



DISLOCATED.

A Novella

MAX ANDREW DUBINSKY

Dislocated.
by Max Andrew Dubinsky

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For Matthew

Thank you for trusting me with a great idea.

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and for helping make this book possible.

“Loneliness is the first thing
God’s eyes named not good.”
- John Milton, poet

PART I

I WONDER IF MARS IS NICE THIS TIME OF YEAR

The sun breaks through the windows this morning with a blistering intensity I'm not even close to appreciating. I wrap the sheets around my head, squeezing my eyes shut tighter than usual—bracing for some sort of impact like I'm on a plane plummeting from thirty-seven thousand feet. Or simply bracing for the impact of a new day, which sometimes can be just as bad, if not worse.

I've slept with my shoes on again.

It seems a decibel or two quieter this morning than I'm accustomed.

Insomniacs travel on an entirely different audio frequency than the rest of the world.

A dog barks in the distance, chasing cars, chasing tails.

Or it's right outside my window.

My pillows smell of stale cigarette ash and sweat. I press my nose deep into them. A painful reminder of last night shoots through my face. I'm on my feet.

I clomp across the dusty carpet, dragging my naked body to the bathroom, careful not to trip on my laces. Last week in a moment of pure and utter inspiration, I moved the refrigerator to the bedroom, providing one less reason for me to leave this immediate area. I grab a beer on my way to the toilet, pressing the chilled aluminum to my swollen eyes. I drink, chasing painkillers. Upon inspection of my reflection, I determine the blackness of my eyes is consistent with my undesirable ability to remain awake—and having recently been hit in the face. I can't recall a thing after that goon rearranged important parts of my insides with his fists. I regard my split and swollen lips with the respect they deserve, and wonder how it's possible my wounds have already scabbed over. I poke my lip and wince. I think about shaving, and think about letting my beard grow just to spite Valerie. I pick dirt from beneath my fingernails, and contemplate how long I could go without showering, while everyone everywhere else is contemplating marriage and babies and cancer and how to send a man to Mars.

"Leslie?"

I tap on the bathroom wall like I'm in the business of cracking safes or hanging pictures.

Leslie seems to be running a bit late this morning.

I check my watch. Rub my wrist. What happened to my watch? Valerie bought me one for Christmas.

I probably smashed it with a hammer.

I wonder if Mars is nice this time of year.

"Are you there? Leslie?"

I knock on the wall, but to no avail. This isn't like her.

Leslie runs Buttercup Bakery on Market Street. She inherited the shop from her mother, and along with it, the hours. I've been working the C shift at the grocery three nights a week, and we tend to rendezvous in our designated bathrooms around the same time every morning. The other two days I get a reprieve from the C and work the B shift, but I still get up—I'm always up—when Leslie's due in because since Valerie left, my tryst through these poorly constructed bathroom walls is the closest thing to a real relationship I've had in months.

Leslie worries I might be depressed. She's convinced herself (not that I mind and not without my help) that I'm some sort of undercover cop—a Private Dick surrounded by cigarette smoke and beautiful dames and big brutes running surveillance on some crooks in our very own apartment building. Her very own apartment building. How exciting for her.

The most interesting things about me aren't even true.

If Ricky wasn't so desperate for the help, he'd keep me on graveyard five nights a week. The only customers perusing the aisles are overweight single mothers demonstrating poor parenting skills, and the local high school riff-raff high from copious amounts of cannabis looking for a midnight snack. And if Ricky and I hadn't gone to school together, he wouldn't have done me the favor of bringing me on at all. Something about hiring ex-criminals.

"At least I amounted to something. Everyone else in this town is permanently stoned, drunk, or managing a grocery store."

"Fine." Ricky handed my application back to me. "Ex-cons then. We don't hire them."

This was a ridiculous accusation. The closest I've ever come to being a convict was the weekend I spent in an overnight cell in New Orleans. And if the three hot meals a day, the Internet access, the pornography selection, and the hour of recreation time I received each day was any bit of foreshadowing on prison life, I was prepared to plead guilty. However, be it a higher power, guardian angels, predestination, or a perfect demonstration of the incompetence of our judicial system, my case never went to trial. I was free to go.

With my ear to the wall, I listen for the sounds of hairdryers and faucets. I imagine Leslie wearing only her underwear whenever she tells me about her day—black lace trim or pink bows depending on my mood. Sometimes I see her wiping off makeup or sitting on the toilet, but I think she's got a shy bladder. I wonder if she even wears makeup to work since she works alone.

Buttercup Bakery makes a dynamite chocolate croissant. Leslie's mother really got it right.

We pass each other in the hall every now and again when she's got a day off. It turns out I'm a terrible conversationalist without the comfort of a plaster wall in my face.

