. Her head lulled back. Jaw open. She kept a hand pressed over her wounded eye. They were utterly out in the open. Maybe 15 blocks from where Hussein had been killed. It was inevitable that the police would come down this street soon. Shaheed had watched several smears of blue streak past down other blocks already.

Now, he knew, the hunt had been brought to him. All day the police had spun circles around the mall. The feds had been satisfied to shut down the freeways in and out



of the city, and focus their energy over the south of the city. That had given Shaheed and Hussein freedom, the whole east of the city empty of police, like they had planned. Strike quick, retreat far but not too far. Let them think you're fleeing. Strike again. Watch them shift. But this was an accident. They had lost their momentum and settled for the final act. Now even that was falling apart.

He had lost Omar, now his brother too. They were martyrs now. The idea was laughable to him. Their bodies ravaged and destroyed. They wanted to start a revolution and he was skeptical of that. To him, revolution was pointless. There was nothing to be gained. Nothing to be lost or won or found. Just life, then death. Nothingness to nothingness. Why waste your breath on the in between. But still, he couldn't help but feel something, something there inside his chest, something lonely and awkward. Hussein had been the only one to ever care. He had raised Shaheed. Both too young. He hadn't had much of a life to give, but he had given it to Shaheed. Shaheed didn't care about a fucking revolution. He didn't care about the dead children in the Middle East. In Africa. He didn't care about drones. He didn't care about government lies or individual freedoms. People were people. He was sad for all of them. But they mattered no more than him. And he didn't matter at all.

## Young Men

On TV they are undressing one of the boys. On TV it is hard to see. Mostly there are the men, in dark coats and dark hats, swarming. There are a hundred of them, stringing yellow tape around the trees. But up and down the block, people stand on porches, their lights on, sweaters pulled tight around their shoulders, watching through the fall of light snow. Watching the bodies of the two boys. Spread long and flat, surrounded by so many swarming men. At first the men in dark coats came running to one of the boys, the one they are undressing, his body sprawled in the white street. They touched his flesh with their fingers, pulled at the zipper of his coat, and backed away. They made a circle. More men came. With more cars and vans. Eventually they moved to the other boy, cut away his shirt, worked at the pale, caved chest. Worked motion into his ribs. Held his body together using all of the muscles in their backs. The ambulance came, but they kept working. These men work relentlessly. They are efficient. They are trained. Then, one man stands, wiping his dark hands on his dark pants, over and over, trying to wipe it all away. But the other boy they leave. Let him stay face down in the snow like an angel, his arms out, a last embrace to the earth. The snow collects on him, as though to hide him, to bury him. But then men come to feel his body. They put strong hands on him and back away. They talk into radios. Say explosive words. A woman on her porch says *dear god* and says *bomb* to her neighbors, shouts it up and down the street, to all the beautiful people out on their porches. *Go inside*, she says to her children, locking the door behind herself so they are safe. The angel in the street is undressed when the big men arrive, their whole bodies big, big everywhere. Big heads, big chests. Like explosions

themselves. They are experts in the big. They put their hands on the boy, though he is a man, when they lift the side of his heavy face, the color all gone. More people come. The whole street just lights and voices and motion. *Call your mother, tell her I love you, it was so close, it could have been me, yes, right there, out the front door, they say he's got a bomb, no, like his body, the whole thing, a bomb, could have blown up our whole house, the whole block if they hadn't shot him, no I heard it, how could I not, a thousand rounds, a thunder storm right here, on Walnut, but how close, just to say I love you, because I'm afraid, isn't it precocious, I don't say it enough, right here really, I never thought me, this neighborhood, but now I know it's possible.* They take off his clothes, three of the big men, their bulbous heads and limbs, put his pants and shirts, that they have cut to shreds, into bags, seal the bags, once, twice, lock them inside a cooler, lock them in their van. When the boy is naked you can see that he is not naked, that there is a dark vest, laden with darkness, maybe wires, *thank god it didn't explode when they shot him, a miracle.* The big man who breathes over the body wipes his big hands on a towel that has gone dark. The other men, are gone by now, they have retreated to the ends of the block, have asked the whole neighborhood to come out, walk far away, but not everyone does, some pretend to not be home, watch from the windows of their attics. The big men talk, they step away from the boy, press their big heads together and point at things. Maybe at the Milky Way, which is clear tonight, a seam torn into that great void of dark, where other things might be possible. A small man comes, then another. They point more. Address God, and nod, agree, say, *no cameras, jesus, it's the last thing we need.* So they find shovels, from the porches of closest houses, and clean the earth of snow around the boy, make a square of whiteless. From their van they bring walls. Heavy

slabs they carry together, one at a time. And together they build a room, fire bolts, the shots loud as war, until the boy is safe. Until it is just him inside a universe and we are all sorry. Two of the big men leave. Walk to the end of the street. The third stays. He kneels by the room, where the boy is alone and puts together his hands. He looks up, straight through whatever is there, to heaven maybe, for forgiveness maybe. He taps a screen. Looks down at the room. Says, *boy, I am sorry for this, sorry for your mother*, and stands, turns, sprints like an astronaut, in the snow, in all the white, by himself, until, when he is safe, behind a line of cars, the world shakes, groans, and does what it does best to young boys.

Phisher

Graham drove in a panic, without thinking and found himself on 19th, going east. As he neared City Park he saw the flashing lights of a police check point. His mind raced. His skin was crawling. He had gotten his friends killed. He could feel the words scratching up from his throat.

The windshield wipers batted at the snow. His whole body ached. He could feel a collapse. Everything inside of him coming undone.

He wouldn't stop. He would drive right through the police. They would arrest him if he stopped.

Slowly his foot pressed further down on the pedal. He could feel the snow guiding the tires, the danger he was approaching.

Then, suddenly, the pair of police cars were lurching into motion, swaying recklessly in the snow, and powering down past him in the opposite direction, sirens alive and screaming.

Couldn't he have been a bomber fleeing the scene? He wanted to scream at them to do their jobs. How would they ever end this if they kept opening holes for escape? He slammed his hand into the steering wheel and the car swerved in the snow.

At Kiley's street he careened off of 19th, pulling the car quickly to the curb. The tires met cement and he jerked forward, his chest slamming against the wheel. He let out a loud, long cry. The pain was impossible, exploding from his shoulder straight to his head. His vision narrowed, his heart strained.

He pulled the door handle and collapsed into the snow and stumbled to his feet. From the backseat he grabbed the wolfhound and the laptop it was wired to.

He had gotten Terry killed. Likely Walter too.

He cut between quiet houses, windows up and down the street were dark. It was incredibly late, but he was certain no one was sleeping. At the back porch he heard the explosion. But he didn't stop moving.

His despair had distilled to rage. These men had killed his best friend. The only option was to kill them. With pain rupturing through his mind he climbed the slick, snowy stairs to Kiley's door.

They had left it unlocked for this exact scenario.

Inside he dumped the equipment on the kitchen table.

He had wanted to do the right thing. But he had failed.

These men were monsters and they would kill so many more if he didn't stop them. If he didn't kill whichever brother was still alive. And the girl, whoever she was.

He opened the laptop, the antenna was still plugged in and in a matter of seconds it linked with a wireless signal they'd hacked earlier. The page he had been waiting on loaded. He scanned the information. The card matched; it was them. But he knew that now, and reading the page felt pointless and painful.

How many people would die for this?

For what?

Gone from him was the question why though. There was no why. He knew now that these men killed for this, for the apocalypse in their hearts. He could feel it. He knew now that he could kill. He could feel the overwhelm that turned men into monsters. And

now, like a stranger to himself, he craved it. Because he feared that if he did not unleash this force, it would consume him.

Adam. Adam was the older brother, the taller one. Terry and Adam. Adam was dead too now.

The apartment was warm. He stared at the screen, his thoughts whirring.

It wasn't over.

He pulled the burner from his pocket. Only two numbers were programmed in. He called Walter, praying, drunk on the idea that he would answer. He hadn't seen Walter die. Maybe Walter was okay.

The phone rang.

It rang and rang until it went quiet and clicked to voicemail. What did he expect? He had sent him to his death, to face off against deranged men with automatic weapons.

But he hadn't told them to attack them, had he? No, no.

The phone rang in his hand. He flinched and dropped it on the table, fumbled for it and answered.

"Hello?" a deep voice said back, not Walter. "Who is this?"

Graham pulled the phone from his ear. His stomach dropped.

The voice squawked, "Hello? Is anyone there? This is the Denver PD. Do you have any information regarding the events that just occurred? Hello?"

Graham held the phone away from his body and ended the call. He knew then, without a doubt, that he would never see Walter again.

Martyr

A small explosion cracked through the night. Shaheed looked instinctively up. But there was nothing. Could it be the building? No. Not so close, so high pitched. The building would be an avalanche, a sound so low it would be felt more than heard. Margaret looked to, then back to him.

“What are we doing?” she said. Her breath was even. She was fit and healthy. And rich and white and pretty.

He waved the gun before her, “Shut up.”

“Just let me go. I can’t do anything for you anymore. Hussein...whatever his name is, he’s dead.”

