

Anamnesis

By

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All learning is but recollection.

I open my eyes and see the gray interior of my car. Squinting against the brightness, I see the lampposts, stray shopping carts, and evenly spaced diagonal lines of a parking lot. The passenger seat holds my backpack and a few loose sheets of paper with my handwriting scrawled on them. I turn in my seat and see that the backseat has a good number of my clothes haphazardly piled on top of each other.

I inhale and smell the metallic odor of dried blood. Panic shoots through my body as images of last night flood into my mind. *I was in a rush to leave. No matter what, I couldn't stay in our apartment. Bella. I left a note on the kitchen table next to the salt and pepper.*

I trace my steps backward as the fog of sleep lifts further. *I had stared at the warning label on the visor that tells you about seat belts until my eyes ached and then drifted off to sleep. I parked here after driving for hours around town without a destination. I packed without thinking, it was more that I was just trying to get everything in my car. Before that, all that comes is the sight of our bedroom door closing. What happened?*

I begin to breathe faster and smell blood again. I look down and see that my shirt and pants are covered with dried blood. *What did I do?* My phone buzzes in the cupholder and I jump. I look at the number. *Ricardo.* My mind spins as I debate whether or not to answer.

The phone buzzes again, bouncing around in the plastic hole. I reach over to the passenger seat and grab the top piece of paper. It reads:

He'll help you get the journal back if you do the job with Ricardo. He wants to take over what he's doing. Do what the blue notes say.

Frank was always the one to get me out of my dorm in college and now he dragged me to things after work. “Frank, you don’t even like basketball.” He stands triumphantly in front of me with a yellow basketball jersey on and his characteristic grin. He had told me to wait for him in the parking lot of our workplace so we could drive to the game together. He’d found tickets for cheap and after so many years of tagging along with him, I hadn’t even protested despite the fact that neither of us had a clue about basketball. “It’s about the experience!”

Frank was never satisfied with being just one thing. In college he was a statistics major like me *and* majored in philosophy. He could cook fabulously, *and* he lived off of instant mashed potatoes for a month. He considered himself “sports agnostic” *and* bought basketball tickets on a whim. He always had to be more than what you thought he was.

I offer to drive, and we leave the almost too-corporate looking building that is home to the insurance company we work for. Frank immediately launches into a rant about our boss, and I nod my head and agree at the appropriate times. Soon enough we are in our seats at the stadium and Frank is sipping loudly from an overpriced drink as he chats up the girls sitting next to us. He’s excitedly asking them questions about basketball and the teams we are watching while I

mainly distract myself on my phone. We're not too far from the court and all of the players look absurdly tall.

I glance around and see the rows of seats begin to fill, a man a row ahead of us jitters in his plastic chair. He's wearing a suit and expensive looking sneakers. His hair is slicked back, and I can smell his cologne even with the distance between us. I can hear his foot tapping even in the echoey din of the cavernous space. After some time, the lights turn off and the home team is introduced sometime before the national anthem is played. "Alright, we're cheering for the guys in yellow and we absolutely despise the guys in green."

He then starts loudly parroting what he's learned from his new friends over the music and tries to catch me up on everything he just learned. "Oh, oh this is called the tipoff. The two guys in the middle jump at the same time to try to get the ball first." The announcer says the name of the players and the man in the suit is rocking back and forth, his knees bouncing up and down.

The ball is tossed up by the referee and an incredibly tall man in yellow is able to tip it away from an incredibly tall man in green. Frank gives a small cheer and a triumphant shout echo below us. "YES! YES! LET'S FUCKING GO!" The man in the suit is on his feet pumping his fists in the air. People look at him partly amused and partly concerned. He smiles elatedly and starts looking at the people next to him. "Anthony Reaves, I could kiss you!" He dramatically blows a kiss toward the court and laughs break out in the crowd. Our eyes meet and I give him a reluctant thumbs up. His smile grows wider, and he starts climbing over the rows towards us. *Should've just ignored him.*

He awkwardly clammers over two rows until he's in front of us and extends his hand, "What's your name?" He shakes my gingerly offered hand and Frank pulls him in for a hug and congratulates him. "I'm Andrew. This is Frank." His shirt is drenched in sweat. "Oh my god, it

feels so fucking good!” he can barely keep still and roughly grabs my shoulder. “My name’s Ricardo and I just won five thousand dollars.”

We’re sitting on a park bench. Bella has her arm intertwined with mine and her head on my shoulder. We’re watching people skate on the frozen pond. Bella says, “I can’t believe you’ve never told me that,” laughs and buries her face into me. I can feel how warm my ears are despite the cold. I groan in embarrassment, and she says something that’s too muffled for me to hear. “What was that?” She remains with her face on my coat but raises her voice. “Why don’t you tell me things?” There’s a pause and I bite the inside of my cheek.

“You don’t want to hear them.” She turns her head to look at the skaters again. “I want to know you. All of it.” Her tone is soft, and I look down at her. A few wisps of her dark hair blow wildly from under her red beanie, and I see her breath being blown by the wind. I look away, “I just think there are some things you don’t share.”

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.” She sits up and intertwines her fingers in mine. She smiles and squeezes my hand. “Ask anything you want, right now and I’ll answer it.” Her eyes are hopeful and expectant. “What were you like in high school?” She’s the one that groans this time, and I can tell that she’s trying to seem more cheerful than she is.

I’m twelve years old and carefully applying whiteout to the report card I just opened. I had been checking the mailbox religiously ever since I got a C on the English test and by pure chance my mom hadn’t looked today. I’d sneakily slipped it into my backpack and put the rest of the mail on the table by the front door. My hands began to shake a little after that and I’d almost messed up the card three times so far.

I watched videos on the internet that told me how to fake a report card eight different ways, but most were for online report cards or required photoshop which forced me to innovate. I'd decided to erase the offending letter and simply run the report card through the printer to add what I needed. All I had to do was position the A correctly.

I blow gently to dry the whiteout faster. I've managed a fairly straight line and fortunately the shade of the paste matches the paper of the report card. I pull up the document where I've formatted a mock card and adjust the spacing slightly. After a few attempts, I feel confident that I've lined it up correctly.

Glancing over my shoulder, I shove the trial report cards into my backpack from the top of the printer and load the real one, making sure that it's facing the right way. I take a deep breath and hit the print button. The printer whirs to life and the sound of paper moving fills the small room. The final product slowly inches out of the mouth of the printer and I nervously examine it. I release a breath I'd been holding as I see that it worked. I hear my mom's voice from the doorway, "What are you doing?"

The phone rings for the last time and stills in the cupholder. I close my eyes and breathe slowly, but still can't escape the smell of dried blood. My heart won't slow, and the car seems unbearably hot. I tilt the rearview mirror toward me and see that the bottom half of my face is red. I must have had another nosebleed.

The parking lot has slowly been filling up with cars and I stare at everyone who walks by, terrified they might see my face. A car pulls up next to me and I turn away from it. I hear the door open and in the few moments it takes before it's closed again, I'm certain the person has seen me and is going to do something. The door thuds closed, and I hear the beep of it being

locked. I slowly turn back toward the window and see a middle-aged woman walking toward the stores.

A few staccato buzzes make me glance at my phone again and I see three texts from Ricardo:

Pick up the phone

You have 5 minutes or I post the journal

We need to talk

A rush of anxiety makes me sit up in my seat. The dull ache in my head grows to a sharp point as I scroll through my messages for something that might give me a clue as to what happened last night. I always delete messages from Ricardo, so there's nothing there and the last text I sent to Bella is an apology for working so much again. I grab the rest of the loose sheets of paper in the passenger seat and rapidly scan them. My phone starts ringing again and I toss them back onto the seat.

My palms leave sweat on the warm plastic of the console as I open it to the mess of multicolored sticky notes that dictate my life. With each vibration of my phone, I feel my throat grow tighter. I carelessly work through the pile of notes for the color blue and stick them on my dashboard, throwing the rest out of the way. I read the brief fragments of my life, not entirely sure what I'm looking for.

ALWAYS AGREE: YES AND

**Frank - the last time you talked to Ricardo was after the
dinner**

**Ricardo has your journal. He'll make it public if you don't
help him with the game.**

Some of the notes fall as the heat melts the adhesive backing. The phone stops ringing and then immediately rings again. I check the clock and see that three minutes have passed. I roll the windows down and a slight breeze breaks the stuffy heat. I pick up the phone and Ricardo answers in his customary monotone, "We have four days."