I'm nervous for the rest of the day. Life has progressed without incident—uneventful and right on time—since Valerie deemed my return to this pathetic excuse for a town entirely inappropriate; a hindrance upon her mental healing. Unfortunately, I'd just signed the lease, and Ma had already filled my fridge with baked goods and cans of root beer, which is (her words, not mine): "...just like drinking real hooch." I can only assume my entire day is now thrown off since Leslie's gone AWOL.

I think about calling Valerie, hanging up when she says hello.

My clothes are in a pile next to the bathtub. I step out of my boots, and step on my jeans, feeling for a cell phone in the pockets.

I brush my teeth in my best attempt at being human again.

I consider going back to bed and pretending today never happened.

When my phone turns on, it informs me of three new messages. The date on the phone reads Wednesday. This must be a glitch or a network error. I could have sworn it was still Sunday last time I went to sleep.

I rinse my mouth, spitting blood and two teeth into the sink.

Last night after work, some prick knocked me around over at The Salty Grog in a less than classic case of mistaken identity. (I was content to lie low and drink in the corner until every last girl in the place looked like Valerie, and I might stand going home with one of them.) All I heard was,

“There you are, you son-of-a-bitch...” from behind before my face met a pair of overly accusatory fists.

After all the confusion and misplaced rage, the testosterone-fueled rhinoceros actually bought me a drink, put his arm around my shoulders, and offered me a ride home. I’d never seen the guy before, which is unusual for a town like this. Not that I’m anybody who knows everybody but it’s hard not to make yourself known around here. He was looking for some guy named Adam and Adam and I apparently carry ourselves in very similar fashions.

“From behind,” the rhinoceros kept saying, “you and Adam...” then he’d wave his hand around in a frustrated gesture like one does when they’re at the zoo on a hot summer’s day visiting the monkey cages. Swatting flies he’d say, “I could have sworn...”

My back was to him when he found me. Eddy, the bartender, was telling me about the horse up at the McKaden’s farm. “Dead. Every last one of ‘em.” The McKaden’s live twenty-some odd minutes outside of town, on the edge of the woods that trickle down and cross the border from Pennsylvania. Dorothy McKaden inherited the farm from her father, and they’ve been breeding horses for as long as I can remember.

“Some high school prank,” somebody’s grandfather sitting next to me said. “Devil worshipping miscreants...” he trailed off, drowning his words in his beer as I tried to comprehend the manpower and skill set it would take to properly execute a horse with nothing short of a sawed-off shotgun. I recalled two old ladies carrying bags full of apples and adult diapers at the grocery store, talking about dead horses on their way out while I pushed a train of shopping cart back in. I thought it was an odd topic to be discussing, but didn’t think much of it as I’m not exactly known for my stimulating banter.

“A filthy mess,” Eddy said. “Detectives involved and everything.” I swallowed my beer, and Eddy refilled it without asking. “Not only horses,” he was rambling by then, leaning across the bar on his forearms. Eddy loves a good conspiracy. A plane can’t fly overhead without him telling you about chemtrails, population control, and brainwashing. Pennies jumped from the pocket of his collared shirt, scattering in all directions. He didn’t seem to notice. Every time he finds a penny, Eddy picks it up regardless of luck. “But birds too.” I pocketed some of the stray coins instead of giving them back. “Birds?” I asked.

“Birds that won’t fly,” Eddy said.

“What’s this have to do with dead horses, Eddy?”

“No, no. You don’t get me.” Eddy had gotten close enough at this point, even with the bar between us, that I couldn’t blame anyone for assuming we were star-crossed lovers about to go home together. “Strange things are happening to the animals out here,” he whispered. “I’m talking about birds that won’t fly. Like something in the sky is keeping them on the ground.”

“Sasquatch.” the old-timer mumbled and hiccupped.

I told him there was no such thing. “There are no monsters in our closets, just skeletons.” I nursed my third round, eyes on the door through the mirror behind the bar. Just in case. There are only three bars in this town, and if you stick with the same one seven nights a week, odds are on your side that you’ll eventually find the person you’re looking for—or trying to avoid.

At some point I glanced away from the mirror just long enough to miss the rhino’s stealth approach from behind, and it wasn’t until he finished macerating my face that he realized he’d been knocking in the teeth of some guy who wasn’t, in fact, Adam at all.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Eddy interrupted, my face unpleasantly situated between the wooden bar top and my new friend’s wooden hands. “There must be some sort of mistake here. Will didn’t do

anything to deserve that, did you, Will?"

—Eddy, always thinking the best of me. I'm sure I did something, somewhere, to someone at least once—most likely twice—to deserve such a pounding.

"Will?" someone asked to make sure they heard another's words correctly. I was too busy making sure the spilled beer on the counter wasn't going to waste. So I just said, "Huh?"