“Shut up. Stop.” Shaheed stood. His chest ached. He sucked air. Through everything he felt the cold, saw the way snowflakes had collected on her cheeks, at the tips of her hair.

“Then just kill me,” she shouted, “You’re out of bombs, you’re out of guns, you don’t even care about being a fucking martyr. Just shoot me and get it over with. Because I’m sick of this. I hate you.”

She threw her weight into him, shoved his chest, sent him reeling into the snow. He rolled to his side and struggled to his feet, but she didn’t run. She just stood, watching, staring boldly into his face.

“You’re not your brother,” she said.

Far off he could hear the sounds of more sirens. The pop of fireworks somewhere closer. Anyone on this block could be watching him. Could have their ear to the phone.



He looked into her eye, the swollen shut one, a dark tear stained on her cheek. It looked as though he'd pushed it in, made a hollow in her face, a grotesque deformity.

Margaret's shoulders slumped. "He's gone." She folded out her arms, laying something before him. "You don't have to kill anyone else. You never even wanted that, Isaac."

She kept using his name.

He didn't want to be another already formed person in her eyes. He was not what she thought. What the world pictured. And he was tired of them, of everyone, assuming what he was, that they could control him, with the flick of a finger, like he would cower.

"He's gone."

And as she said it, it sunk in. Adam was gone, the last person who had ever cared for him, called on birthdays, taken time, given money, friendship; his family, his friend. He had been alone for his whole life, with only Adam. They had been more than brothers. He had been his everything. Shaheed was here for his brother. Because Adam had given him life, and for that Shaheed owed him anything.

Shaheed would finish what his brother started. He would go to downtown, to the van, set it off himself.

"Do you want to kill yourself?" She could be running, but instead she stood over him, her arms wide. "Kill yourself." She gestured to the gun.

"I can't."

"Coward!"

Surely someone had seen them. Police would come soon. And they would be happy to kill him. But so happy to not; to let him rot before the American public, humiliated, defeated. They would revel in that. He was certain.

“I have to finish what my brother started.”

“You don’t! You don’t have to do anything, Isaac!”

“Quit screaming at me.”

“Isaac, Shaheed, whatever the hell you want to be called, let me be the first to tell you, no one is going to remember your name. Nothing you do is going to matter in a year. You’ll never be anybody’s hero.” She paused and dropped her arms. Sorrow covered her face. “I know you don’t want to do this. This isn’t the man you want to be. You’re depressed, not a terrorist. Not a murderer.”

“You know nothing about me.”

He leveled the gun at her, but she didn’t move.

“I know you’re sad.” She was unafraid of something. “I know you’re a kid.”

“The problem,” he said, drawing closer, cutting the distance, carrying what was left of his warmth to her, “Is that you want me dead, you would be so happy for me to die. For what? Why? What you don’t get is that I want to die because of that! Because that’s how you fucking treat me. Like some dog, better off dead.” He could feel himself winding, tapping into something dark and deep and there always with him, in the cave of his chest, in the knife carving all the humanness from him. He could feel Fuck You taking over land from The Dread. “No life is more valuable than mine, and if mine isn’t worth shit, if I can stick this gun in my mouth,” and he did, the steel barrel stinging his tongue, scrapping his teeth, he pulled it out, “And blow my brains out, it’s because I’ve

been pushed and so should everyone else. I want to see the whole fucking world on their knees, blowing out their fucking brains! Because you're no better than me! Because you did this to me. Because you are me."

Hacker

Amsterdam is blisteringly cold. The chill pulls in around us when we push through the double doors of the central station. A massive square opens before us. They could be watching from anywhere. I keep my face low. I avoid cameras.

Phil hums under his breath. *Man, he says, It's something else.*

He stops and turns to look back at the rise of the central station. The medieval buildings, the color of it all beneath the colorless grey sky. The angles and ancient.

I take hold of his hand and we keep moving. This paranoia is getting harder to fight. I took a double dose of morphine, let the world blur past, fingering the flash drives in my pocket, holding to those lives for dear life.

Now I am afraid that I must think of countries in terms of their precedent to extradite political enemies of America. I should have chosen Switzerland. Or Sweden. Or maybe I never should have come to Europe. I hate myself. I should have gone to South America. Ecuador. For now though, I am relieved to simply be away from Strasbourg and the mistake of my phone call.

Before returning his phone, I disable the GPS.

I walk with intent, away from the trains, up and down narrow paths and alleys, and Phil follows. It is mid afternoon and Amsterdam is sleepy. The holidays are still heavy. People are out, but not in force. We have not yet booked a room. We do not yet have a map.

I choose a small cafe in a canal house and pick a table by the windows. The trees that run along the water are leafless and shivering. People mill past arm in arm in heavy

coats, smoking and breathing steam. They are not in love. They are spies. They are hunting me.

I order a toddy whiskey and Phil buys himself an Irish coffee. I cradle the warmth between my hands, lower my face to the rim and let it run through me. I want to be on fire.

Phil drinks his quickly and orders another. I do the same, my eyes flitting over everyone who passes the cafe.

*I'm not a drunk*, he says suddenly, sipping his coffee.

Our drinks balloon a small fog on the window beside us.

*I never said that*, I say, distracted.

He is unafraid to look at me. *But you think it*, he says.

*It's none of my business*.

*I drank this much in high school. It doesn't mean shit*.

*Okay*, I say.

*And if I'm a drunk, so are you*, he says. *And an addict*.

*Fuck you*, I say too quickly.

He shifts, settles back into his seat, staring at me.

I turn back to the people outside. I'm looking for cameras, for people lurking, talking on cellphones. I think I was strong once. Before all of this. There is a ghost in me who is unafraid of anything, she whispers in my ear to be angry, to be on fire, that there is no difference between me and the people I'm afraid of.

Darkness and quiet and alone are meant to make you less of yourself. They lobotomize the fire.

When I do look back at his face he is not angry so much as honest.

*You're allowed to be whoever you want to be, I say.*

*I'd like to be dead, he says. I'd like to drink myself that way.*

*Why don't you.*

He smiles ruefully. *I should, he says. But I won't.*

*Then do what you want. Drink as much as you need.*

*I don't need to do anything, he says.*

*Good.*

Then, I can't help myself.

*Why does it matter what I think?*

He shrugs his shoulders and looks away. Maybe toward something simpler.

Where there is not war or darkness or the unrepentant violence of humanity.

I have a sudden longing for Alex.

I wait for him to say something, but instead he sips his drink. A small boat glides past noiselessly in the canal.

*We will both go home, I lie.*

*And, he says.*

*And this will be over.*

*I'm not smart, he says. But I'm not as stupid as you think.*

I spot a man in a dark coat, across the canal, a phone to his ear, leaning casually against a wall. He stares our direction.

*I don't know what you know. But I know that look. I know that place, that loneliness in your head. The inescapable feeling. Like it won't ever end. Listen, he leans forward, The future is what we want it to be.*

I say nothing but I begin to pity him.

*I just mean that we aren't from too far apart. We can... stay in touch.*

*It doesn't matter where I'm from. I'm not going back there.*

*We could be something there, he says. Make this not all for nothing.*

I am amazed by his ability to be old, to look old, to sound like he has been somewhere grand with his life. Because he is a boy, a child, like me, no matter what he has seen. No matter what's been broken inside. I think this because I am angry. He is wrong. And he is stupid. I want to tell him that he cannot think like that. That nothing is wasted just because it is gone. Because we failed.

But I see, written plainly on his face, that he wants his life to be significant. Full of the violence of love. He wants to romanticize the pain.

Then he surprises me. He says, *Do you think it gets better?*

His eyes are dark and wide, set amid sharp lines and bony cheeks. I hardly ever notice the color of someone's eyes. My mother's are green, clouded and nearly loose. But green, surely at one time a beautiful color.

I feel sorry for Phil. I do not know what he has seen or how it felt to see, because to see a horror, to stand witness, apart or a part, is a universe from the telling. My mother sat with me while I read, when I could read again. There was nothing to say, so we sat and I read and sometimes she read too. We have a need for narrative, to make order of chaos, to make sense from order. But a brain in trauma skips like a melting record. The

memory a mess, out of time, inconsistent, impossible to comprehend. Simply the telling is an act of heroism, a sign of strength and resilience.

Like this, I love Phil.

I say, *You will be okay.*

He raises his dark brows and I say again, *I know you will.*

And he smiles sadly and looks down, reaches for the lip of his glass and pulls it towards him. *I feel like a coward*, he says, *For running away.*

*Me too.*

*Everybody else went home*, he says.

We both so badly want to fit inside that box, that word, *everybody*, to be everybody, average, not destroyed, not dead in everyway but one.

*They could court marshal me maybe. I had obligations.*

*What will you do?* I ask.

His face is soft and unguarded and he says, *Re-up*, before he can stop himself.



Martyr

“We’re going to your car.”

“No. It’s too far. We can’t walk that far.” Anger flashed across her face. “Stop this right now! Just stop. Stop.”

He grabbed her arm and she tried to pull away. He torqued her arm. He looked around. He had lived in this city his whole life, but had never learned these streets. This area was wealth. Money. Thousand dollar a month studios. White. Beautiful. Rich.

“Which way?”

She said nothing so he twisted her bones further.