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I'm walking to my car a couple of blocks away from an Italian restaurant downtown because I didn't want to pay for valet. *Why did you say that?* I put my hands in my pockets to keep warm. I keep going over the date in my head. *You're an idiot.* Frank once said that he always thought that *Romeo and Juliet* was completely absurd until he saw how I was with women. "Obsession sounds exhausting." *How many dates are you going to ruin?*

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I'm eight and Hannah Pleaman is the center of my universe. At lunch she had given peanut butter cookies to everyone (she was so nice) and when she came to my desk and asked me why I hadn't tried mine, I panicked. I didn't want her to know that I had allergies out of some

fear that would make her think that I was a nerd. I remember picking up the cookie, looking at her, and then taking a bite. “This is really good!” She giggled and skipped away.

My heart melted and then my throat constricted. I walked to Ms. Sharp’s desk and calmly informed her that I had peanuts and couldn’t breathe. She screamed and called 911, the school nurse, and my mom. My mom was furious and had barely said a word since she picked me up.

We’re at a red light, so she turns around and looks me in the eyes, “I thought you were smarter than that. Did you even think about what the other parents might think of me if my son doesn’t even know what he’s *deathly allergic* to? Promise me you’ll never do something that stupid again.” I wipe snot from my nose on my sleeve and nod my head yes. “I want to hear it.” My throat is still sore so it’s hard to speak, but I know I have to. “I promise.”

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We’re driving back from a movie that was about three different affairs a man had over the course of his life. The first was when he was a teenager and began to see a married woman. The second was when he was married and began to see a teenager. The third was during his second marriage with someone his age. The cinematography and acting were incredible, but I couldn’t get past the plot. My skin began to crawl as soon as the protagonist started monologuing about the “essence of an affair.” I’d barely said a word since the end of the movie.

Bella has asked me a question. “Sorry, what was that?” She glances over at me while we’re stopped at a red light. “What did you think about the movie?” Knots tie themselves together in my stomach. “I, uh…” I fall back into the whirlpool of my thoughts. “It was good.” The light turns green, and Bella hits the gas, “I liked the uncle guy. He was like the only regular dude in the whole movie. Everyone else was just extremely horny.” I know that it’s not going to stop unless I say something.

“Bella?” She turns down the music playing. “Yeah?” A thousand words run through my mind, and I can’t say any of them. “Andrew?” I make myself speak, “Why didn’t you tell me you and Frank dated?” She glances over at me, and I stare at my feet. “I didn’t think it was that important. It was in high school; we were babies then.”

“Yeah, I just...”

“If I’m being honest, I didn’t think Frank would even remember me. We went on a couple of dates and then he... He didn’t want to date me and went out with another girl, like, the next week.”

“So, he broke up with you?” I know how ridiculous the question is, but the words are out before I can stop them. She looks at me incredulously, “Andrew, what are you talking about?” I turn to look at her, “I wouldn’t worry if you’d just told me.” Her voice gets higher, “Jesus, so it’s my fault that you’re jealous of someone I haven’t talked to in years?” Silence fills the car. Questions swarm in my mind, but I resist the urge to ask them.

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“I’ll be there in thirty minutes, I’m all the way across town.”

“Don’t make me remind you about the position you’re in again.” The line goes dead.

I had managed to navigate the conversation without Ricardo noticing the gaps. I was simply trying to make it through the call without having my life ruined. The first thing I really want to do is change into clean clothes and wash my face.

I start the car and drive to a nearby park with a public restroom. There are only a few cars in the parking lot and there’s only a man throwing a frisbee for his dog to catch. I rifle through the clothes in the backseat and find a shirt and a pair of gym shorts. My hand hits something hard

and I find a yogurt container at the bottom of the pile. I open it and it's filled with small purple pills. *Oh god, how much did I spend?*

I shake my head and put the container back, rushing to the bathroom where the smell of stale urine fills my nostrils. The floor and walls are stained and dirty in the particular way that public restrooms are. The mirrors have the expected scratched graffiti that I always try and fail to read.

I put my face under the sink and press down on the top of the faucet. The water pressure is extremely high, and I feel the weird tickling sensation of thin spouts of water being shot into my face. I roughly scrub my face with my free hand, periodically looking in the distorted mirror. I press my hand against the soap dispenser, and nothing comes out. After a few more minutes I am cleaner and I change into the clothes I brought, awkwardly trying to avoid actually touching the floor.

I step out into the daylight and open my trunk to put my bloodstained clothes somewhere less conspicuous. A bus whines to a stop in the nearby street and I see the advertisement plastered on the side. It shows the starting lineup of the city's professional basketball team and reads:

THE GAME OF THE CENTURY

I get back into the car and look at the notes I wrote myself as the pressure of the task ahead of me mounts.

There's a knock at the door to the apartment. Bella's out of town visiting some friends. I open the door. Ricardo stands, looking out of place in his suit and sneakers. "Come in. Uh, do you want anything to drink?" His expressionless face turns toward me. "No." We walk into the living room, and I invite him to sit on the couch. Ricardo sits with his back straight as if he wants to minimize contact with where I live. He exhales loudly, "I don't normally do house calls." I nod my head, unsure of what to do. "I ask for payment up front."

"Oh, yes. Of course." I go to the kitchen and grab an envelope with cash. "Here you go." He takes it and puts it in his back pocket without looking inside. There's another pause and he nods his head. I begin to count the number of times he blinks. "I've only ever done this at the doctor's." He pulls out a small plastic bag filled with purple pills, takes one out and puts it on the coffee table. "Do you have a pen and paper? It'll be the same process that Dr. Shlatz does, just simpler."

I grab my journal and pen from my nightstand in my room. Ricardo checks his phone and distractedly explains the plan, "Take a pill, and then instead of all the pictures, sounds, and smells, you just write out what happened." I grab the pill and examine it, "It looks exactly the same."

Ricardo stands up to leave. "Wait, writing by itself will work? I won't forget the wrong thing?" He gives a dismissive snort, "The only reason why docs do that whole song and dance is to make it feel more official. You don't need to do a reenactment every time you want to remember something? Just take it and if you forget something on accident, I'll refund you." He walks himself out the door.

“I told you I was done after last time.” Ricardo is in my apartment, sitting at my kitchen table with a glass of water in front of him. “Andrew, this could be the last time you ever have to do anything for money. That’s the type of profit we are talking about.” He’s in a suit in contrast to my sweats and t-shirt.

“You said it yourself, the guy is a psychopath!” Ricardo leans closer to me, “You’re wasting the biggest fucking opportunity of your life. I *need* you to do this with me. He is the only one who is crazy enough to place bets that large.” I get out of my chair and pace a few times. Ricardo’s tone changes, “I’ll give you as many Blanks as you want.” For some reason anger wells up inside me, “I don’t want your fucking drugs, Ricardo. I told you I’m done.”

He leans back in his chair and looks out the window. “I already told very important people that we were going to do this. I can’t back out.” I lean against the sink counter, “Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t do it.” He looks at a spot on the table in front of him and pulls out a small black journal from his coat. “This is yours, right?”

Fear shoots through my body and I grab it from the table. “Where did you find this? I’ve been looking for it for a week.” Ricardo looks at me, “I thought for sure you were buying some for Frank, but no. You’re running out of pages.” I sit back down and thumb through the pages. “What is this about?” Ricardo snatches the journal back from me. “You are going to do the job.”

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I’m driving on the freeway to Ricardo’s apartment trying to focus my mind on what I have to do. The radio cuts to an advertisement for the game this Friday and I immediately shut it off. My phone rings and I look at the caller ID. It’s Bella. I reach for the phone, holding it for a few moments before picking it up. I don’t have a new enough car to connect to Bluetooth, so I always end up putting my phone on speaker and holding it near my face.

“Hey Andrew. I was just calling to see if you got to the hotel okay? I know you said you weren’t going to be able to talk much, but I was getting worried.” *The hotel?* I look at the blue sticky notes still hanging on the dashboard and find nothing helpful. “Uh, yeah, sorry. Got here okay. The trip wasn’t too bad. I was just really tired last night.” I put the phone in my lap and stretch to grab at the fallen notes, just barely getting a hold of a few. “Did they really have to send you *all the way* over there?” I flip through them and find two with red ink. One reads:

*Bella – work trip in San Diego – working with branch
there on project – back home saturday*

I fake a laugh, “It’s just a few hours away. You’re so dramatic. I’ll be back on Saturday before you’ll even miss me.” She makes a noise of dissatisfaction. “Alright, but don’t be surprised if I’ve replaced you with a small dog or an army of cats.” I almost laugh genuinely this time and the guilt begins to seep in. I look at the GPS on my phone and start switching lanes to make an exit. “You know I’m allergic to cats.” I look at the other sticky note. It reads:

*FRANK – mental health break – needs some of your
work for project – ANSWER HIS CALLS*

Bella says something as my mind wanders and I answer automatically. “Sorry. My bad.” Bella laughs. My phone buzzes again and I see that Frank’s on the other line. *Shit*. “Don’t apologize for having allergies.” I take a moment to come back to the conversation, “Okay I have to go, they need me. Love you.”

“Alright, go tell the future you little robot.” I’m able to laugh this time and we say goodbye.