"You know this guy?" the rhino asked Eddy, and my skull was set free.

"Of course I do. That's Sue and Ned Scott's son." Eddy said this like it was a common fact everyone should know. Two plus two is four. Grass is green. Water is wet. I'm Sue and Ned Scott's son.

A round on the rhino, and he straightened my jacket, patted my face. "No harm done then, yeah?"

"Yeah. No. Yeah. I think a little harm was done." My teeth felt like a mouthful of Skittles.

Unfortunately, none of this changes the fact that my pearly whites are now falling out of my head at an alarmingly rapid rate for my age.

Looking at my gap-toothed smile, I think about what Adam might have done to deserve such a thing.

I call Dr. Wilmington. I pulled a favor for him a few years back—right before I left town the first time Valerie and I split up. He found himself mixed up in a relationship with an eight-toed stripper in Vegas named Mandy who had an anomalous infatuation for needles, and a big shot semi-pro golfer named Shark. The whole situation birthed around a mistake Dr. Wilmington made back in college, and all he needed was a guy who knew his way around the Internet for a few hours to make it go away. I didn't ask too many questions, just for free dental care for life. I've got bad teeth. Not crooked like a bowl of broken glass, just rotten. Genetics. Ma's had dentures since she was eighteen, losing every molar and incisor before high school graduation. In her Senior Prom photo she's got a gap in her smile, and her date still married her.

I walk over to the window. I stare into a liquid blue sky I swear to God I could dive into from here. I ring the office three times before I get anyone, and all I get is an answering machine. It's Monday morning. Maybe it's a holiday I don't know about. Or Dr. Wilmington is on vacation. I tongue the hole in my gums, tasting copper blood, wondering if this classifies as an emergency—the answering machine politely informing me to contact the nearest ER if this is, indeed, such a thing.

I hang up.

I don't notice the silence or the stillness outside.

But I do notice the birds.

NOTHING MUCH EVER HAPPENS AROUND HERE

Nothing much ever happens around here. Terry Holmes scratched his way to five thousand dollars on a two-dollar lottery ticket three weeks ago, and bought rounds for everyone at Blue Rockne's Tavern to celebrate. Every now and again someone gets divorced, dies in their sleep, falls down a well, has an affair. Mrs. Davidson had triplets last summer when she thought she was only having twins.

Of course, the Canfield Fair comes every September for five days, but if you're not in high school or nine-hundred-years-old, you don't really notice. There's the hot rods that gather on Market Street near the fifties root beer shop the first weekend of every August. Alex Jones married an eighteen-year-old girl last year. You couldn't walk into a hair salon or buy a single slice of deli meat without hearing about that slut Suzy.

And there was that accident on Hopkins Road. Two teenage girls slammed a stolen Honda into a pick up truck carrying twenty-six caged-up chickens in the bed. There were feathers and blood and tiny bits of beak everywhere. The newspaper listed all twenty-six names of every single recently deceased chicken involved. I'm pretty sure both the girls are dead now – from alcohol poisoning years later.

Other than that, things stay pretty quiet around here. The occasional tornado comes tearing through every now and again, and someone loses a house, a dog, or a small child. The Ladderback's nine-month-old son, Phineas, spent two days in a tree after their trailer was lifted thirteen feet off the ground and ripped in half. That was big news for a while. Newspapers said they found him with a smile on his face. I wasn't there.

Stranger things have happened, I guess.

Not here, though.

Definitely not here.

Dr. Wilmington is out of the office. Leslie isn't home. I've got one hundred birds vacationing on my front lawn. And there's a burning sensation between my toes. Something's not right. Could be Athlete's Foot. I don't like it one bit.

I look for some ointment in the medicine cabinet, but it turns out I'm no physician. All I've got in there is a half-smoked soft pack of cigarettes and a single, unopened condom from the nineties. I kept it in a back-pocket wallet for when my queen, the now vanquished Valerie, the Andromeda of my galaxy, decided she was finally ready to commit herself fully to me. Valerie flexed and practiced her Christian values to the best of her ability, until the afternoon her father came home from work and announced he was leaving, moving to Cleveland to be with the object of his desire, Paul. Valerie proceeded to spend the following twenty-four hours having sex with me every hour until my skin turned red, and we developed rashes from all the friction. I should have done the right thing and asked her how she was feeling, told her she should see someone, talk to someone she trusts, but it's hard to do the right thing when you're nineteen and naked. She was my first and I believed she would be my last, so I told myself it was okay I'd left my wallet at home that afternoon.