She pointed and they started together. Most the way they kept to alleys, crossed streets to avoid people and streetlamps. When he considered it, his feet were soaked. He was shivering. Had been all night. The snow was nearly a foot deep. Maybe more. The city had never been so dark.

For all his anger he wanted to tell her he was sorry. This was their intention. There was no getting around that. They meant to kill innocents—but shouldn’t we all be ready to pay the toll of life? This was war. The retaliation. For so much bloodshed, so much unnecessary murder rot upon the world by the American War Machine. They fought terrorists because they needed a war that could never end, so sales would never stop, but they fought unfairly. Removed their souls from harms way. If you cannot die how can you remember the value of your life?

He was angry, sure. Hussein and Omar had made sure of that. *So many hundreds of thousands*, they said, *and for what? What has been gained? When you die*, they said, *what good can you say you brought to the world?*

The words struck a chord in his heart, the feeling resonating for days. That he could die for something. He was hungry for that. For the anguish to end. For the great nothingness. Because what could be better than the black forever of oblivion. But to do something with his death. To be a hero in those final throes.

“I don’t have my keys,” Margaret said as they finally approached the hospital. They had taken the long way around, the ER entrance still a buzz of light and noise.

Shaheed kept walking, kept hold of her arm. The sidewalks around the building were shoveled recently. But a thin layer had fallen since. His feet made plain tracks. He wasn’t sure if it would ever stop.

“Which car.”

They worked through the rows. He looked around but there was no one. Farther up by the building there were people standing beside some back door smoking. He watched their dark forms.

They made a final turn and she pointed to a new, dark SUV. He’d learned to hotwire cars online, but nothing so new. And surely this one would have a blaring alarm. But there was a keypad on the door handle.

“Open it,” he said and she did. The driver door clicked open.

“Get in,” he said, and she did.

He walked to the other side of the car and got in too. They sat together in silence. There was no way to start it. To heat it. Their breath clouded out before them. The

windows, covered in snow, began to fog and dampen. She put her hands on the wheel like she might be steadying herself, and sat silent.

After a time she said, "I'm freezing." But Shaheed said nothing. Just stared ahead into the white that covered the windshield. He was sorry for all of this. To get downtown would be a deadly walk. And surely to drive there would be to get arrested by the thousand officers that now were buzzing between him and the Brooks Tower. Like always, like everything, he would fail. He would give up. It was the story of his existence. His parents. His aunt. His friends. Sports. School. College. He was worthless. A nothing put into a nothing world.

"Listen," he said. Margaret didn't shutter. "I hope you know this isn't about you. You are collateral damage here. This was about a war that will happen. That needs to happen."

"Shut up," she said. "I'm tired of you and your war. I know you don't believe it. It's plain enough to read that on your face. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. And if you believe the shit coming out of your mouth, you're stupider than I ever thought."

He was shocked silent.

"People die. It fucking happens. Things don't change." Her knuckles tightened on the wheel. She had stopped covering her eye a half hour ago. Maybe numb to the pain. "But killing, murdering, innocent people isn't going to start a war. You aren't going to break the system." She looked at him. "You're going to die and no one is going to care. Next year people will watch the news and see something about the anniversary. But one more later and you're a fucking ghost. You might as well have never even been born."

She paused, her face harder and more lined than he'd seen it. "You want to be nothing? *This* is how you become nothing."

"It's not about a revolution. It's about leveling the playing field."

"You don't know what the fuck it's about. Every time you open your mouth it's about something different."

"I don't care. I believe in this."

"No you don't."

"How could you ever understand. You're rich and white and you've had your whole fucking life served up on a goddamn platter."

"You don't know shit about me."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"I don't have to. I don't have to tell you shit. I don't give a fuck what you believe, because you're nothing. You're a nobody. You're worthless."

She was pushing. He could tell. He could feel it, she was pushing him to do something stupid. She was tired of the games. She wanted him to act. He knew, but still her words stung. He could blow up the whole fucking car. Be done. Give her what she wanted.

"You want to be someone? Give me the gun and be the guy who ended this."

A small chirp broke the air. She jumped. He did too. The ringer kept playing. It took him several rings to realize it was his phone. The burner in his pocket. He fished it out. The number on the screen had no name attached to it, but it wasn't hidden, it was right there, for him to see, and something about that was terrifying. No one knew this

number. No one but Hussein and Omar and the cellphone in the van hooked to 4,000 pounds of explosive.

He clicked the green button. "Hello?"

Hacker

We leave the cafe in the early dark to a small hostel, in the truth of something. I know now that I don't love. Not in any right way. But, still I wonder if I will ever be as close with someone as I have felt with him in flashes, in moments.

What does it mean to be healed? To give my body is, in itself, an act of freedom and power. An act of trust. I worry that I will never really trust again. I will never not wonder if he—him, her, Phil, Alex, anyone—will not just grab hold of my neck and squeeze. But still, in our room, in this quiet hostel, with this tiny bed and this tiny window overlooking a tepid canal, I pull at the buttons of my shirt, pull down my jeans and my underwear, until I am naked, bare, true in some small way, while he lays unmoving before me, watching. Not because he asked, but because I can.

*Is it okay to love you, he says?*

I am shaking.

*No, I say.*

He says nothing, lays quietly, with his head propped up, watching me.

Then I reconsider. *Tonight, I say. You can love me tonight. We can have this.*

*Tomorrow?*

*Not tomorrow.*

*Okay, he says.*

*Okay, I say.*

I don't know what I'm afraid of anymore. Not in any real way. But I feel afraid of everything. I feel afraid of this room and this city and this man. Of this moment. But he says again, *I love you tonight, then.*

*Okay*, I say and step towards him.

In the morning I wake feeling caged and restless. My body is damp with sweat and tense. I look to the body beside me and will myself to feel something big and deep. To feel safe. But when nothing comes I stand and dress quickly. I need to do something. Walk or run. Move, breathe. When I am pulling on my shoes he stirs.

*I'm just going for a walk*, I say.

He runs a hand through his hair, *Okay*.

*Will you be long?*

*There's a cafe across the street*, I say. *I'll meet you there in an hour.*

*That's forever*, he says.

I say nothing and he shrugs. *Okay*, he says. There is a TV in the corner and he reaches for the remote, turns the channel to the news.

*See you there*, I say, and leave, my small bag slung over my shoulder.

The air outside is heavy, all the colder for the wet, the kiss of salt and frost. The trees shiver. I want there to be sun, but the sky is low and grey, on the verge of rain.

Today like never before I feel them watching. Immediately I want to return to our room. But I can't. I will myself to walk.

Still, I feel their eyes. I feel their hands, undressing me, searching, grasping for something, looking for the weapon I am. In prison your body is everything. It's all you are. You weapon, your home, your warmth, where you keep everything. Your body is treated like a secret, stormed a thousand times, decimated and taken over until they are certain you no longer feel as though it's yours. That it is theirs. Your mind is the only safety. And they try to take that too. With the darkness, with the violence of sound, with your body chained and your mind dying to be free.

I can feel them watching as I walk down these streets. Ducks float lazily in the canals. Boats motor past, heavy with boxes, with people, and flowers, with bicycles. There aren't many people, but they watch me, all of them. And I can feel them looking down from above, from the canal houses. And I should have known they would come. I should have known there would be no real safety. No real escape.

The truth, I know, is elusive, but it is the truth, it is solid and firm and certain. Lies, untruths, can be picked apart, worn away by time and search. They cannot last. And neither can the truth. Not unless it is protected. Not unless it is fought for.

I am not safe.

A light snow picks up and eddies in the air, not really falling, just swirling, twisting around me while I walk. I follow a railing along a length of canal. The cool of the metal seeps through my gloves. Ice runs thinly across the edges of water. The canals freeze during the coldest winters, thick enough to skate on.

I keep my passport—the fake, this false woman—and a fist worth of money in my bag. Never have I left these things with Phil, never have I gone anywhere without them.



The question is what to do next. I never thought beyond this, beyond Europe and not killing myself. Where would I go next? What would I do there? It's foolish to believe for even a second that there is a life waiting for me out there. There is only prison. Only the hell of home. The government, the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, the *they* of the darkness, their hands hungry for my flesh, to dismantle me.

I feel their eyes pushing me. I stop at a break in the railing. The water is dark, black almost. Certainly deep enough for me. Certainly cold enough to be quick. Freezing, they say, is peaceful, like sleep. But sleep, for me, hasn't been peaceful in so long.

I dry swallow two of my last four pills. Will them to take hold of me.

I feel more eyes and I know I can't run for my whole life, changing names and truths, unthinking everything that's ever been important to me.

I consider Alex. The last of the good. A representative of the lives of others, of myself, that I have destroyed.

If I go back I will die in a cell, old and rotten, motherless.

And if I run I will never be whole. Not again.

Phisher

Outside snow swirled in the wind, kicked up from the roof and trees. Graham sat at the table shaking. His body was wracked. He was defeated. He watched snow collect in the empty alley, in the dead branches of the trees, on the roofs of the houses. From the window he could see a lone Christmas tree lighting a window, the green and red blazing out into the darkness.

From his pocket he pulled the bottle of pills and chewed down two more.