A white pickup truck nearly hits me as it suddenly switches into my lane. I slam on my brakes and my phone flies out of my hand and smacks against the dashboard, dropping to my feet. The phone keeps ringing and I scramble to pick it up while not running into anybody. It stops as I finally pick it up and my stomach drops. It immediately begins to ring again, and I answer.

“Frank, sorry I-”

“Andrew, we had an agreement: you answer when I call. I don’t want to be an asshole, but you know the position I’m in right now.”

“I’ll pick up next time I promise.” He sighs.

“Okay, thank you. I’m sorry, I know you must be going through it right now too.” There’s a tense pause.

“What did you need?”

“I was looking at your model for the new policy and had some questions about how you weighted the variables.” I breathe a sigh of relief and quickly answer all of his questions.

“I still can’t get over how you’re able to do that. As soon as I shut my laptop, I forget everything I’ve worked on.”

“I don’t know, it just always sticks around for me.”

“Do you realize you’re a genius?”

“I don’t think a genius would need to take time off.”

“We’ll be able to survive without you.” I tell Frank I have to go and hang up just as I pull into the parking lot of Ricardo’s apartment complex.

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“Let’s just try it one more time.” Bella sits across from me at the table in our apartment with a mug of coffee in front of her. The morning light softens her blank expression. Her shoulder-length hair refuses her halfhearted attempts to straighten it as she yawns. She rubs her eyes and steam from her cup floats gently toward the ceiling. I swallow the piece of toast I’ve been chewing, “Why is this so hard for me?” I take my plate to the sink, rinse off my hands, and then tighten my tie. I take a deep breath and turn around to face her, “Alright, let’s do it.” She finishes taking a sip of coffee, clears her throat and sits up straighter, her face becoming serious.

“Andrew, besides having the best hair in the office, why do you deserve this position?”

“He wouldn’t say that! It’s got to be realistic.” She tries not to smile.

“I’m trying to lighten the mood!” She resumes the facade, and this time makes her voice a low rumble, “Andrew, what makes you a good project lead for the new policy we’re developing?” I take a deep breath, “I’m efficient, accurate, and, and, always have every detail in mind when it comes to work.” She nods slowly pretending to mull something over, “Leading a project takes strong interpersonal and communication skills. What about those?” A spasm of anxiety races through my chest. I breathe again, she gives me an encouraging nod and then resumes her stern demeanor. “Although, although I’m not the most talkative, I have what it takes to coordinate the necessary meetings.” Bella pretends to look at some papers, “Hm. Well, thank you for your time, we will get back to you soon...”

Bella completely drops the act. “Good job.” She smiles and then yawns for a long time. I realize how tense I am and force my shoulders to relax. I say the words over and over again to myself. This is the fourth time we’ve practiced.

I sit back down at the table and start putting on my shoes. “Hey, if you don’t get the spot, it’ll be okay.” I walk over to her, and she leans into me. “You don’t think I’ll get it?” She shakes her head no, “I think you’ll get it; I just know how you get.” I stand back from her, “How do I get?” She looks at me slightly confused, “I heard about the motorcycle policy you messed up for months.”

“I didn’t mess it up. The model was perfect. I just misinterpreted the instructions I was given.” Bella rolls her eyes, “You’re proving my point.”

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“I don’t want to go to MIT!” It’s my last semester in high school and I just received the last of my acceptance letters to universities. I’m standing in the doorway of my mother’s home office. She’s doing paperwork at her desk with her glasses perched at the tip of her nose. The room is dark except for the light of her lamp. “Don’t raise your voice.” I bite my tongue to keep from yelling. “I told you when I applied that I didn’t want to go.”

She continues to flip pages back and forth and her pen barely slows. “You aren’t going to waste your father’s money. MIT is where you have the highest probability of finding a career that will support a family. It’s the best option.” I run my fingers through my hair. “I just want to be normal for once.” Tears start to come to my eyes. “I’m eighteen, I can choose where I want to go to college.” She puts down the pen and looks at me. “You’re just going to throw away everything your father and I have done for you? After everything we’ve given you? Piano

lessons, tutoring, private school all your life, and this is how you say thank you?” Her voice has been growing steadily more strained.

“I’m grateful, really. I just want to go to a normal school. Please, mom.”

“You’re going to MIT.” Tears start to run down my face. “You can’t make me.” She turns herself toward me, closes her eyes and takes a slow breath. “Alright, go where you want.” My heart leaps and I start to walk toward, arms outstretched to give her a hug. “Thank you, mom, I-”

I embrace her and she remains still. My heart sinks to the floor and I lower my arms. My throat feels tight. She turns back to her paperwork and begins writing again. “You’re wasting your potential.”

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I pace back and forth across the bedroom. I stop and turn toward my nightstand, and then resume pacing. I still can’t stop thinking about it. Sometimes the scene plays out from beginning to end and I relive exactly what happened. Sporadically, singular moments repeat over and over as I imagine what I could have said. My mind plays out the same possibilities ten, twenty, a hundred times and I know that this isn’t helpful. I’m fully aware that I can’t outthink something that’s already happened, but still my mind wears on.

The fan above me spins and the chain that hangs from it clinks against the glass around the bulb. Either from a fault in the wiring or the bulb itself, a weak orange light fills the room, too dim to see clearly, but bright enough that my eyes never adjust fully. The lamp on my nightstand glows a much more soothing soft white but is too small to fill the room. My plain black journal lies on top of the nightstand, a pen placed neatly next to it.

I walk over to my nightstand and open the drawer. Inside is a small plastic bag with around twenty purple circular pills. I take one out and set the bag on top of the nightstand. I hold

it over the lamplight and the mix of lighting almost makes it look like a piece of candy. I put the pill down and begin pacing again, but almost immediately pick it back up as the thoughts return.

It's not that serious, I don't need to take this. It was just a dumb mistake. I tell myself all of the things I know people would say to me. The scene plays again, and I speak aloud to the empty room, "It doesn't matter, no one cares except me. It doesn't matter, no one cares except me. It doesn't matter..." I repeat the words again and again. I go to the kitchen, fill up a cup with water and take the pill.

I pick up my journal off of the nightstand and begin writing every detail I can remember and everything I would have done differently. A warm fuzziness overcomes me and the light in my room reminds me of a comforting fire. I write as quickly as the thoughts come, always behind. I fill one page, then another and on my third page I begin to slow. I start to read what I have just written and at first, it makes the thoughts start again, but by the third or second reading the words look strange to me.

I understand what the words on the page are telling me, but it's as if someone else had written it. I read it again, this time genuinely confused. This is something that could have happened to me. Did this happen? I put down the journal and pen and close my eyes. I take a deep breath. I feel as if I was recently scared by something, but I'm not sure what. I lie down on my bed and soon sleep comes to me.

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I have a duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a backpack over the other as I stand in front of Ricardo's apartment building. I type in his apartment number into the keypad on the wall and after a few rings the door buzzes and I walk in. The entire marketing scheme of the complex is catered to the type of people who have money and think they can buy themselves into being

interesting. Everything in the lounge areas and on the walls is “vintage” and “retro” while remaining as clean and polished as a five-star hotel.

Strong colored geometric patterns make up the carpet and wallpaper and the lighting is the timeless twilight of a casino. The elevator is new but appears ancient and even has the collapsible metal fence in front of the door. I always get a bit paranoid riding it, so I’m almost relieved when I see that it’s out of order. Then I remember Ricardo lives on the sixth floor.

I find the stairway and begin the vertical trek. After the first flight I’m breathing hard. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself.* My body feels like it’s been replaced with a paper model. I make it to the third floor, and I’ve already sweat through my shirt. *You’re so weak.* I pause on the landing of the fourth floor and drop my bags. I lean against the wall, panting and extremely conscious of my lack of athleticism. I wipe the sweat from my face. *Only two more flights.* I shoulder my bags and struggle on as my head begins to feel light. The fifth flight goes on for an eternity and as I reach the top, I clumsily drop my bags, stumbling forward. I collapse against the wall, darkness encroaching at the edge of my vision. Nausea hits me and I crumple into a crouching position. I hear whispers of familiar voices and a montage of images flashes before my eyes: I’m crying in front of a piano, I trip Frank and he falls on his knee, my boss thanks me in a meeting, Bella winking at me. *What is happening?*

I slowly catch my breath and the images and voices subside. I open my eyes and see a small pool of blood on the floor. I touch my nose and my hand comes back red. I hold my shirt to my nose to stop the flow, while I put my back against the wall of the landing and sit, trying to take long, slow breaths. Waves of panic begin to hit, and I wipe my shaking hand on my pants to fish my phone out of my pocket. I call Ricardo, “You better be here. Wait down the hall. I’m finishing a deal.”