Before you start jumping to conclusions about me, I'm no more of a sex-addicted maniac than any other warm-blooded American male who can't let go. I simply keep the condom in

question as a reminder of the way things would be today if I'd never forgotten my wallet. I lose everything I touch. I've had to replace my driver's license four different times since I turned sixteen, and I've had my identity stolen twice on account of a misplaced wallet—but I stole it right back, with interest. Ma says it's the creative side of my brain. "You're an artist. Your brother, Russell, keeps a meticulous journal and calendar he can't live without, but I don't even think you know how many days are in February."

"Thanks, Ma."

"Regardless, I love you both the same."

"Yeah, I love you, too, Ma."

I step into the living room, sunlight burning up all my belongings, illuminating the dust I've collected throughout the months. I've got a t-shirt pulled halfway down my head, eyes peeking from just above the collar like I've been buried in sand.

I yank my shirt down, and look back out the window. My apartment overlooks what could be considered a relatively bustling small town neighborhood. It's the only street in town with apartment complexes, and this morning there are no cars. No traffic. No children running screaming from their homes to enjoy a fine summer's day after consuming a breakfast of champions: chocolate chip pancakes and cereal with marshmallows. There's been nothing except that damn dog barking earlier, and even he's found something better to do.

Just birds.

I stick a finger in my ear and dig a little.

"Hello?" my voice reverberates like I'm living in a dark, empty cave. I half-expect bats to come barreling out of my bedroom, so I duck a little.

I scrape a clump of wax onto my jeans.

I lift the window. A warm breeze rushes in. I stare at the birds standing there, mimicking what must be their best impression of their long-extinct cousin, the dodo.

"Hey!" I call out.

Nothing, but what was I expecting here?

I look around for something to throw. I settle on an empty beer can, and drop it into what qualifies as the apartment complex's front yard.

The can startles the birds enough to jump, and even flap their anxious little wings, but none of them take off for the nearest telephone wire. They only squawk their concerns to one another before falling silent, keeping distance from the mysterious can recently introduced into their community.

It's as if they've forgotten how to fly.

The vibration of my cell against the counter shatters this unstable bout of mysterious silence. I pick up the phone. It's not a call. Just a reminder of my messages.

I dial, looking back out the window, and listen.

First message. Received Sunday at one-thirty-seven a.m.

I step into my room, take a beer from the fridge.

Ma wants to know if I've heard anything. She wants to know where I am. "Did you hear it? The helicopters. Your father said it was helicopters." She asks again and again. "The Clarks are here. Kathy says there was an incident at the market. Joe Marshall collapsed. You remember Joe." This isn't a question, and I have no idea who Joe Marshall is. "There's something on the news about staying indoors. They're trying to contain it." She just wants to know that I'm okay. That I'm indoors where the news has told me to stay. "Please call."

I'm mid-sip, lifting couch cushions and over-turning wastebaskets; my interests officially piqued, looking for the remote. I haven't turned the television on in months.

Next message. Received Sunday at two-twenty-two a.m.

It's Dad. He's got more of the same to say. "God damn you, why haven't you called us?" His breathing is hard and labored. "Your mother...she's...something's wrong...I think it was Mrs. Clark..." There's commotion in the background, but I can't decipher it over his wet, lungs-filling-with-water breathing. Until I hear the screaming. It could just be the television. "We're coming over. They're saying something about evacuation...can't make up their goddamn minds..." the line goes.

I kick over the coffee table like it's actually going to help before trudging over to the television itself and clicking it on manually.

Static.

On every channel.

I haven't paid my cable bill since I put all my money on that dice game those college punks play in the basement of The Salty Grog every Wednesday at 4 a.m. That little shit Stevenson told me he was rolling loaded dice, and how many times do you have a run at a sure thing?

He skipped town, and I passed out in a gutter somewhere before I could catch up to him.

The cable bill was the first thing to go after that.

Next message. Received Sunday at two-twenty-six a.m.

"Hey. It's me. Listen. Where are you? Are you leaving? Oh, God. I just need...I just...I'm so scared. Look..." there are tears. Too many tears. I can't make out what she's saying next. And the line goes.

Lines are always going.

My heart stalls. Stops. Starts again.

To hear this message again, press eight.

I scramble for the number eight on the keypad. I can't remember where the hell it is.

"Hey. It's me. Listen. Where are you? Are you leaving? I just need...I just...I'm so scared. Look..."

I hang up; dial. Thoughts frantic. My heart sweating, and stomach twisted in the worst kind of knots.

I am forwarded straight to voicemail.

Hi. You've reached Valerie Anderson. You know what to do.

Beep.

Contrary to your popular assumption here, I do not, Valerie, know what to do at all. Enlighten me.

I look back outside at the birds, at the static on the television, and hang up, deciding to play it cool. I'll just drive by her house, make sure everything is okay.

I grab my jacket. I'm out the door, and there's a wolf in the hallway.