He woke the machine before him. He wasn't sure how he would find them now, but he'd start with the wolfhound. He clicked to the device's activity monitor and a crawl of data filled the screen. The wolfhound had collected hundreds of calls since they'd activated it. Thousands even. The left hand column listed the origin phone number. The column next to it the destination. In the past fifteen minutes nearly all of the destinations had been 911. Further down was the carrier. The duration of the call. The GPS location of the wolfhound when the call was recorded. The distance from the device of the origin phone. Without data from a second and third tower Graham couldn't pinpoint any exact locations, but he could figure a radius.

Graham felt sick. He hadn't eaten since that morning. Maybe 18 hours.

He had never really understood the device, or why Walter built it. At its core it was designed to act like a cell tower. Turned on it would intercept cellular activity, acting as a tower for any network you programmed it to, or all of them at once, capturing every call in the device's range. Then it would route the call. To the person on the phone nothing would seem off. But the wolfhound would collect everything, all possible

metadata: date, time, phone numbers, call length, even texts. Feds used it as a warrantless device to collect data on suspects. Walter used it to prove that he could, that he could build the top tier tech, that mass government surveillance was dangerous because it could be implemented by the wrong people, by nongovernment entities, by Walter.

After only a moment Graham saw it. He was scrolling aimlessly through the data and suddenly his eyes caught something, a cluster, something suspicious. A dozen or so calls between the same two phone numbers. Each connected, then immediately disconnected, the redial instant. And the numbers, both of them, from an undetermined carrier. They were burners.

The most recent call was only minutes ago.

It was a coincidence, but one he couldn't over look. It had to be him, the final bomber. This was Isaac.

A cold chill went down's Graham spine. Certainly this was a bomb. They had threatened another, bigger bomb, to alter the skyline. This had to be it. Wiring an IED to a cellphone was the most common form of remote detonation. Had that been the explosion he'd heard outside? He stood to run to the window in Kiley's bedroom that had a view of the city. But he realized it couldn't have been. If a building came down it would have shook the whole city. There would have been shockwaves. The noise so much louder.

The detonator then, had failed.

Isaac would have to set it off in person.

Graham's hand shook as he sat back down to the computer. There was no choice about it. No decision. Just action. He had to stop him. He had to kill him.

His mind raced. He had to find him. But how?

He clicked through windows open on his computer. The IRCs, the Google Drive files, the facebook pages. He considered asking for help. Crowdsourcing had worked earlier. But he knew he didn't have time to organize people. Isaac would be desperate now. He was far younger than Adam and Jonas. He would be panicking.

Graham slapped his hand on the table and let out a short scream. The burner phone bounced and skittered away. And it hit him. He'd planted a RAT in an FBI agent's phone.

The feds would have a Stingray—a \$400,000 mass-produced wolfhound. It only made sense that the feds and the local police would be tracking calls. He didn't know if DPD had a Stingray, but the feds would have one. They used it mostly for sting operations though, and wouldn't be studying the data it was picking up, so they wouldn't have seen what he had, not yet.

Graham worked quickly, pulling up the darknet page where Walter kept the RAT. The agent's phone had been the most recent download. He accessed the trojan and uploaded code Walter had written to remotely takeover the device. He worked recklessly with no regard for the fingerprints he was leaving everywhere. These men had to be stopped, everyone could see that, and they had to be stopped now.

Minutes ticked by. Online he pulled up everything he could on Stingrays. Finding Agent Tyson Mills' access code and login data was incredibly simple. Clearly he was a field agent, not a tech specialist: his passwords were saved in the phone's keychain. What he needed now was access to the Stingray. Graham clicked through website tabs and

skimmed forums and conspiracy theorist encyclopedias. There had to be a remote access to the database where the Stingray stored data.

Then, like magic, he found a hyperlink in the annals of some terrified nutjob that routed him right to the server's front door. He pasted Agent Mills' login info into the boxes and the tumblers clicked open. He worked through the logs of data to find the location denotation of the Stingrays. He found Denver. He found the most recent data dump, from a little over 15 minutes ago. It would work.

Using keyword searches he indexed the thousands of calls the Stingray had picked up. There was a match with the burner's number. His heart leapt. The rest was simple. Plug in the GPS coordinates of both devices when they logged the calls. Then, using the phone's distance from each device, make a radius. Ideally he would have three sources. Two sources made the resulting radii intersect twice. With three there would be only one place where they all came together. He quickly created a map with a free app he found online and watched the two circles intersect. One point of intersection was obviously outside the city limits. The other, beautifully, was close by.

He knew where Isaac had been the moment he made the calls.

But, Graham realized, Isaac could have kept moving. He could be in a car, speeding toward downtown.

Now what? Graham ran his hand over a small bruise on his face, pressing with his thumb into the wound, the pain stretching out over his skin.

He picked up his own burner.

Graham copied the number and programed the call into the wolfhound. A Stingray couldn't be used to complete calls, but Walter's iteration had ended up with the function as a byproduct of the mismatched hardware he'd used to illegally build it.

Quickly Graham pulled up the IRC and pasted everything he and Walter had learned in the past few hours. All the information the anons had passed. He dumped it in a Pastebin, the ATM info, the burner phone numbers, everything, and sent the link to 200 people from around the world. There was no right or wrong anymore, there was only what it took to save lives.

He pulled up an old email address, one he hadn't used in months. He'd fallen out of favor with Knees, but he needed his help now. He typed as fast as he could with one hand. There was a rumor that Knees had hacked a telematics systems, could use OnStar to remotely shutdown a car. If he could, Graham could still potentially stop Isaac.

The message was short: *I need your help*

Then, Graham dialed the number. The wolfhound registered the call on the laptop screen and connect it. And he inhaled, his eyes growing wide, and listened, his whole body on fire, with rage, with hate, to the silence between the buzz. For something to be wrong there had to be something right, a possibility of doing the right thing. But tonight he had learned that such things were luxury, that now, there was only the difference between letting more people die and saving them.

An email pinged back. He clicked it open.

*I'm listening*

The phone rang. Graham took a long breath.

He was going to kill Isaac.

Martyr

“It’s beautiful work.”

Shaheed felt a chill. The voice was young. Thin. A man, but someone near his own age, likely. He was not sure what he had expected, but not this.

“Who is this?”

“I’ve been watching all night. On TV.” The voice laughed once. “A bit haphazard, but overall admirable stuff.”

“Nobody has this number.”

He could feel Margaret watching him, her dark eye, what he’d done.

“I can only assume you’ve got a... grand finale.”

“It’s an unregistered phone.”

“Since you’ve been on the move but haven’t left the city. If you didn’t have something to finish, something, you know, worth finishing, you’d be long gone. On a plane to Syria or some other godawful place.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“An admirer. A friend. Likely your last.”

Shaheed hung up the phone. Held the red button until the screen asked if he was sure he wanted to power down. He did nothing.

“Who was that?” Margaret asked.

Shaheed shook his head. Snow covered all of the car’s windows so that he couldn’t see out. So no one could see in. He had felt safe and unwatched in this stupid,

unmovable car, but now his skin crawled, a thousand threads worming through his veins, pulling him too tight.

The phone buzzed again. The reedy jingle. He nearly dropped it. Answered only after the melody ended and began again.

On the other end was static breath.

“I don’t think you understand, Isaac.”

Shaheed’s breath caught. “How do you know my name? Who the hell are you.”

“You make a dozen unanswered calls between burners within a three mile radius of two incidences of... *terrorism* and you expect not to be found.”

“There’s a woman here. I’ll kill her.” Shaheed lifted the gun. How many rounds were left?

The voice faltered. “Good. I’m calling because I want to help. What you’re doing is... art. You’re making people listen. Making them pay attention. Waking them up from their pathetic ignorance.”

Shaheed was unimpressed. Ready to hang up. “I don’t need your help.”

“Then why haven’t you finished it yet? Is it a bomb? Where?”

“We’re waiting for the proper time.”

The voice laughed. “Bullshit. You’re the last one left. You panicked. The bombs faulty. But... you haven’t blown yourself up with one of those vests yet, so maybe you’re hoping you can still set it off.” The voice trailed off. “How close am I?”

“I’ll fucking kill you. I’ll kill the girl then I’ll hunt you down and kill you.”

“That would be a shame. A waste of a show. You’re—let’s see... you’re going nowhere. Sitting in a parking lot. Battery dead? Leave the headlights on?”



The amount this man knew was startling. He was wrong about the car, but right that they were trapped. Shaheed opened the door suddenly and jumped out, gun raised, keeping the phone to his ear. "Where are you?" He scanned the lot, twisting in circles. "Don't fucking hide."

"Go ahead and blow yourself up. I'm not anywhere near St. Josephs. Though that would be a shameful way to go. A little fizzle to your big night."

Shaheed couldn't take it. He looked back at Margaret who was watching him, unmoving.

"Is it a new car?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The one you're hiding in."

This was ridiculous. He was being watched. But he didn't know how. He looked up, scanning the sky, but the clouds there were low and pregnant, and the idea felt preposterous, that a satellite could be watching anyways.

"It's a yes or no question."

He hesitated. "Yes." Where was this going.

"How new?"

He looked to Margaret and mouthed the words.