“Hello,” my voice comes out weaker than I thought it would and my breathing has not slowed, “I... I’m stuck on the fifth floor. I need... help.” With my eyes closed I see the strange whiteness of being lightheaded. “What do you mean stuck? You better not be pulling something.” My hands feel extremely heavy, and I have to focus to hold the phone up to my ear. “Just... come.” A darkness deeper than the shade my closed eyes provide overcomes me and I hear my phone hit the ground.

I’m sitting with my feet in the sink in the kitchen of my childhood home. I’m five or six and my mom is cleaning my skinned knee. “This is going to sting.” She pours hydrogen peroxide over the torn skin, and I flinch. I’ve only just stopped crying and the tears start pouring out again. She rubs my back in a small circle and hums gently. “This is why I told you not to play with those kids.”

Frank is teaching me how to make spaghetti sauce and I’ve been tasked with cutting tomatoes. I awkwardly, but dutifully chop away while he whizzes around the kitchen doing ten things at once. “Wait, what’s her last name?” Frank has a thermometer in his mouth, so it comes out muffled. “Johnston.” Frank stops rolling meatballs for a moment and rubs his nose with the back of his hand. “I think I went to high school with her. We went on a couple of dates.”

My hand slips and I cut a gash into my left index finger. Blood starts pouring onto the tomatoes, and I stare in shock. *You idiot.* “She seems nice, I’m glad you two hit it- Holy shit Andrew!” The thermometer clangs to the ground. He rushes over and pulls me over to the sink. He grabs a handful of paper towels and makes me hold pressure on my finger.

I'm sitting across from a man in a white lab coat with salt and pepper hair. He's lanky and a missed meal away from being too gaunt. His desk is covered with manilla folders and loose pieces of paper are scattered sporadically. A few picture frames face toward him and a small name placard displays in gold letters: Dr. Michael Shlatz.

"Mr. Meno, the medication is quite safe. You see every time you recall your memory-look at figure A." I look at the pamphlet in my hands. There's a cartoonish picture of a film crew recording a scene of someone being laughed at. "You see, every time you recall a memory, your brain has to reconstruct it. It's as if your brain cells are acting it out and recording it. It then goes back into storage slightly differently. The medication simply swoops in and," he waves his lengthy hands around in front of him, "make sure it doesn't get back there. It also inhibits the formation of new memories for a short time, so you don't remember what you've forgotten." He taps his temple knowingly.

On the back panel of the pamphlet there's a long list of possible side effects listed in small black print. "And the memory we discussed is okay? I'll be able to get rid of it?" Dr. Shlatz adjusts his glasses and interlocks his bony fingers. "Embarrassment is a specialty. Of course, we will run through your medical history, but I don't foresee your little recital being much of an issue. I'm glad you're starting small. I always say that even pebbles make the load lighter." He gives me a big smile.

—

After the basketball game Ricardo had invited Frank and me to get drinks, though a part of me was sure that he was more interested in Jennifer and Chelsea (the girls Frank sat next to). This suspicion soon diminished as with every passing minute after the game, Ricardo became more and more reserved.

We were the only ones left at the little table, Frank and the girls had gone to play darts. Ricardo insisted on buying everyone's drinks but seemed otherwise unenthused. I had nearly exhausted every option for small talk within the walk to the bar and had only learned that he worked as a drug rep at a pharmaceutical company and that he had gone to college on the East Coast. I have the unfortunate combination of severely lacking conversation skills and an inability to sit in silence.

My salvation came to me when I had asked him about betting. Suddenly, a portion of the wild exuberance he'd shown at the game returned to him. He talked for nearly five minutes without interruption and all I had to do was nod my head here and there. After a pause, I realized it was my turn to speak, "You know it's not that different, from the math perspective I mean. We learned a bit about how Vegas makes odds in school."

"What do you mean?" He seems almost annoyed that we could be similar. "I mean that the only difference between the math I do to see how likely someone is to lose their car and the math that determines how likely a team is to win a game is that for insurance you stake something in case of potential loss and in betting you stake something for potential gain." He stares at me and his brow furrows slightly.

I hear a cheer and Frank comes rushing back to the table, Jennifer and Chelsea trailing behind him. "Andrew! Dude! I got the job!" He embraces me and I can smell the alcohol on his breath. The girls laugh and cheer. "What job?" My stomach sinks as I already know the answer. "I'm going to be the project lead! Hank just texted me. I'm not supposed to tell anyone yet, but I had to tell someone!"

I fake a smile and cheer with him. Ricardo buys another round of drinks for everyone and within a few minutes, Frank has managed to get onto the small stage to sing karaoke. I stare at

my drink as he loudly sings. *Just be happy for him.* I never told him that I'd applied for the position.

—

I'm standing across the room from Bella and Frank. Frank had thrown a dinner party to celebrate him getting to lead the team for the new policy. The din of conversation makes it impossible to hear them. Jealousy shoots ice through my veins and my stomach begins to churn. Frank says something, grins, and takes a sip from his wine glass and Bella laughs and touches his arm.

I start to walk toward them, but people keep walking in front of me and I wait for them to cross. I see Bella step closer to Frank and put her hand on his chest. He sets down the wine glass and takes her into his arms. I start to push past the people, but as soon as I get past some, more crowd in. The entire room is filled with people walking quickly and their voices keep rising in volume.

Frank leans down and kisses Bella and I charge headlong into the crowd. As I shove my way forward, a piercing ring fills the room, and the crowd disappears. I stumble forward from my momentum and trip. For a split second I see the corner of my mother's desk rush toward me, and I hear my skull cave in as it meets my forehead.

I gasp awake as the piercing ring makes my head feel like it's being split apart. I had set Frank's ringtone to be the loudest it could possibly be after missing his call. My phone rings again and I nearly vomit. I open my eyes to fading daylight and answer the phone. "Hello?" I see sports memorabilia on the wall and realize I'm on Ricardo's couch in his apartment. "Hey Andrew, I'm with Jingmin here and he had some questions about the work you did with Robert a few months ago."

I start to sit up but collapse back down to being prone as nausea hits me again. I take a deep breath and respond without thinking. The answers come easily, but I deliver them haltingly. Frank comes back on the line, “Hey are you doing okay?”

I turn my head and gasp as I see Ricardo sitting in a chair looking at me. He waves and I close my eyes again. “Yeah, yeah, I’m doing fine. Thank you for letting me take this week off... I hate leaving you guys at such a... c-crucial moment.” The line grows silent for a moment, “I just hope you’re letting yourself rest. Just turn off your brain for a little while.” I quickly say goodbye and hang up the phone.

“Are you going to be able to do the job?” Ricardo’s voice shows no emotion. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I... just haven’t been sleeping well. Most of the work is done, I just need to tune some things.” He blinks and leans forward to rest his arms on his knees. “You realize I’m your dealer. You don’t have to lie to me.” I breathe through another wave of nausea and don’t respond. “I got your things from your car. If you leave this room or contact anyone about what we’re doing, I’ll post the journal.” The doorbell rings and he gets up to answer the door, frustratedly muttering about addicts. The only thing besides gambling that animates Ricardo is selling drugs.

As he walks to the door, he calls over his shoulder, “Somebody stole all my Blanks, but they keep bothering me to buy some.” *The pills*. Panic rises in my chest, and I glance around the room for the yogurt container. I see my duffel bag and remember that I packed the container in there. Ricardo cracks the front door open, and I hear his voice become slightly more stern than usual. “I fucking told you already, Miles. I don’t have anything right now. Someone stole all of my product.” There’s a short pause and I hear Ricardo again, “Well how do I know it wasn’t you, you fucking *tweaker*?” I can’t make out the response, but I can hear the voice on the other

side grow louder. Ricardo's voice lowers to the point that I can't understand it and then the door shuts.

Ricardo walks back into the living room, sits down in the chair again, and with a loud clunk places a handgun on the table. My eyes grow wide in fear, and I scramble to sit up. *He knows*. I see him look at me and he grins slightly, "Scared? It's my form of insurance." He gives a small laugh at his own joke. I can't stop staring at it and he rolls his eyes. "If I was going to shoot you, I wouldn't have blackmailed you." He gets up and tucks it into his waistband. I settle back into the couch and nod, my heart beating furiously. Ricardo sits back down and looks me in the eye, "Are you ready to rip off a psychopath?"

—

"I can show you right now. Pull up the betting site you usually use." Ricardo shakes his head in disbelief and reluctantly opens CasinoKings.com on his laptop. I pull out my wallet and hand him a hundred-dollar bill. "Okay bet twenty-eight dollars on the Angels." Ricardo turns to me. "They have been losing this whole season." I gesture at the bill I just gave him. "Alright, it's your money. Now what?" I check the information on my phone. "Okay now pull up EZbetz.com with a Z... two Z's. Okay now bet seventy dollars on the Rangers." Ricardo clicks loudly and sets the bets. "And?" I reach over him and put the two sites side by side.