SIMPLY A SIDE EFFECT OF THE INSOMNIA

A wolf. In the hall.

Elucidation escapes me. The aforementioned statement speaks for itself.

At first it's just a dog, right, because, well, a wolf? Please. Someone must have let his or her dog out and forgotten about the stupid mutt. The Allens down the hall, they've got a dog. A monster of a thing. Big as a house. Seriously. So I'm thinking, Bernie is out, again.

Not that I'm scared of dogs or anything.

Russell is allergic to everything from gluten to horses. Fearing for his life, our folks never brought any sort of loveable creature around the house for us to cherish. As a result, I've never been fond of animals, nor had the chance to feel compassion for them.

Not for Bernie.

Not for wolves.

Speaking of wolves, imagine my complete and utter surprise.

And I'm thinking, the zoo. This animal must have escaped from the zoo. The one thing this town has going for it is a half-decent acre of betrayed and caged animals. Then I'm thinking, "No sudden movements," because the last movie I watched with animals on the loose was Jurassic Park. I swear to Christ I count three hundred razor sharp teeth all the way from here, and the thing is still fifty feet down the hall. All right. I get it. I'm impressed. Now shoo.

I have yet to close my door. My hand remains on the knob, my grip coming loose, the brass lubricated with perspiration. I'm making movements so minimal you'd have to observe me under a microscope to see the distance I'm traveling back into the apartment.

My adversary remains steadfast. I consider the possibility I'm being hunted. The beast's sides flex in, flex out, like he's breathing heavy after a hard and devious escape from the local zookeeper's clutches.

Maybe, just maybe, this is simply a side effect of the insomnia.

I blink a few times over and over, and with each shudder of my eyelids the wolf appears even closer. It's as though he's moving beneath strobe lights. I put the palms of my hands to my eyes, pressing them into the back of my head—as deep into the sockets as they'll go without squashing—and I wish the monster away, only to find my vision has doubled, and he's closer than ever before when everything comes back into focus. The hallway seems to bend and tilt as if I'm on a boat lost at sea. The wolf has replicated itself, and instead of reuniting into one as my eyes correct themselves, his halves grow apart.

Either my vision is getting worse inside this nightmare, or my furry friend isn't alone.

I hear footsteps behind me, and for a moment, just a moment, I believe everything is okay. The zookeepers or animal control have arrived, and they'll scold me for not staying indoors as was probably instructed, but I didn't know because I don't have cable and of course that's what my parents were talking about on the phone with all their concern about staying inside. I turn to greet my rescuers and see someone else has, indeed, joined the party. Another wolf emerges from the stairwell at the end of the hall like he's been living here all along, and I'm the one who doesn't belong.

Two seconds, tops, I'm back in the apartment. The wolves make their move. I slam the door and a dull thud hits the other side. ~~A man with less wisdom would simply assume a guest has arrived and answer.~~ I spin the locks fifty-seven different directions just in case the damn dogs learned how to turn a knob or disengage a dead bolt. I jam a chair beneath the handle, wondering where the rest of the pack might be residing. I have no recollection regarding the duration of time I stood dumbfounded with the door open. Another wolf could have snuck right by me, now waiting patiently in the bedroom, lights off, under the covers and big teeth all the better to eat me with.

I move to the bathroom with educated steps, careful not to make noise. I rap on the wall with fingertips, whispering, "Leslie! Are you there? Do not go outside," I say. "Do not go outside. There's a fucking wolf in the hall."

Leslie isn't much for profanity. I think she goes to church on Sundays. But with all due respect, there's a critical degree of seriousness between a wolf in the hall and a *fucking* wolf in the hall, and I'd hate for her to think there's just a wolf in the hall, like it's no big deal at all.

Hours pass. Maybe days. I don't recognize my surroundings. I must have fallen asleep because my back hurts like hell, and I can't feel my ass. I'm hugging the toilet like it's the twenty-fifth hour of my twenty-first birthday.

I don't...feel drunk.

My brain is hazy with the remnants of dreams of wolves and debilitating loneliness. I stand jeans bunched uncomfortably high into my crotch, my t-shirt caught between my armpits and contorted like I got dressed in the dark.

My muscles have turned to wood and I stumble, planting the side of my face into a wall I'm all too familiar with. This is a good indicator I've been here before. The voice of recognition tells me I'm in my own bathroom.

Despite the difficulty of using my body, I feel rested for the first time in weeks. Nightmare-induced sleep is better than no sleep at all.

I've got a mouth that tastes like I've been using pennies as breath mints. I spit thick, dark clots of red and black into the sink. I smile, but I'm not laughing. Two of my bicuspids are still missing.

I twist myself out of my shirt, uncomfortably wet with sweat, and leave it behind on the bathroom floor. Adjusting my pants, I take my cell phone from the pocket. No new messages, but the date reads Wednesday just as it did in my nightmare.