"2015," she said.

"Did you hear that?"

The voice affirmed.

Shaheed continued, "What are you doing? What the fuck does it matter what year of car it is. We don't have a key."

“Because I don’t have a car. But, lucky for you, I’m close.”

Again Shaheed swung his head around, squinting into the darkness the haunted the ends of the streets. He could see no one expect for the distant bodies out smoking. Where they the same people as before? Or was this man there now? Blending in. He felt crazy.

“I’ll kill you the moment I see you.”

“Not if you want to finish everything that you and Jonas and Adam started.”

Hacker

There are men in dark suits outside the cafe. From across the canal I can see Phil through a window at a small table, absorbed in his computer. I feel the men watching me. The CIA. The NSA. The FBI. DOJ. DOD. A dozen of them. I am a threat to the state. I am a terrorist in a certain light. And who's to say that is not the truth, the unflinching thing? Who's to say I am not.

I could leave him there, at the table and vanish. I don't need my things from the room. I could leave now. I don't need him. I could go. Somewhere. Switzerland. South America. To the bottom of the Amstel. It would be quick and painless and over and maybe they would never find me, not really, because they would never find how far I got, and I could stay peacefully at the bottom of the river, a secret, a secret within, that would never, not for her whole life, hurt Alex.

I feel something inside of me. My body changing.

I steady myself and walk to the cafe, past the men in dark suits, and through the door. Phil sees me and slaps shut his computer. His face is tight. He has a drink before him. And his eyes are focused, relentless. He pushes out my chair with his foot, but doesn't stand.

I realize now that I have been afraid of him. This whole time. I'm terrified of what lurks inside of him. I refuse to think he is broken or damaged or defective. But still, I am afraid; of his eyes, and his hands, the way his body has slumped into his chair, the way the café is quiet, even though there are people everywhere.

He says, *Where have you been?*

I am late, nearly an hour late.

*I'm sorry.*

*In the marines if you're early, you're on time, if you're on time, you're late, and if you're late, you're dead.*

*That's cute, I say.*

*It's not too much to ask, he says.*

*Don't patronize me. You don't know me, I snap.*

*I could say the same thing, he says. But I don't feel so sorry for myself.*

Something has changed. There is a new anger biting beneath the surface of his skin, the twitch of muscle in his face. There is a hollow in my stomach. I fight the urge to run.

*I've been watching the news, he says.*

My heart bursts, a pit opens up inside of me.

I wait. We say so much in this stubborn refusal to be honest with words, to lie with our bodies.

*Twenty grunts got killed in a car bomb outside of Homs. He holds my gaze. Every fucking day kids get killed. Why not me?*

*I'm sorry, I say. His eyes pinch and he looks away, taking in the words. He sips from his drink, a soft amber liquid.*

*There was this guy, he starts.*

*I don't want anymore of your stories, I say.*

*Too bad, he says and begins again, There was this guy when I was in Syria, Muhammad, he came to the wire of our FOB one night, middle of the night, with his*

*hands up over his head saying, Don't shoot, don't shoot I'm an American, which really got us going. What an audacious thing to say. We loved it. Piss off, we said. They'll kill me, he said. Who gives a shit, we said. They'll cut my head off, he said. They're waiting at my home, he said. Too bad, we said. And on and on. Him begging at the wire with his hands on his head, for like an hour. He really did refuse to leave. Finally, some sergeant gets tired of it and orders us to drag him in, so we do, and I remember he's a pretty small guy, pretty light, no muscle at all. But we carry him in and throw him in our lock up and he tells us we're heroes for saving him, which we all love. I killed a terrorist, he said. Who, we say, who, and he tells us the name of some Daesh cat who we recognize and say bullshit, he says, no no, I did, I did, he's dead, you'll see. So we say, How? And he proceeds to tell us a story that takes a goddamn hour to tell, but we don't care, we sort of love this guy, and I think, eventually, we all start to believe him, in his broken English, that he did kill this guy, this monster. Not because he was a terrorist, he assured us, but because it was his life or the terrorist's. Now you take me to America, yes? he says. We can't help but laugh at that. But he keeps saying it, telling us he's a hero and he belongs in America with the heroes, which we loved. But he keeps at it, and eventually, after a couple hours, someone finally starts to buy it, Rioia or someone. And Rioia says, I'm going to try for you, and the guy about kisses his feet. And who could blame Rioia if this guy really did kill this terrorist? These guys were killing us, our friends, every damn day. So, really, we fell in love with this guy, this killer.*

Phil finishes his drink and orders another when the waitress passes. He isn't looking at me much. The table between us is small but we go to great lengths not to touch. I am frozen. Barely breathing.

Something irreparable has happened.

*He killed him all right, he continues. We learned the next day that the Daesh guy was dead, whatever his name was, so we celebrated Muhammad. And we honestly began pushing for refugee status for him, to get him to America. Didn't matter to us that he killed someone, or even why. We thought. It went on for a week, with Muhammad hanging around our FOB, shooting the shit with us, eating our grub. Then we learned, somebody learned, out on a liaison patrol, the kind where they try to make friends in the community, somebody learned that Muhammad really had killed the guy, that Muhammad had followed this guy's daughter home from school, stabbed her mother in the side of the head, and raped the girl for hours, until her father got home. So, sure he killed the father, the terrorist. But not for being a terrorist. For being a father. For being in the way of his dick.*

My blood is cold. I am afraid when I stand nothing will work. I'm afraid that I'll collapse.

Phil won't look at me now. My heart hammers violently, beyond my capacity.

*So we threw Muhammad out, Phil says. In the middle of the night, we cuffed him up and threw him in the back of a HMMWV and drove him out to the middle of the city, which was insane, a suicide mission, but it's like people knew, they knew why we were out there, to drop off this scum, to let them have their way with him.*

*You don't understand, I say. I'm not sure if he's done speaking, but I cut him off anyways. I want him to stop.*

*Stoning is technically illegal, at least they say it is. But still. And now, it hasn't hardly changed. They dig the hole by hand, with shovels. They measure the guy so he can*

*be buried to his sternum, so his head and shoulders are they only thing, so he can't barely move. And then they lay the shroud over him, a white one, so you can see the blood, so he can't see the rocks. And then they line up. The whole town has to join in. Like it's a fucking faux pas not to throw a stone. When it starts, after they've read the Shira law, they all stand around waiting, until someone is called by Allah to cast the first stone. They stand pretty far away so about half the time they miss. But half the time they don't. The rocks are heavy. The teeth come out easy. The sternum collapses. The face balloons. But it's slow. Bones break but the skull is resilient. More than it should be. And it takes too many hits before it shatters and the shards tear up the brain. Even then some people don't die. They just stream.*

*Stop. I say again, You don't understand.*

His story is already over. I don't need any more. I understand.

*I really do, he says.*

I shake my head.

*Listen, he starts and pauses, I need you to know.*

But I stand suddenly, grab my bag and trip on the chair, knocking it over. I push out of the warmth of the cafe. Outside I look back, through the window, to see Phil, to see him on the phone, to see him pointing at me, guiding some great hand to my throat.

But he is not there, at the table, and I am running, or walking quickly, doing my best not to look panicked, with no idea where I am going, just going, just away, away away. Then, I feel the tears. I round one corner, then another, pushing past people as the city trickles to life, they do not seem to see me, plow right into me, like I am invisible. Like I am nobody.

Finally I stop, duck into a small nook, and sob. Uncontrollably. For everything. For all the violence surrounding my name, my existence. For my mother. For Alex. For Graham and Margaret. For Isaac. For Phil.

He doesn't know what he has done. He doesn't understand, which kills me most, that he was swayed by something, by the news, so fully he couldn't even ask me.

I am not a monster.

No, not like he thinks. I'm not a monster. I did right, in some small way. I did what I was raised to do. I am not the killer from his story. Intention matters. Intention can be everything. And my intention was good.

I wipe my eyes and watch the crowds bustle past. Couples and families and men and women and children and everyone, all alone somehow.

I don't need Phil. I don't need Alex. I don't need my mother. I don't need a man or woman or anyone.

I push back my hair and step back onto the small sidewalk. I am lost. I need the train station, but have no idea where it is. I need away, but I have no idea where. I turn left.

I am not a monster.



Martyr

How did he know their names? Shaheed held the burner in his hand. The screen had gone dark but he kept looking. Like something more would bloom there. The man had said he was coming to start their car. Shaheed had no idea what it meant. But something in the confidence, the sureness of the man, had gotten to him. He had known everything. There had to be a reason for it. Shaheed didn't believe in signs, but he knew enough not to ignore the truth.

And it didn't matter. Their names would come out eventually. They had always known that. No reason to pretend otherwise. What would it matter now?

Except for Emily. She would have learned soon enough. It would have happened. But he would have been gone. And there was a comfort in that. In knowing that he would be gone by then. It would have been so much harder for her to hate him then. When he was already dead. How much easier to hate the living, the guilty, the evil in the present tense.

Though really he didn't even know what the world knew. He assumed the police or the media had figured it out and the man had learned it there. But maybe he knew something else. Maybe he was Omar's friend. There was an explanation somewhere.

But really, now, it didn't even matter.

"What will you do with me?"