"How much do you stand to win if the Angels pull off an upset and win?"

"A hundred and twelve dollars."

"How much do you stand to win if the Rangers continue to dominate and win?"

"A hundred and twelve dollars... Holy shit."

"Congratulations, you just spent ninety-eight dollars to make a hundred and twelve. It's called arbitrage betting; the basic concept has been around forever."

“This doesn’t make sense, how...?”

“CasinoKings thinks the Angels are more likely to win than EZbetz does and vice versa for the Rangers, so, even accounting for the cut the sites take, we can make a profit by betting on both sides. If the Angels win that’s really unlikely so our twenty-eight dollars makes us a lot more. If the Rangers win that’s pretty likely so it takes seventy to do the same thing. Either way we win more than we staked.”

Ricardo looks at me with the aliveness that only comes to him with betting, “What affects that margin?” I start cautiously, “If you want to make money off of it, you have to bet a lot and finding a bookkeeper who takes a smaller cut would help.” He starts to grin, and I start to worry. “You ever place a bet with a psychopath?”

—

“Oh, fuck. Oh my god.” Frank looks at me with wide, panicked eyes. He keeps reaching out his hands and then lowering them. “Dude I’m going to take you to the ER. You’re not gonna fucking die in my dorm room.” I roll to one side of the small bed, curling into the fetal position. I gasp, “Call... ambulance...” My stomach feels like it is tearing itself in half.

I waver on the edge of consciousness, and Frank’s voice sounds miles away. “Andrew, where is the pain? I know it’s your stomach, what side? Does it hurt when you cough?” He asks what seems like a dozen more questions and relays my answers to the dispatcher. “Okay they said they’d be here soon.” I hear how scared he is in his voice and feel him stand next to the bed again.

After an eternity the paramedics come into the room, and I am surprised by how nonchalant they are. They ask me a lot of the same questions as the dispatcher, and I answer in between gasps. I nearly shriek as they lift me onto a stretcher and cart me out of the room. For

the entire ambulance ride I alternate between feeling like nothing is real and the undeniable reality of pain.

I ended up having “the most thoroughly burst appendix” that the doctor had ever seen. I call Frank and he picks up almost instantly. “Dude are you okay?” I update him and he breathes a long sigh of relief. He laughs, “You kept telling me it was just the hot wings you ate. You were so sure!”

“Hey Frank, could you not tell anyone about tonight?” Frank laughs again and then is silent, “Like, at all?” I feel the familiar tension of knowing how pathetic I sound and the inability to stop myself from asking. “Yeah, I just don’t want people talking about it.”

“But it’s such a great story!” I start to dig the nail of my index finger into my thumb. “Frank, please.” He pauses, “Yeah. Sure man. I won’t tell anybody.” My shoulders relax, “Thank you.” He quickly finds a reason to hang up the phone.

—

I’m scrubbing a particularly stubborn bit of cheese off of a plate in our kitchen with a sponge. Old jazzy love songs trickle in from the living room. Bella leans against the counter behind me sipping a glass of wine from dinner. “I think tonight was a success, Mady said she had a really good time.” My shoulders relax. This had been the first time we had hosted people from both of our friend groups in our apartment. “I hope so, I feel like an idiot for forgetting that she has Celiac’s.” I triumph over the cheese and put the plate in the dishwasher. I start scrubbing the next plate. “You’ve only talked to her a couple of times; it was an honest mistake.” I focus on the dishes, thinking over the night. “It just sucks that I can remember stupid stuff, but when it’s people or words it doesn’t stick.” She comes up behind me and wraps her arms around me. “It

could be worse. You could be like me and forget everything.” I realize how red my face is. She kisses the back of my neck and lays her face against my back. “You worry too much.”

I put down the sponge, rinse my hands off, and dry my hands on a towel. I turn to face Bella and put my arms around her, leaning back to look into her eyes. “It’s my specialty.” She playfully pokes my chest. “Stop that. My friends love you.” I take her hands in mine, “They wouldn’t if I sent them to the hospital.” She starts pulling my arms back and forth to the beat of the music coming in through the doorway. “You don’t let go of anything do you?” Our dance comes to a stop. “My job is based on the fact that the past is the best indicator of the future. It’s helpful to remember.” She turns to grab her glass and takes her spot back at the counter. “So, what, you just keep a spreadsheet of everything wrong you’ve ever done?” I walk over to lean against the fridge across from her. “It would be hard to draw meaningful statistical conclusions from a data set like that, but it could be a useful indicator about the *types* of mistakes I make.” She glares at me. “You’re kidding. Please tell me that was a joke.” I look at the floor. “Uh, yes. That was a hundred percent a joke. Ha.”

“I’m dating a large, handsome calculator.”

I chuckle and begin slowly sliding down the fridge. Bella takes a sip of her wine, “I want to argue with you, but you only ever listen to your mistress.” I’ve finished my slow journey to the kitchen floor and Bella’s looking down at me and I cock an eyebrow at her.

“The one true love of your life.”

“What?”

“Math.” I shake my head with a smile. “Tell her I’m pissed that she makes my boyfriend hate himself for offering someone bread.”

“I just feel bad about it.” Bella puts her glass down and sits across from me. I’m looking at my shoelaces. She scoots closer to me. “Hey.” I look up at her. She’s smiling. “Get over it.” I laugh. “No, I’m serious. You’re the only one who cares. Get over it.” I laugh again. She scoots over and lays her head in my lap. She grabs my cheeks and squishes them so my lips stick out. “Say it: no one cares but me.” She lowers her voice to make an impression of me. I try to get it out but can’t keep from chuckling. “Say it!” I try to escape her grasp while trying to say the words. “No one cares...” I pull her hand away. “...But me.” I lift her head in my hands and kiss her lips.

“Twenty odd years of baggage wiped away in a night. You should pay me.” I lie down beside her and she weaves her fingers into mine. We are quiet for a long time. I stare at her as she stares at the lights. She looks at me and we both look back at the ceiling. We talk about nothing important for a long time.

—

“Fuck!” I hear something hit the floor and slide into the living room through the doorway and jump. I look up from working on my laptop and see Ricardo stomp into the room and pick up his phone. He looks at me, “How can a team that’s fucking ninety-nine percent to win choke in the fourth quarter?” I hold back my immediate answer. “It’s... Statistics describes probability...” He looks down at his phone and I see him only barely contain a spasm of anger.

Ricardo takes a deep breath, “I’m going to get a new phone.” He grabs his keys and slams the door on the way out, not even bothering to threaten me. It’s Thursday and I’m working on the models for the championship. All of Monday I was barely able to work on anything because of my head. Luckily, Ricardo has a large assortment of prescription migraine medications. I was at least able to get the desktop setup in the living room to scrape data from the internet even in the fog of the medicine. Tuesday and Wednesday disappeared as the work in

front of me consumed me and I nearly forgot that I was being blackmailed. My phone buzzes.

It's Bella:

miss you

the army of cats is well trained and blood thirsty

buy me a souvenir

I respond:

Miss you too! Work is still crazy. I'll buy you a snowglobe even though it doesn't snow here.

Guilt turns my stomach over and I close my eyes. *You fucking liar. What if she knew?* I look at my duffel bag and resist the urge to walk over to it. "No one cares but me." The words feel hollow as the numb pall of apathy settles on me. I don't have enough time to deal with this, so I halfheartedly promise myself to quit after the championship. I know the voice won't stop by itself. More texts come in from Bella:

i miss your face

by that I also mean your body

by that I also mean sex

My chest feels tight, and the anxiety grows quickly until I'm staring blankly at the screen in front of me, my mind a chaotic mess. I used to struggle for a lot longer, but now I walk over to the duffel bag and grab a single pill from the yogurt container. After it had escaped Ricardo's

notice the first time, it felt too risky and too obvious to move it. *You're pathetic.* I think of all the times I've made myself smile to hide the truth from Bella. *Liar.*

Ricardo has digitized my journal and made it so that unless he checks in, it will be sent to everyone I know. I grab it off the bookshelf and turn it over in my hands. It feels strangely light and small for being the reason I'm here. As I hold it, I think of it in the hands of Bella, Frank, my mom, and my boss. The thought thins the air, and I can't seem to get enough breath.

I worry that Ricardo will freak out if he sees that it's missing so I get some paper and a pen and lock myself into Ricardo's bathroom. Taking a seat on the toilet, I put the pill in my mouth and start writing.

—

"I don't care how safe it is. You can't just erase yourself." Bella resolutely puts down the shirt she just folded. We're sitting on the floor in our bedroom surrounded by laundry. "I wouldn't be erasing myself. Just the bad stuff." She picks up a pair of my jeans.

"I can't believe you went already." I continue separating the piles by color. "It was just a test. We decided on the piano recital I told you about." She looks down at her hands. "I haven't thought about it since. I... It feels great, actually."