My own personal Groundhog Day.

The sun has set my bedroom ablaze. I use my forearm to block out the light, and feel my way into the living room, where I've left the shades drawn shut. I have ample opportunity here to allow my eyes to readjust to humanity, and figure out where I last put my teeth.

There's a chair jammed up beneath the door.

It takes an hour for me to work up the courage to venture back outside. In the meantime, I pour myself a bowl of cereal and wash it down with a beer, attempt to check my e-mail but the Internet is down, and find what smells like a clean shirt crammed between my bed and the wall. Putting it on makes me feel better about myself. It's a blue button-down, a bit wrinkled. I put my nose in it and swear I can still smell Valerie and her fifty-three dollar shampoo. I think she bought me this shirt on a Valentine's Day when we couldn't last twelve minutes without seeing each other, calling or touching. Any absence of her in my life produced a pit in my stomach large enough to swallow

this planet whole. And when she finally left for good, that pit devoured me but left the world intact. If you've ever come home to find an envelope on your kitchen table with a set of keys and a note that reads with the poetic teenage proficiency of a Dashboard Confessional song, then you know the terminally ill, intolerable existence of which I speak. If we'd been living in Los Angeles, I could understand. But you can't leave someone that way in a Midwest town like this. Here, you risk a meeting just going to the mailbox.

I still have that note. I hold a lighter up to it once a week.

I sit on the floor in front of the door, inspecting the chair, trying to come up with a rational explanation as to why it would be there. Sleepwalking is about the best thing I can come up with. I can't bring myself to listen to my messages; the voices of my mother and father still play themselves with perfect clarity in my head. I'm doing a fine job convincing myself I'm still dreaming. But what of Valerie? And my parents? What if they're really in trouble? When I remove the chair and open the door, what I find next isn't as dangerous as a rabid wolf escaped from the zoo with the potential ability to open doors, but it's enough to warrant the fact that this is turning out to be one shit day.

A PERFECTLY GOOD DAY BEFORE BEING DEAD

I find the body in the foyer at the bottom of the stairs, slumped over and sleeping. Mauled by a wolf? There seems to be a few sporadic bruises on his neck, like broken blood vessels, but I'm not a coroner. In fact, one could argue he was having a particularly perfect day before being dead.

And me, being the good-natured-every-day-Christian-human-being that I am, I nudge him with my boot. You know, just to be certain. When his head rolls from the left to the right like he's just working out the kinks, and his bloodshot eyes pierce my soul with an intensity straight out of hell, I scream. It's more of an automatic regurgitation of repulsion, like finding a spider crawling up your arm. A damsel in distress sort of thing, I'm ashamed to clarify.

"Hello?" I call out in my best attempt at keeping my voice steady. "Someone! Help!" Standard protocol for this sort of thing, really. When it appears that no one seems to be coming to my aid—his aid—I take a moment to gather myself, collect my thoughts.

In no particular order, they go something like this: Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

I recognize the poor fellow as Mr. Phelps from down the hall, even though he's gone gray enough to be an apparition. A split, brown bag of groceries lay scattered about his person: celery, apples, bread, a dozen eggs now scrambled, and a half-gallon of spilled milk now curdled, which, along with his ghostly jowls, putrid odor, and skin color, leads me to believe he's been down on his luck for quite some time.

I decide this is the appropriate time to vomit. I do so, officially tampering with evidence. How long does it take for a body to decompose? I try to recall the last time I caught an episode of CSI. I'm regretting that dice game more and more every hour.

Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay.

Go to Mr. Phelps's apartment and get Mrs. Phelps.

That won't end well. I've never been very good at delivering bad news. I backed over my neighbor's cat, Sampson, when I was eighteen. I paced around the driveway for nine hours and officially took up smoking before I finally worked up the courage to knock on their front door and deliver the news. And this here, this is like, twice as bad.

He's clearly been dead for more than a day. Why is his body still here?

Hands in pockets, I break some eggshells beneath my boots.

I've never had much luck when it comes to animals.

I push the front door open, and three gazelles run across the street into Mrs. Beck's front lawn to terrorize her azaleas.

The sun shines in a cloudless, pulsating blue sky, bouncing off the windshield of Mr. Waterman's vintage Lamborghini next door. The car sparkles as if it's just come off the showroom floor, near

blinding me. The smell of fresh cut grass lingers in the air. Squirrels go about their jittery, squirrely business, scattering in every direction at once. There are birds everywhere. Pecking at the grass, chirping. None of them taking off, flying far and away upon my emergence into their world.

An abandoned newspaper scratches its way across the road.

Summer is here, but no one seems to be enjoying it.