Shaheed said nothing. Soon, there was war coming. He looked at the 9mm in his hand. The heavy steel. The thing of power, of efficiency. Of violence and control.

He dropped the clip, pulled back the slide and emptied the bullet in the chamber into his waiting palm. He peered down the slide, let it click forward, clean and ready. He counted out the rounds remaining in the clip, 8, and reloaded them, one by one, with a fluidity he never expected to have.

He was here because of a promise to Hussein. To stay in this world, for another few months, another few weeks, days, today. It was today.

He set the gun on the dashboard. Margaret was still.

“Are you really going to blow up a building?”

He fished the detonator from his shoe, the wires from inside his coat. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her look away. Black with black, red with red. So simple no one could fuck it up.

“Dear god. They’re people, Isaac.”

“I know.”

“So it means nothing?”

“You don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing for me to understand. You’re a child. You’re angry. When has this,” she raised her hands and gestured to the terror around them, “When has this ever done anything.”

Shaheed met her eye. “People listen to you. You chose this. This car. This job. This fucking neighborhood. You chose it because you had it as a choice.”

“You had choices too.”

“Never *this*.”

“You’ve got a choice now. Take off that vest and give me the gun and go home.”

He laughed. He could feel himself separating. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“It can. You’re a good kid.”

“Stop acting like you know me.” He held the detonator up before his face. It was armed. The small button on top so easy to press. He’d pressed it a thousand times when it was hooked to nothing. “Your life was defined by what choices you made. Mine... mine has been defined by what choices I didn’t even have.”

Her hands sat dead in her lap and she stared down at them. Her face a pool of dark shadows, bones and flesh and blood.

“And what do you do by killing a hundred more people? More kids?”

Shaheed thought for a time. Trapped in this cramped car. “I don’t know. That’s up to them. If anything will actually change. But I know one thing, I know they’ll listen.”

“Isaac, That’s bullshit, and you know it. You know nothing’s ever changed. Not ever before. Why do you think anything will now?”

He shrugged. “Exactly.”

Margaret was looking at him with her mouth open. He couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. Not for her life, or anything that had ever been given to her. But for this, the great toll of life. He knew he was stupid. That he’d learned next to nothing in his life, but that, dear god, he knew it. If nothing else, he had this. That he wasn’t like all those others, lost in their social media lives, defining themselves by status, thinking everything was figured out. He knew what he didn’t know. And he was at peace with that. He was the harbinger of something. Something great. Maybe hope. Maybe truth. He might not fix anything, but he was doing something.

“Jesus,” she said. “Your logic is broken. I don’t know what else to tell you. Except don’t do it. The world doesn’t need you to see how fucked it is. You’re going to blend right into this great tapestry of violence. You’ll be another blip. Another statistic for talking heads to spew about angry, disassociated young men. You won’t even be a fucking terrorist, *Shaheed*. Look at you, you’ve got blonde hair; you’re too white, too All-American, too familiar to be any *other*.”

“You don’t understand, Margaret.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He could see from here that her knuckles were white, her hands balled into fists. “It’s your name.”

“I don’t give a shit. You lost that right. You fucking dog.”

He watched her eyes trace a path to the small red button resting in his lap. The way their lives could end like that. She was beautifully brave. He realized what he wanted was a whole world of her. What we couldn’t learn. She was who he always meant to be.

“I can’t let you do it,” she said.

He didn’t move.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

She was quicker than he expected. She came with both arms out. Her right found his head, palm open, stronger than he anticipated. His skull slapped the glass, split a spider’s web, shook the snow from the window. Her other found the detonator, yanked it away. And in no time, with no thought, she pressed. Pressed again and again. Her eyes on fire.

He snatched the gun from the dash, but did nothing with it. Only held it so she couldn't.

“Fuck you,” she said. The red wire had come undone when she'd grabbed it. She threw the small plastic device back at him. “Fucking piece of shit.”

Shaheed righted himself gingerly. Pain ran down his spine, out over his cold limbs, waking everything, the hair on his legs. Gently, he ran a hand over his head. His fingers came back warm and darkened.

“I'll crash the car if you make me drive.”

He nodded. “Okay, Margaret.” In his pocket he had one last epipen of morphine but the baggy of powder was gone. He flicked the cap of the pen with his thumb. The needled pricked his leg, the warmth spread. “Okay.

“I'm the stray dog in your neighborhood. In your neighborhood plagued with strays, tearing through your trash, killing your cats, scaring your children, keeping you up at night while you do nothing. Not until I come for you biting to break skin, to make you bleed, to make you put a bullet in each of our heads, so you can finally sleep in peace.”

A knock came at the driver's door. Neither of them jumped. Their eyes met. They could see nothing through the snow, out into that world they both now despised.

Doctor

Margaret looked at Isaac meekly and he nodded. She watched him adjust his grip around the gun's handle. Through snow covered window they could both see the shadow of a form, another man, another anger.

Isaac nodded to her.

Margaret swung the door open slowly. Snow that had settled over the kiss of door and car shifted and rained down. There was the sound of wind and night. Not much more.

When she saw the man, the boy, she didn't know what she felt. She was surprised and not. Sure and not. Angry and not. The man was young, probably Isaac's age, no bigger, but whiter, prettier, his cheeks flushed in the cold, his eyes bright beneath the dark hood of shadow. Something about one side of his body looked off. His jacket was lumpy, the sleeve seemed to be empty. He held his other hand up slightly, an almost mock surrender. His eyes lingered on the gun.

She recognized something about him, his face, his gate.

But he beat her to it. "I recognize you," the man said, pointing a single finger at Isaac. "You go to UD?"

Margaret studied his face and Isaac gestured with the gun. She could tell he was in no mood to play with a sociopath, someone grossly excited by all of this terror. He regretted agreeing to let the man help already.

"You've got one minute."

"Going to shoot me?"

"Can you start the car or not?"

“I heard on the news that you were jihadists. Muslim. ISIS.”

“I’m not fucking around.” Margaret saw something in Isaac, watched him find some place inside himself. The dread on his face throughout the night had been obvious. But now, it was draining. Now there was violence. She could see his world upending.

“Neither am I.” The man pointed to his pocket, let his hand travel slowly. “Some people, Jesus Christ, lose all right to this life. They’ve got to be stopped. Ended. Cause we won’t ever fucking learn, will we? This is a war.” He’d pulled his phone from his pocket. Punched in a security phrase to open it, everything done with painful deliberateness. “We don’t mean to be warriors, you know. But this is who life makes us, you and I. People whose hands are forced.”

The man opened the door further, kept talking, letting some logic spiral out into an unfathomable darkness. He switched on the flashlight on his phone and brushed away snow from the space. Looking for something.

There was something off about him. Something broken and lost. Margaret watched him work. These angry children. When their eyes had met, for a brief, fleeting moment, she had seen terror like never before. The chords of music inside of him had snapped all at once. She could no quite be their mother, but there was something inside the feeling, the responsibility for the actions of these boys, Isaac, this other, new animal chewing off his own leg. But for what? To die in this frozen snowy hell.

All of a sudden she wanted to take both of them into her arms. Grow big enough to wrap them inside of her warmth, squeeze the air from all the violence, give them a home, a good place to die.

It was a sick world.

It was only seconds. He found what he was looking for. A small metal plate, far down on the inside of the door. She could see letters, but couldn't read anything.

Was he still talking?

She watched him take a picture of the small plate. He clicked around on his phone some. The light went dark. The man stayed squatted. She could smash his head in the door. At a point there is only this violence. At this point where everyone is defeated. She was defeated. Exhausted and angry.

The man stood and dusted snow from his jeans. Stuffed his phone back into his pocket, his hand disappearing there too.

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

“For what?”

The man looked up. Margaret followed his gaze. The snow was finally letting up. The dull, glowing of low clouds was thinning. She looked higher, up, through the small space of door and car, up through the scraggled branches of a lone tree, through whispers of snow still hanging in the air, through all the light of the hospital she had spent her last three years bowing to, through this city she still barely knew, through the vast infinitude of connection, through the empty space of sky, through the last gasp of atmosphere, past the satellites and moons, through that space where heaven might have been, she saw something, some light.

“Magic I guess.”

“Back away. Get the fuck back.”



The man stood still, eyes still up. “Do you think we were made this way? Or were we just born monsters?”

Something inside her clicked. A name. “Graham.”

The movements came from the corners of both eyes. The car hummed to life suddenly. The radio blared. Isaac’s arm adjusted. The man’s hand twitched. The shots were deafening. Three quick. She threw her arms up over her head, caught in the middle. The man’s weight rocked back, then forward. He lunged with the small knife, his eyes wild, scared, for anyone, to do any sort of damage, and found her side, just above the ribs, with enough force to stab to the hilt, the blade catching as he fell, his hand losing its grip, body crumpling straight down, boneless, empty, head lulled back, eyes open, forehead dark and open, and looking straight into all that heavenless space above.

Hacker

I don't kill myself. But I think about it. I think seriously about it. Death terrifies me. But less so than what lies ahead. I do not know how to handle what lies ahead. It is likely that I might die anyways, shot or tortured or simply killed, because that happens. But more likely, I will have to endure, so much terrible, so much pain and violence and darkness. More likely.