"Andrew, that's a part of you!" She pushes me on the shoulder. "It's not a big deal." She stops folding, "Stop acting like this is normal!" She rubs her face with her hands, "I- I don't like parts of my past, but I don't know who I'd be without them."

I shrug, "Maybe you'd be happier." She glares at me and then her expression softens, "It really scares me, Andrew. My mom is like that, she just pretends like everything's fine all the time." I walk next to her and hold her hand. Tears run down her eyes. "It really scares me."

“Hey,” I squeeze her hand, “I won’t go, okay? I won’t go anymore, I promise.” She looks me in the eye and her face becomes determined. She solemnly extends her pinky finger. I laugh and she jabs it at me. Her voice is small, but strong, “Promise?” I link my pinky with hers and give her a kiss. “Promise.”

—

Why am I here? This was a question I often asked myself at parties, but the question had not stopped sounding in my ears from the moment I walked through the door. Ricardo had won big on a bet and immediately chose to throw an impromptu party. This mainly meant large amounts of alcohol and loud music.

I look around the room and see a strange mix of people, half coming from Ricardo’s drug rep background and the other half coming from his gambling and party life. I stand in the corner and sip from a red cup, alternating between a deep desire to leave and hating that it is impossible for me to enjoy this. I see Ricardo barreling from group to group laughing and cheering with people. He sees me, waves excitedly, and walks over.

“You came! Andrew, Andy, And-man. Y’know,” He takes a drink from his cup and lowers his voice, “I normally don’t hang out with people I deal to, but under all that.” He gestures vaguely at my person. “I think there’s a fun person waiting to be released.” He laughs heartily and pours whiskey into his cup. “Plus, you use your magic to make me money.” He reaches into his pocket and hands me a small plastic bag with pills in it and winks.

“Go home you fucking buzzkill!” I open my mouth to respond, but he’s already walked away to another group. I look around and quickly make my way out the door. As I open it, I hear someone step back and make a noise of surprise. I look up and see Frank with a pretty girl behind him.

“Andrew?” *Shit*. I force myself to smile and go to hug him, “What are you doing here?” He gives me a confused look and gestures at the girl. “We’d just finished dinner when Ricardo sent out the text about the party and I thought I’d swing by.” They’re both dressed nicely. I wave at her and give a weak smile. “Yeah, I was just going home. I might go in early tomorrow to work on some of the analytics.”

Frank nods, “I thought you told me you and Ricardo had a falling out?” I shrug, “I guess he wanted to extend the olive branch.” There’s a long pause and the girl behind Frank speaks up in a small voice, “Let’s go in?” Frank turns his head quickly toward her and smiles, “Yeah, be prepared to talk about drugs in every way you could think of.” She giggles and Frank looks down at my hands.

“See you tomorrow.” I nod and the girl waves with a smile, “Nice to meet you!” I respond in kind. I hear people shout Frank’s name as he makes his entrance. I make my way down the brightly lit hallway and press the elevator button. A chill runs down my spine as I realize I’ve been holding the pills in my hand the whole time.

—

Frank looks at me, his eyes are narrowed. “Why do you still talk to Ricardo?” I look away from him at the laminated menus on the booth table. “Why do you care?” I glance and he’s still glowering at me. “Why do I care? What type of question is that?” He pauses and I stare at the middle of the table. “I never thought that when I told you about Dr. Shlatz that you would...” His voice falters. “That I would what?” I act confused and for a moment I can tell that he almost believes me.

—

I hold the plastic bag over the edge of the bridge and close my eyes, counting down from ten. When I get to zero, I open my eyes and see that I'm still holding it. I curse and my breath fogs in the cold. I bring the bag back over the edge, turning to walk and I slip on a patch of ice and stumble forward, losing my grip on the bag. Dozens of pills spill out on the cold concrete. One slips over the edge, and I watch it as it plummets into the freezing water. I take off my gloves and start to pick them up with freezing hands.

—

“Can we talk about this later?” Bella is putting earrings on in the bathroom mirror. “I don't want to have to report to you every time I have a conversation with Frank.” I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, “I don't want a report... I just... I don't know why I'm like this, but I just get anxious.” Bella starts putting on lip gloss, “Well, it makes me feel like you don't trust me.”

I run my hand through my hair, “I trust you; it just feels like I've told you this and you don't even try to make it easier for me.” She pauses and looks at me in the reflection, “I'm not going to cheat on you. I don't know what you want from me.” She finishes in the mirror and grabs her purse. I get up and hand her keys to her.

“Frank is going to be there. I wish you would just come.” She starts making her way to the front door of our apartment. I look at my laptop, “You know I'm trying to be project lead. I have to take every overtime opportunity I get.” She fixes her hair in the mirror by the door.

“Every time I talk to Frank, it's about you anyways.” I feel distant as my body seems to freeze in place. “I'm sorry. I... I don't know what to do.” She grabs my hand, gives it a quick squeeze and opens the door. “I should go. I'm already late.” She's already turned away and the door shuts in front of me.

—

I wake up sitting on Ricardo's toilet with the pen and paper on the tiled floor. I yawn, rub my face, and look in the mirror. There are bags under my eyes and the face I look at seems miles away from the person I am. Exhaustion, deep exhaustion settles in, and I wonder what would happen if I simply stayed here.

I'm in a gambling addict's apartment helping him rip off a psychopath. I'm too tired to laugh at the absurdity. I can't think of the last time my life felt real, the last time it didn't feel like I was watching someone in my body. I hold up my hand and watch the fingers move one by one.

I hear the door open, and fear snaps me out of my thoughts. Scrambling, I pick up the pen and paper and rush out of the door but pause before going out. I walk over to the toilet, flush it, and then wash my hands, making sure to dry them poorly. I take a breath, open the door, and try to act as nonchalantly as possible.

Ricardo looks up from a phone as I walk in, packaging strewn around the coffee table and his face impassive once more. "Hey Ricardo." I put the paper in my backpack and throw the bag back onto my pile of things in the living room. My laptop has locked itself, so I type in the password as I sit back down to work. Ricardo puts the phone down, sits back against the couch, and folds his legs. I can feel his gaze and the sound of my clicking and typing fills the room.

"Do you always go to the bathroom with pen and paper?" My heart jumps into my throat and my hands cease to move. I slowly look up to meet his gaze, "You're my dealer, I don't have to lie to you." He stands up and starts gingerly pacing toward the door. "That's true, but there have been a few things I've been confused about." I feel a sweat break out across my body and my voice almost gets caught in my throat. "I'm doing what you've asked, I'm almost finished."

“You know I was beginning to think you might have actually quit this time. We haven’t seen each other in a while and by my count, you should have run out by now.” I slowly close the lid to my laptop and place it on the table. Ricardo glances at me but continues to pace in front of the front door. I scramble for words, “I-I have been trying to quit. I made them last a lot longer this time. Th-that was my last one, actually.”

“I didn’t even want to do all this bullshit with the journal anyway. I was beginning to think that we could be real partners with your math stuff and my connections, but you wanted to back out. And now you have the balls to double cross me? I guess you can never tell what a *junkie* will do.” He spits the word out. He stops pacing and calmly reaches to the back of his waist and pulls out the handgun. My entire body tenses and I can barely breathe. He reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a blue sticky note, walking closer to me with the gun aimed at my chest. He hands it to me, and I can immediately tell it’s my own handwriting, it reads in red ink:

RICARDO - LEAVE THE YOGURT IN THE FRIDGE

THURSDAY LEAVE BEFORE 5pm!!!!

I resist the urge to check my watch. “You don’t think I’ve seen shit like this before? People writing notes to themselves before they pop a Blank. What’s happening at five and what fucking *yogurt* are you talking about?” I start breathing fast, “Ricardo, I swear I don’t know. I’ve been taking so much... I didn’t write that.” He’s swaying back and forth on his feet. “I know this

is your handwriting!” He punches me with the gun in his hand. I reel back and crumble into the couch as pain sears my face.

Tears flow from my eyes and I hold up my hands in front of me. “I- I don’t know who I was when I wrote that! I don’t know why I would write that!” He grabs the black journal off the shelf and throws it at me. “It must be in there, then, right? That’s where you would have written about it.” My stomach churns as nausea hits me.

“Please, don’t make me read that... Please Ricardo.” My sight becomes a small slit as my eyes swell. “Open the journal and tell me what’s going to happen!” I realize the warmth dripping from my nose and touch my face. Blood covers my fingers, “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Open the journal, Andrew.” Tears pour down my face and I taste a mix of salt and iron on my lips. I open the journal with bloody hands and turn to the last entry. I frantically turn back and forth, “There are three missing pages. I don’t know where they went. I swear I don’t know.” Ricardo pauses, thinking, “Don’t fucking lie to me Andrew!” I let out a cry, “I swear, I swear. Please, Ricardo, just check the copy you made. Ple-” Ricardo walks up to me and puts the gun against my head.