My head doesn't itch, but I scratch through my hair to give myself something to do. The world sits devastatingly still. There's a scary sort of silence begging to be heard this morning.

The gazelles graze the grass and flowerbeds of Mrs. Beck's yard, a widow with no children and no cats and nothing better to do but tend to the azaleas and roses and snapdragons that decorate her lawn. Gazelles. Of course. How normal. How do I know they're gazelles? Because there's a fucking wolf in the hallway, Leslie never showed up this morning, my toes are still burning, and Mr. Phelps is dead and gone in the foyer. I watch, helpless, as the three animals destroy everything Mrs. Beck spent all season perfecting before looking back at Mr. Phelps, believing I've been sorely mistaken and I am going to see him stand up, brush off his trousers and mumble about how he's just taken a bit of a spill, and can I help him with the mess. But he's just a dead as he was twelve seconds ago.

Needing to phone the police, check on Valerie, and prevent a nervous breakdown, I take my phone from my pocket and dial 911, practicing basic evasive maneuvers against the wolves. I wander around back, wondering what exactly I am going to tell our town's finest protectors of the law that won't make me sound stark raving mad. It is here I find my other neighbor, Roger, passed out drunk in the shrubbery behind the complex. I don't normally find him here before noon, but last night must have been one hell of a bender. I've never been so thankful for his alcoholism. Done. Forgiven. For all the times he's knocked on my door at four a.m. asking after a Mr. Habernaro. Asking to borrow a hammer and nails. A teakettle. Seven lampshades and a gun. Black socks with gold toes. Nail clippers and a thermometer.

I put the phone back in my pocket, shouting his name before getting too close. A necessary precaution. A murder of crows escapes with pristine formation from a nearby tree, calling to each other or maybe to me as they drop to the ground to take rest, rather than taking flight into the heavens. Waking Roger from a self-inflicted, alcohol-induced slumber with a vigorous shake or sudden startling is your own funeral. Unlike every other properly intoxicated adult, Roger's hangovers snap him to attention like he's straight out of boot camp, and his upper extremities start swinging as if he's still caught up in the bar fight that ended his night.

When he doesn't immediately respond, I call out again before deciding to proceed to Roger's aid. He's curled into the fetal position, and I wouldn't have been shocked to discover him sucking thumb. In fact, that's preferable to finding him dead—which is precisely how I find him.

I discover the third body of the day in the parking garage, slumped against the steering wheel of the minivan assigned to the space next to mine. It's Mrs. Ross. She's got two kids, James and Jasmine, a dog called Cody, and a husband who works in construction. I recoil at the sight of her, spewing out the same sort of shocked repulsion I did when I found Mr. Phelps. Her porcelain features are bruised and battered, almost as though she were beaten to death right here. I regain my composure and press my face against the glass, scanning the backseat for the children, and my heart slows when I find it empty.

My vehicle isn't much for travel. When I moved back to this town, I purchased a '95 Integra with two hundred thousand miles on it for three hundred dollars and a bottle of conditioner from Wentworth Bellmont, this town's one and only millionaire. He moved here three years ago from upstate New York looking to retire and build a golf course. My father, a barber before he retired, sold his shop to the hair salon moving into town — hence the bottle of conditioner. I slapped on a new pair of tires, and Mr. Bellmont was happy to see me drive off with the car. He stood in the driveway waving until I was out of sight, and probably kept waving while I sat at The Salty Grog and listened to Eddy's theories about 9/11 and the New World Order.

Every time I get behind the wheel, it takes two or three good tries for the engine to turn over, and today is no exception. At least something is going right. On the fourth try she starts up, pull out of the garage, but I'm getting nowhere fast. There's a giraffe in my way.

I'm beginning to think the police aren't going to be any help today.

A CRITICAL AMOUNT OF RED

Valerie moved back into her mother's place after we split for the last time. The heartfelt high school poetry she wrote and left behind, wrecking my ability to breathe, never informed me as to where she went. But it didn't take long for Ma to call and say she saw Valerie at church, and when was the last time I went to church? "You know the invitation to come with us every Sunday is always there, right?"

"I know, Ma. Did Valerie say anything to you?"

"Do you need me to call you on Saturday nights to remind you? Would that help? You know your father and I would love the company."

"Probably not. Are you sure it was Valerie?"

"Pastor Henry always asks about you. When was the last time you saw him? You were maybe fifteen years old. I'm sure he'd love to see how much you've grown up. He cares about you."

"And I care about what Valerie said to you."

"Oh, we didn't exchange pleasantries. But I did run into Viv. She said Valerie was back at home and wanted to know if you were too. I'm not quite sure what to tell people about you. They always ask."

"Just tell them I'm homesick."

"You know there's always a place for you here."

"Thanks, Ma."