I consider the Amstel, sliding slowly to the bottom. Letting it take me, quietly. I even bend down and touch the water, feel how utterly cold it is, the way the cold slides through my veins, up from only the tips of my fingers, through all of me, until the whole of me is thoroughly chilled.

The truth is I think about my body, if they ever did dredge it up.

Their bodies started a war. All of them, these kids. The city erupted over them. Isaac and Adam, the orphans. No one could decide what to do. To burn them, some claimed was necessary, to destroy the evil within. But others said that cremation wasn't enough, too gentle and kind. Unmarked graves, others begged, so no one could ever find them and celebrate their horror. Some even suggested dumping them into the middle of the ocean.

But quietly a man came forward, a bishop of some sort, who asked for them, to give them something proper, and they were given to him, in the night, driven to the mortuary, and cremated, their ashes put into simple wooden boxes and taken to the bishop's church where he held a service for them, for their souls, for the good that must have existed somewhere, even once, in their lives. Then, they vanished.

Would my body start a war so similar? I have parents, so it would go to them. But would they be allowed a service that wasn't hounded?

When the bishop was found out, the windows of his house and church were smashed in with bricks, attendance at his services dwindled, two public officials called for his arrest, parents picketed his parking lot, until, finally, he too disappeared.

What I know is that there can never be peace. Not really.

We claim piety and righteousness, America, but we have none, we are incendiary. We are no better, no worse, as evil as everyone else, as cruel and heartless and damned.

Doctor

She could feel herself screaming. The pain was sharp. Unbelievably so. She'd treated dozens of knife wounds of all severity. But had never felt what they felt, the drunks and dead and children, so many so numb, so quiet, their eyes following her while she worked sutures through their anesthetized skin.

She couldn't look away from the man's body. Her ears ringing. The whole world split open.

"Get out." She felt Isaac's hand on her arm, strong but not forceful. "Move, move," he said. He was pushing her out of the car.

She didn't want to budge. She was afraid the blade in her side would split her open further if she moved a muscle. She could feel it in there, so hot, the warmth all the way in the center of her chest. Vaguely, from some far off place, she could hear herself swearing over and over.

Isaac climbed over the center console, stopping halfway, facing her, his legs spread over both sides of the car. He pressed a hand to her chest, forcing her against the seat. She didn't fight back. Up, in his face, there was too much darkness to see anything. Her arms up around her head blocked the view of the knife.

"Stop," he said. "Stay still."

She felt his hand find the knife, the sudden pressure.

"Okay," he said. "On three."

The absurdity of it. Of this boy. This act.

"No," she said. "Don't."

He said one number and tore. The blade slipped from her, dragging out her every nerve with it, a rake pulling forth her soul. She screamed into the cold.

Isaac tossed aside the knife, out onto the man's body. Both boys. Then, again, he pushed. First her legs, out of the car, then her whole body. She felt weightless, unable to catch herself as she tumbled out. Her feet found asphalt and she buckled. Somewhere, there were shouts. The door slammed shut above her. She looked up and pictured his face looking back down, soft and kind, the same face she'd seen all night, buried in violence and hurt, wrought with understanding and sorrow. She thought this would help with all the despair to come.

The car lurched forward, up and over the small parking curb and out onto the sidewalk, onto the small service road that ran a loop around the parking lot. The snow bank was high but the car shot through, a blast of powder. But the ice was slick and the car drifted sideways, slapped into another parked along the curb with a screech of metal. The tires never stopped spinning. Soon enough they caught and the cars separated, the tear ear splitting.

Margaret became aware of people. Many of them. Coming from all over, converging upon her. She was on her knees, facing away from the body she knew was so close. She pressed her hand against the small sedan before her. She could stand. One foot at a time. The pain needling out everywhere from her side. She righted herself slowly. Kept one hand pressed firmly to her wound. The blood not nearly as warm as she expected it to be, pooling between her fingers, dripping out in a steady stream.

She moved in the opposite direction. Isaac would have to follow the road around the lot and past her again before he could head downtown. She ran hunched over, each

step another stab. Soon, she realized she was crying. Her vision closed, a darkness settling over her. The world was collapsing.

What would she do when she intercepted him? She wasn't sure. But she knew she would save him. However she could.

But she could hardly run. It was a pathetically slow process. Her body failing out from under her. She knew the mechanisms of her wound. The fight going on beneath the skin. The veins and arteries surely severed and leaking slowly earthward through the density of her body. She slowed and looked up. Her black SUV tore past, picking up speed on the straight run of road, barreling through an empty intersection, west toward some sort of unknowable violence. More people came running. A news van slid around a corner from the front of the hospital.

She could do nothing but bleed into her hand.

Hacker

I avoid Central. Take the subway to a smaller station outside the city and catch a train. It's all I can do to breathe. They are there. I can feel them, their eyes on me, their dark suits. The violation. They will take me. I pick the first train, to Zandvoort, a coastal town barely an hour away. I'm certain they expect me to go south, to Switzerland and seek asylum. Or somewhere similar. But I pick the first train, look at the board, the departure times, and just go. I have no doubt that he called them, gave them everything he could. But I was never Anna, I could never trust him, not fully, not wholly, only with my body, my softs, my life, never with my heart, with my truth. He never saw my passport. He can tell them I went by Knees, not Brittany. He can tell them I am a wreck. That my coat is puffy and ripped and blue. That my hair is short and unkempt and dark.

The train rumbles painfully slow. Due west from Amsterdam. The towns get smaller as we go. The houses and buildings older, like we are moving through time—backwards, back, past what I've done, back to when I was innocent, and further, to a time when I'm unburdened and free and so much less guilty. I see also, from my cool window, the windmills towering above the flat expanse, wooden and great, an ode to the lost. I'm afraid they are on the train with me. Men in dark suits moving from car to car, hunting me. But I know distance is crucial. Not too far, not too close. I'm devastated when Zandvoort comes, hardly an hour from the city. I wanted more. But I don't know this country.

Still, I disembark.

With everybody else, I file from the train, and begin down the platform. Before us is a row of towers, hotels and condos that wouldn't be out of place in any American town. And there is sand already. Blown into the cracks in the sidewalk, coloring the grass, already against my skin.

And then, suddenly, there is the smell of salt, of ocean, and the briefest moment of calm, of not panic, of not terror, of not fear, of no past, no tether to the awful before, of not sadness, of not loss, of hope.

Outside the station I follow the big roads, the crowds of people, to a row of shops. I choose one at random and enter. The clothes are unremarkable and expensive. But I buy whole outfits. I buy a coat, red and heavy and clean, I buy hair dye, I buy new shirts and bras and panties and pants and makeup, blush and eye shadow and lipstick. And all of it is piled into a pair of bags.

Then, I know what I must do. Across the street is a small electronics store. Inside there is the familiar smell of wire and plastic. The man at the counter is tall and plain looking, wearing a red polo shirt and jeans. I am the only customer and he begins in Dutch, but I stop him and apologize and he says, *What do you want?* But his face is soft and nonthreatening.

*A computer, I say. A laptop.*

He leads me to the back of the store, to a row of computers, and makes way for me and my big bags of clothes to slide past him in the tiny shop, and I read the small signs before each computer, decoding the stats in Dutch. I know what I need. I pick the boxiest one and point to it. He nods and then I find the RAM and fans, the processors, and a new motherboard. A solid-state hard drive. And a small pouch of tools. I don't need



much. It is most of the rest of the money I have, and I leave, with another large bag, swaying foolishly from the shop.

I walk towards what I assume is the water, until I can see it. The solid grey, out just below the horizon. The sand is everywhere now.

I pick a small hostel by the water, a block away, and book a quiet room on the top floor that looks south, so that I can just see the beach, an edge of it when it meets the water beneath these low and heavy clouds, everything muted and grey, the houses along the sand feigning brightness, but muted by grey and salt, and I think, for a moment, that no one will ever find me here.

Doctor

No more than a half-mile. Her car was quick. Nothing special, but a half-mile with the pedal down was at least sixty. The brake lights lit red. The car came undone.

Margaret was keeled over herself, watching. From here she saw the tires lock all together, catch a patch of ice, the tail swing right, then left and catch the hood of a parked car. The slap was sharp but she didn't hear it until the car had already recoiled and lifted, whole body perpendicular to its direction. It flipped once, 280 degrees, slammed onto its side and flipped again, another 90 degrees, back onto its wheels. And again. So many rolls she lost count. Finally, still flipping it smacked into another car, this one actually driving. They met in the center of an intersection. Her car in the air, ripping the top from the other. Their bodies folding together, twisting further down the street. Accordioning into a third. All of it finally over.

She was running without knowing. She could no longer feel her limbs, her hurt. Her legs pumped in an ungodly manner. The strength sudden. Foreign. Not hers. She passed others who came out onto porchs to watch, people from the hospital frozen at the sight of the wreck. Others, doctors, nurses, running too. She ran in the street, ahead of all of them.

Knowing what she would find.

She limped the last half block, her breath labored, blood in her mouth. No one had crawled from the wrecked cars. Smoke coiled into the darkness. From somewhere, maybe within, there was screaming. She heard someone say, "Do something," heard herself say, "I'm a doctor."