“I’m not going to ask again.” With a shaking hand I reach for him. Ricardo backs up with a look of disgust and checks his watch, “Read what you just wrote in there.” He gestures to the bathroom. I quickly scan the loose pages, “It’s just about lying to Bella. I- I feel terrible for lying to her. I told her that it was a work trip. I-” Ricardo cuts me off, “Read the last one in the journal.” I flip the pages and blood smears on the pages.

I begin to scan through it and Ricardo shouts, “I said read it! Word for word.” I look at the unfamiliar words in my handwriting, “I-I...” A sob escapes me, and I see a drop of blood fall from my face onto the page. “I feel like I’m a puppet when Bella and I have sex. I just move the

strings around and do what I know she wants. I lie and lie, and she doesn't figure it out. I-

Ricardo grabs his hair, exasperated, "That's enough! God, you're fucking *useless!*"

Ricardo paces back and forth, muttering to himself and my sobs slowly quiet as I gain a small measure of control over myself. I wipe the blood, tears, and snot coming out of my face on my shirt. There's a knock at the door and Ricardo looks at me with panicked eyes. A man's voice calls out in a sing-song voice, "Ricardo! Your friend has come to visit!"

—

I'm sitting on the edge of an examination bed and Dr. Shlatz is shining a light in my eyes. Even with the elevation of the bed he has to hunch to look closely at my pupils. He murmurs to himself and makes a mark on a clipboard. "Yes, everything is looking great. How have you been feeling? Any side effects?"

"No nothing much. I've had some dreams and headaches like you expected but nothing severe."

"Great, that's great." I open my mouth and he uses a tongue depressor to examine the back of my throat. After that he uses one of those instruments that is a magnifying glass with a light to look into my ear canal. "Ah, I had almost forgotten. To answer your earlier question with more depth, the medication is limited out of an extreme abundance of caution. In all my years of memory erasure I've only had one or two cases where the patient suffered any serious harm." He starts hitting my knee with a rubber tool. "I'm operating at the very edge of modern science, and I believe I'd be doing a disservice to the field if I did anything too risky. You only need one or two amnesiacs to ruin the public's perception of your work."

He places both hands on my head and begins feeling both hemispheres of my scalp simultaneously. "Has that happened before though? People forget everything?" He looks at me for a moment and then laughs, "No, no, of course not. You would have to take an absurd amount

to risk amnesia. The only serious negative effect that we haven't discussed that came up in the trials- and that's the trials, mind you- is very difficult to verify." He begins to strap a metal head piece onto me.

"Some patients began to remember things that didn't line up with their autobiographies. Of course, when you ask someone to write down the story of their life, they can't say everything, but there seemed to be some discrepancies." He walks away from me to start typing notes into the computer. "It was as if new memories were being generated out of thin air. For the patients, they were just as real to them as if they lived them, even when the new memories contradicted the old. In the most extreme case, one man claimed his wife was alive even when he had the scars from the car crash that took her life."

"So, he forgot his wife died?" Dr. Shlatz turns to look at me, "No, no, that's the strangest part. He still remembered the car crash vividly. Yes, I know, it's confusing," he gives me a sympathetic nod. "I told him that his wife died many years ago and all he did was give me a strange smile and say, 'I know.'"

—

"Andrew, let go of my arm." Bella looks scared. "Please, give me the journal." She drops the journal into my hand, and I let go of her. I walk to the other side of the room and lay my head against the wall. I realize how heavily I'm breathing. "I wasn't going to read it, Jesus. What the hell do you write in there?" Panic starts to set in and my mind races for something to say.

I take a deep breath and try to force tears to come to my eyes. "Bella, I'm sorry. I don't..." I turn around and she's looking at me with her arms crossed in front of her, more holding herself than being standoffish. "Andrew, tell me what's in there." I slide down the wall

until my head hangs between my knees. “I still don’t know how to talk about them.” I’m able to make myself cry and after that it comes easily.

Bella’s tone grows softer, “Who are you talking about?” She takes a step toward me but doesn’t come nearer. The lie comes easily, “My... my parents.” I heave a louder sob and grab my hair with both my hands. She walks over to me and kneels by my side. I instinctively reach for the journal and hold onto it with one hand. “Hey, hey, it’s okay.” She rubs my back in small circles.

“I’m not going to look at it, okay?” I nod and hold onto her, the tears coming effortlessly now. “I’m not going to look at it.” I nod my head and try to make myself stop crying, but the sobs keep coming. I collapse into her, still holding the journal.

—

Ricardo looks at me with wild eyes and whispers, “Grab everything that’s yours and go into my room!” I look at him blankly and he points the gun at me again, “Go!” We scramble and start haphazardly grabbing things, trying to make as little noise as possible. There’s a louder knock. Ricardo and I move most of my things into the bedroom, “Give me your phone. It’s fucking Mark. I just need him to be gone before the first investors get here.” I nod and notice how much I’m shaking. I sink to the floor and darkness starts to fill my vision.

Ricardo smooths his hair, tucks the pistol into the back of his pants, and shuts the door with a deadly glare. The doorbell starts ringing incessantly until Ricardo’s muffled voice calls out, “What the hell is it? I’m coming, I’m coming.” I crawl to the door and lean my ear against it to hear and the sound of a man’s voice comes through.

“Lost your phone, Ricardo?”

“Good to see you, Mark. I broke it today, actually. Lost a bet.”

“I get a little nervous when you don’t answer my calls. You know how I am.”

“What the hell? Do you really need *that*?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

I realize that my laptop is in the room with me. I wipe the blood from my hands, quietly grab it and log in, sitting with my ear pressed against the door again. “Yeah, I don’t know what it is, but I really think they have a shot. I’m feeling a bit lucky about it.” I open up the messaging app we use at work and frantically type a message to Frank.

Before I hit send, a loud crash echoes in the small space. *The computer*. I’d left the desktop on throughout the week, constantly running simulations and scraping data from the internet. It had just become a part of the room so much that I hadn’t thought of it. I wipe more blood on my shirt and start typing the message again:

**in big trouble at ricardo’s, don’t call cops
really dangerous man probably w/ gun
dont know whats happening .**

I hit send and throw the laptop onto the bed as I hear footsteps approach the door. Despair begins to sink into my bones and a sense of finality overcomes me. I hear the strangely happy voice, “I just want to meet your friend,” the door opens. I stare up at a large bald man with features that are somehow both soft and intimidating.

“Ah, Andrew, I thought I told you not to be here at five.” Mark smiles, steps over me and grabs my laptop from the bed, throwing it violently on the ground. It lands with a thud, and he crouches over it, bringing the metal bat in his hands down on it repeatedly until it’s in pieces. He keeps viciously beating the pieces of metal and plastic, muttering curses. “I-I... I-... Don’t r-

remember.” He glances around frenetically. “That’s what you’re good at,” he reaches down and pats my head. I flinch. “Where are the Blanks?” I weakly lift my hand and point at my duffel bag. He unzips it, finds the yogurt container, and looks inside.

“So, you followed half of my instructions!” He shakes almost a dozen pills into his hand and steps back over me. He roughly grabs me and drags me into the living room where I see Ricardo duct taped to one of the chairs. His face is bruised, and bleeding and duct tape covers his mouth. Mark lifts me up on the couch and I’m too weak to sit up straight.

“It’s gonna be just like all of the other times we’ve met.” He starts pacing rapidly across the room. “You’re going to walk,” he looks at me and corrects himself, “I’m going to put you in that bathroom and you’re going to forget everything about me. And you” He lunges over to Ricardo and smashes his foot. Ricardo screams in pain. “You are going to help me disappear.”

Mark walks over and drags me by the collar into the bathroom, throwing me onto the floor. “I- I need my journal and a pen.” He smiles excitedly and nods, “I’m giddy! No more bodies to hide, no more witnesses.” He runs over to Ricardo who is still writhing in pain and squishes his face. “Unlucky for Ricardo that I need him to remember.” He runs back to me and speaks into my ear with a saccharine voice, “As for you, you’ll wake up in a hospital and it’ll be like this never happened.”

He kicks me on the floor, and I hear pills clack against the tile, and one pelts me in the face. I cough and sputter, trying to catch my breath. Mark gives a gleeful cackle. Grabbing the pill with a bloody hand, I look at it in the light. It almost looks like a piece of candy. I sit up, leaning against the cabinets of the sink and call out to Mark, “I did what you asked. You’ll give me my journal?” He gives a too-wide smile, “Don’t you worry about a thing!” He crosses his heart, “Your secrets are safe with me.”

The door slams shut, and I sit in the silence for a few moments. I look at the pill in my hand again and swallow it. After a few pages, my hand doesn't function anymore and I'm barely conscious. My pen slips out of my hand and the journal falls beside me as darkness envelops me.

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I open my eyes and see the white walls and white light of a hospital room. My body feels hollow and heavy at the same time. My lips are chapped, and my hands are cold. "He's awake." Frank sits in a chair that's backed against the wall to the left of me. I slowly turn my head toward him, wincing with pain.

"How are you feeling? Do you need anything?" He gives me a concerned smile. "I'm a little thirsty." He gets up immediately, "I'll be right back." I frantically search through my mind to piece together what happened, but my thoughts are sluggish.

Frank walks back in with a small Styrofoam cup, "Here you go." He sits back down and watches me as I take small sips of water. "I really was going to go to San Diego, but I decided just to get a hotel here instead." Frank looks at me with a peculiar smile and then rubs his face with his hand. "He sent the journal to me. I read it."

—

Bella sits on the right side of the hospital bed, holding my hand and looking out the window. Her thumb traces a small circle across my fingers. I had been awake for a few minutes but had stayed silent. Whenever I saw her head begin to move, I would close my eyes until I thought she was looking out the window again.

I squint my eyes open, and her thumb stops moving, "Hey." My entire body still aches, and I have to look away from the bright light outside. I stare at the hand holding mine. I clear my

throat, but my voice is still hoarse, “Hey.” The silence is only broken by my loud breathing. I can feel Bella looking at me and the sun warming my skin.

“I didn’t read it.” I turn to look at her, squinting my eyes against the light. She has dark circles under her eyes. “Why?” She looks down and bites her lip. Her thumb starts to trace circles on my hand, and I watch the gentle movement. She takes a slow, deep breath.

“I don’t know. I think I’m scared. Right now, all I’m sure of is that it wasn’t bad enough to make Frank hate you.” She snuffles, “I wanted permission to still let myself love you and I think that was enough.” She brushes back her hair over her ear and seems to sit a little straighter. A look of determination settles on her face. “But I can’t be with someone who hides from me.” Despair starts to fill me.

“I’m going to stay with my parents for a few days. Frank is going to take care of you while I’m gone.” She lifts her other hand and I realize she’s been holding the journal in her lap the whole time. “We’ll talk when I get back.” She removes her hand from mine and places the book in my grasp. “I can’t love you if you don’t let me.” Her firm demeanor breaks as she stands and her jaw quivers as tears come to her eyes. She quickly walks out of the room, and I look at the black, bloodstained cover in my hands.

—

“You have to read it.”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t even know what’s in it.”

Frank and I had gone through the same conversation at least five times and he had quickly devolved from coddling to matter-of-fact by the third time around. I’m sitting on the

couch in the living room of Frank's apartment with a blanket over my lap and four pillows positioned around me, while he cooks in the kitchen. He's a natural nurse.

He brings over a bowl of soup with a side of homemade bread and then grabs a serving for himself. I'd barely touched most of my food while he wolfed down his own creations happily. "I ruined it."

He wipes crumbs off of his face and becomes serious, "It's all your fault." I'm unsure by his tone if he's asking a question or making a statement.

"Who else?"

"What about the drug dealer that blackmailed you?"

"I shouldn't have been working with him in the first place."

Frank puts his food down and walks over to the desk in the corner of the room. He picks up the journal and looks at it. "It's all your fault then. Not even the person who held a gun to your head gets a piece. It's all yours." Dread begins to rise in my stomach. Frank walks back over to me. "I don't want to read it, Frank."

He thumbs to a page and reads a bit. "What if you killed someone?" My breathing quickens, "Please don't read it again. Please stop." He looks at me, "What if you killed someone and I was still here?" I glance back and forth between the book and his gaze. "You wouldn't be." He shakes his head, "No. Just imagine it with me. What if you murdered someone and I still made you soup and let you stay with me?" I've recovered enough to feel the full rush of anxiety, "Stop messing around Frank, I wouldn't take it. If I killed someone just turn me in, please." The weight of the possibility starts to crush me.

He reads the page again and suddenly tears come to his eyes. My stomach turns over in me, "Frank just tell me if I did it or not!"

“Would it really stop you if you didn’t? You’re just waiting, you’re practically begging for me to tell you that you have blood on your hands! You won’t take any other answer!” My hands start to shake, “Is there blood on my hands?” My voice is low and weak. Frank’s lip trembles, “Andrew, I’m so sorry.”

Confusion mixes with the fear and I gingerly accept the book as he hands it to me. “What are you talking about?” I can see the shape of handwriting in the corner of my eye and the fear begins rising into panic. “Just read this page, please.” I glance down and before I realize what I’m doing, I’m reading the words on the page.

“That’s cool right?” I nod my head numbly at Frank. He smiles and runs out the door. He was running late for dinner with Allison Moore. I walk over to my bed and lie in it face-first. I’d been trying to work up the courage to ask her out for a month. He did it just because he could. I know from the look in his eyes that he can tell. He knows I like her and that I’m just too much of a coward.

I look up at Frank and he grabs the journal from me and flips over a few pages.

Frank’s drunk. “You’re not gonna get anywhere if you keep being a bitch about it.” His words slur. I fake a laugh, “I’m just taking my time.” He giggles, “I’ve already been to second base with your girlfriend and you haven’t even kissed her.” Ice covers me and I go numb. “Shut up.” He laughs harder, “It’s true!” He takes another drink, “It was alright. She’s not that special.” He roars with laughter. I don’t say anything else and hate myself for it.

“It’s all yours...” He sits beside me, and I stare at the strangely familiar shapes of the words. “It’s all *your* blood.” He crumbles and puts his face in his palms. “It’s okay.” My body goes numb, “I... I forgive you.” He whirls around toward me, “Don’t say that! Don’t just use those fucking words and keep blaming yourself!” He grabs my shoulders and shakes me. “You don’t get to take all of this! Let me have mine!”

“I should have-” Frank cuts me off, “Stop! There’s enough in there for you. You can’t say you forgive me if you don’t even blame me. You won’t even let me apologize before you rush to cover it up.” He shakes his head and returns his face to his palms. Frustration suddenly builds in me and flames into rage.

“I do blame you! As long as we’ve been friends, I’ve just been the fucking cool calculator you got for class. You show me off to people and use me for homework, but you don’t care! I’m just an audience for your stupid projects to make yourself more interesting! I...” Frank has tears in his eyes. “Frank I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-” Frank shakes his head again and a strange smile breaks across his face even as the tears fall.

—

I carefully set the mug down on the table and glance up at Bella as she takes another sip. We are sitting at the kitchen table in our apartment, and it feels strangely alien, as if the life we used to live here was a long time ago. We had already worked through the small talk and now the air seems heavy.

We stare at each other and then look away and then stare again. I hear her clothes rustle and the soft thumps of the mugs being placed on the wood of the table. My chair creaks far more than I remember it ever creaking. I take a deep breath and am only able to sigh again. Every time I try to think of what to say, there seems to be no way to say it right. I take a deep breath.

“I’ve been scared for a long time. Ever since I was a kid, I didn’t really know what to do when things were bad, so I’d just ignore it. I never forgot it, I just tried not to think about it. Everyone was able to just live their lives and I was always just trying not to think. That’s why I…” The words are still hard to say, “That’s why I started taking the pills. It was the only way I could forget, and I thought that I’d be able to finally just exist. To just be somewhere without having all of it hanging over my head.” Bella’s staring at me and I look down at my hands holding the mug. “I never killed anyone, and no one did anything horrible to me, I just couldn’t put any of it down. Day after day, it just added up. By the time we started dating it was this huge weight and I thought it was going to get better, but I could tell you could feel it. I couldn’t get out from under it, and I hated how it infected everything.”

I put the journal on the table from my lap and immediately feel the urge to take it back. Anxiety claws at my stomach, but I ignore it. “It never went away, even when I forgot things. I kept trying to find what was wrong with me. I just couldn’t believe…” I can’t find the words again, “When you only listen to what you’re afraid of, it always comes true.”

I cover my face with one hand, speaking slowly, searching for every word. “I have lied to you and put you through hell these last few days and I don’t know what to do with that.” I remove my hand and Bella is looking down at the table. “The words seem too small, but I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I feel hope and despair mix strangely in those words. “I don’t want to hide anymore. I’m so tired of being scared.” I start to breathe faster, and Bella wipes her eyes. “It makes me want to run but reading you this is the only way I think I’ll be able to let go. And I can’t,” I feel my throat tighten, “I can’t keep holding it.”

She nods her head and wipes her nose on her sleeve. Tears trace their way down her face, and one hangs off of her chin. She nods again and her voice comes out in a small, quiet cry,

“Okay.” She laughs suddenly and I look up in surprise. She wipes more tears from her face,
“Okay.” I open the book and look down at the first page, glancing up at her. I begin to read
aloud.