Glass cracked under her feet. One of the cars spewed hot fluids. Her car still ran, somehow, the remaining back tire spinning furiously, levitated from the earth, seeking traction, distance, vengeance. The windows were smashed out. Closer still she crouched. He was there. He had put on his seatbelt. Hanging upside down. Something ran thick and steady from his head.

“Isaac,” she whispered, the boys name taking up so much space in her body, so much wind from her lungs.

Others were hurt. She could hear them. Voices gathered around her.

Slowly his head twisted. She couldn't see his eyes. The car was dark. He was a silhouette.

“It's going to be okay,” she said. But the words, she knew, were untrue. Impossible. She'd said them out of reflex. She said them to all of her patients, everyone who passed through her doors, even to those she could tell from a look were hopeless. Because maybe, in her heart of hearts, she believed in some sort of heaven, some place so far from this motherless, forgotten world.

She dropped to her knees, crawled closer. He looked down, craning his neck toward his new sky. His arms reached. It was all slow. He caught some sort of wire and reeled it in. Even in the dark she could see the split wires of the detonator. One still attached, the other loose and stray.

“Please,” she said. “I'm sorry.” But there was no one left to talk to.

She yelled and jumped to her feet, felt a universe transmuted inside her, through her ribs and lungs, up into her heart, her whole being unrecognizable. *My god*, she thought, *here I am*.

The bomb exploded.

Hacker

The first thing I do is shower in the quiet communal bathrooms at the end of the hall. My mind is bruised and fogged. I turn the knobs until the hot is scalding, until my skin roses and steams. Until I can feel some of my fear burn away. I would burn it all away if I could. The each of it. But it is buried deeper than skin, somewhere in the marrow of my bones. I am so tired and hurt and burned that I fail to remember the confinement and noise, the panic that should dwell in my heart.

At the sink I dye my hair. And rinse again in the shower, alone the whole time, and grateful for it, the new blonde rivering over my breasts, so foreign, and I tell myself, this is who I am now.

I dump my bags on the bed. I cut the tags from my clothes and try them on in clouded mirror on the wall above the only furniture in the room, a small wooden desk. The clothes feel comforting, their tightness, firm and reassuring.

Then I take out the makeup. It has been so long since I've used any. High school maybe. But it comes naturally. I change my face. I change me, with the bright red lipstick, the new part in my blonde hair, the clothes regular but sturdy, and suddenly I am a woman, a woman with a job and friends and money, I am everybody, and like that I am somebody, somebody new, somebody different, somebody anybody but me.

As I look at myself I decide that I am not hiding. I am taking back the power.

Then, I set to work on the computer. This, I remember like sex. I know everything. I know the truth in all of these pieces. I know their use, their value and purpose, the sum of their power.

Everything fits together nicely. Everything I bought compatible. But once I replace the final screw on the backplate, I don't boot it up.

What's before me is the rabbit hole. A key back to a life, I think, that I am happy to leave behind. What I will do will be illegal. But any money I take will be money heavily insured. Money that shouldn't belong to anyone. And I will hurt no one, only corporations, capitalistic leaches, violent men.

But still.

I sit staring at the lifeless machine.

What's before me is my power. I fish out the flash drives from the pocket of my jeans.

The truth is so many people died. I did not know any of them. I didn't know Graham or Walter or Terry. I didn't know anyone at the mall. I didn't know the orphans, Isaac or Adam, I didn't know Jonas. I didn't know the woman and her daughter in their car. And I didn't know Margaret, though I feel for her most. But they all died and I helped. In my small way. I hacked the telematics system. I crashed the car.

It fell into my lap. I watched the op unfold for hours. I believed, like Graham, that we might be able to show somebody the power of the people, just how unneeded our militarized police force was, how outdated and unreliable. But I did nothing. Graham's work was sloppy and unorganized. A huge call to action that lacked focus. In his dead-brother desperation he was trying to cast a net so wide no one could slip through. And in the end he got lucky that he found them. I watched from my apartment in Missouri, CNN on my TV, the op feed on my computer. Then, I got his email. I got the VIN number.

That was all it took. I had already hacked the system. With the number I had the car.

It was terrifying. To have that power. But I cherished it. And now I feel it again, that fear, worming in my trembling fingers.

I think now that I shouldn't have helped. I shouldn't have hacked the car, I shouldn't have turned the ignition when he asked. But I did. And in that moment I heard them, through the OnStar. I heard their voices. Their furies. I heard the gunshots. The screams. I heard the engine rev and Isaac panic. For those brief seconds I was there with him, inside the car. I could hear him crying.

I didn't want to kill him.

When the girl he'd loved found out about him she'd told reporters she'd never trusted him, that he was disgusting, vile, a beast, a monster.

I heard a boy. A child.

But Graham was dead, because of me. And this boy was on his way to unleash worse.

With the files on these drives I will reconstruct them. I will take the fractured fragments of their lives and make them whole, make them people again. Not just victims and murderers. I will make them human.

You know what happened. The woman and her daughter, dead. Margaret. Isaac exploded into another great scar upon the world.

What does it take to be a monster?

## Epilogue

I don't mean to sleep, but I do. I sleep for days at a time. Withdrawals come. I'm out of pills. I drink away some days, huddled beneath damp sheets. But others I can think. I can move. I take walks through the quiet village.

A week passes.

I wake one morning and I watch a flood of bodies outside my window, their heads orange, walking towards the sea. Hundreds of them. Filing past in the street, everyone wearing an orange hat. And more down at the beach. Thousands even.

I dress slowly, sleepily, and catch myself in the mirror, the blonde, madeup stranger staring back, the ghost, the girl I'm getting to know.

The cold outside is stiff and wet and the sun is buried in cloud, the town grey again. There is a lull on the street. But back towards the train station I can see more, another train's worth pouring toward me. And I wait, standing the doorway of my hostel, until the first of them pass by, walking noiselessly, whispering in small groups, holding hands. And then I slip into the masses and follow.

We take the street to where it ends, runs headlong into the first bluff of sand and tall grass. There is a small and broken down wooden fence and we jump it, and I see the thousands more in orange hats grouped on the beach, the people pooling in from everywhere. We stumble down the steep hill towards the stage everyone surrounds.

Closer, I can hear the music, the pulse of it, the voice, chanting out. And when we reach the stage we see them strip their clothes, down to swim trunks and underwear. The bass finds my ribs, rattles my bones, shakes me awake. I follow everyone into a line and we



file person by person into a white tent and sign out names and get orange hats, those of us with old ones put on the new ones, and those of us with none put them on slowly and feel, suddenly part of something. Then, we too strip. Pulling our clothes over our heads and down our legs and feeling the surge of cold, the kiss of salt on skin, the terrible wind. We ball our coats and pants in the sand and jog towards the stage, we move for warmth, to feel our bodies, the freeze of them, the seize of our muscles. Out beyond the waves, in the water, there are men, ghosts, in heavy, dark suits, with masks, with oxygen tanks, marching slowly out, forming a line a hundred feet from shore, holding between them a rope, their bodies sentries, still, the ocean churning around them, these darknesses. And then, as we round the stage, to face the thunder of speakers, between the sound and the water, we dance, without thought or consideration, our bodies take life, writhe, convulse, rhythmless, violent in a way, desperate, pleading, for warmth, for freedom, to be set free, from gravity, from the awkward of our limbs, to be gods, to be children again, we dance with our whole hearts, pounding together, and suddenly, we are together, following a man on the stage, following everyone together, everyone following each other, until it is beautiful and we are one great sight, thrusting our souls into this new oblivion.

And then the man on the stage is counting, the numbers going down, lacking meaning, lacking substance, but changing still, propelling us towards something, towards some inescapable moment, toward the inevitable, toward one point, a moment outside of time, the tip of a pen, existence, to the warmth.

Run.

Bodies turn and tear past.

We charge with abandon. But only some of us, only a handful. We run tripping past others, out, past the last of the dancing, the few of us, crying out, and then, it is there, the water, solid, so cold it is like kicking a brick wall, but we don't stop, we hike our legs high and run harder, splashing like mad, the solid of cold clawing at our naked flesh, higher, until it hits our chests, seizes our lungs, so cold our bodies lose function.

I see them turn back. I see the people I followed. I see everyone else, the thousands, still dancing before the stage waiting for the true signal. But I can't quit yet. My legs lose the sand and I drop, the cold taking me, fully, wrapping my head, the whole of me, so suddenly, so quickly, I gulp water, I cannot will myself to do anything, to kick, to swim, to live. Somewhere far I can see the dark shapes, the men in dark suits, the stone bodies, but they do nothing.

And nothing flashes before me. Nothing but Alex. And this new life inside of me. This beginning. A child. My lungs smashed. My body frozen. Unwilling. Trapped. But something inside of me. Alive. By now there is a heart. Beating, even now, when mine is not. A body, warm and alive, when mine is not. I will never see them again. I will never go home. But I've already died enough. And there's nothing left of me I'm willing to give. Not another cell. Not another cell of me. I'm not done.

Then, there, beneath my feet is sand, soft beneath my toes, and I feel every grain, every atom, the warmth, the fire, and I kick.