The prospect of dropping by to check in on Valerie because I was in the neighborhood doesn't exactly thrill me, but it's a better scenario than finding them as dead as everyone else. Plus she called me after, what? Six months of very intentional silence?

"Oh, please, God, let Valerie be okay." Christian as I may have been raised, I'm not sure God is listening anymore, but it doesn't stop me from praying.

I grip the steering wheel, shaking as if I were stuck in rush hour traffic and running late. "WHAT IS HAPPENING? I AM LOSING MY GODDAMN MIND!" Cell phone in hand again, I have no service. I toss it into the backseat as I approach a traffic light at the top of the hill in my neighborhood. The steering wheel vibrating violently, the engine quiets down. I push in on the clutch and inch forward in first. The car chokes back to life. The light is red, and the brake lights of the car in front of me shine bright. My heart skips. I lay on the horn before getting out of the car.

"Hey!" I call out as I approach. "Hey!" I'm waving my arms frantically. I might as well be guiding an aircraft to its landing. "What happened last night?" I ask even though I'm sure the individual in the car cannot hear me.

I reach the driver's side, and knock on the window.

"God!" I stumble back, falling right smack onto my tailbone. A gray face, mouth agape, stares back at me from the car. I sit on hot asphalt staring back at this stranger until the silence is comparable to what it must sound like on the moon. I realize the engine of the car isn't running.

The driver is slumped back in the seat like a sixteen-year-old who just got his license. I look away from his gnarled features haunting my brain, and twenty yards in front of us is a small two-seater airplane with a blue stripe down the middle, impacted into the concrete. No smoke rises from the engine. The windshield is cracked and coated a reddish-brown. The tail jack-knifed into the air, the plane all bent out of shape at rest in an L position. The door to the cockpit hangs loose on its hinges, drifting in the wind. Two deer cross the road here—as if this scene couldn't get any more apocalyptic—casually approaching the fallen aircraft, grazing the weeds poking up from cracks in the concrete.

Beyond the plane, cars are parked on the sidewalks, with one decidedly resting inside the barbershop where Mr. Dickens used to cut my hair as a child. The glass decorating the ground beneath the vehicle shines like diamonds in the sunlight.

I look back to the ghoulish figure in the car. It's as though everyone in this town but me remembered to drop dead at two a.m. last night. I'm momentarily pissed at the prospect of having been left out of such an endeavor. Why no one included me, I cannot say.

Two miles from my destination, I'm forced to another stop.

Wayward and nonchalant, three pachyderms are crossing Market Street, and I sit here watching like this is the most casual happening in the history of the world. Just another Wednesday afternoon in small town America.

Hang on, Valerie. I'll be right there. But the elephants have the right of way.

Valerie's car is in the driveway. I park out front, in the street, and leave the car running. A quick getaway. I plan to be no victim of the Zombie Apocalypse.

I skip the front door and try the side garage door. Valerie's mother, Ms. Anderson, Vivian—Viv—keeps a key inside a stupid, plastic turtle next to the door. I'm no thief, but Christ, if I was, the first thing I would look for is a stupid, plastic turtle next to the side garage door.

It's dark and damp and cluttered. I wouldn't call Viv a pack rat, but one could say a garage sale or a fire is well overdue. Most of the crap in here belongs to her husband. Ex-husband. I'm not entirely certain if they actually divorced when he left.

For a thousand extra moments I simply listen—for what, I do not know—wasting time, letting my eyes adjust to the dark so I can make my way around Viv's car. I don't know how many of you have ever been involved in a situation as unique as mine, but I can't quite shake the feeling of being watched, followed, and stalked, even as I grow more confident fewer and fewer people are alive. I kick an uncapped metal trashcan full of golf clubs, baseball bats, Frisbees, and footballs. Valerie's younger brother, Victor, is quite the athlete. Valerie and I spent countless hours in gymnasiums and grandstands surrounded by cheering fans while we felt each other up, slipping in hand jobs and blowjobs. I linger here on these memories. I find the cold grip of a wooden Louisville slugger in my even colder hands. I sling the bat over my shoulder like I'm next up to the plate, and open the door that leads into the kitchen.

I should have rehearsed something to say. "Hi. Hello? It's me. The man you despise, yet left a mysterious message for last night. I'm just following up by sneaking in through the backdoor with an erection and a baseball bat."

The lights in the kitchen are off, but the sun seems a few inches closer today than normal. I'm able to see perfectly well while I wait to disintegrate along with the rest of this town.

"Hello?" I whisper, carefully choosing the tiles I'll step on. I've snuck out of this house enough times at 3 a.m. to know the sour spots on the floor. You don't stand a chance in hell on making it

through here undetected with a pair of shoes strapped to your feet.

~~From the kitchen I find myself in a living room entirely un-lived in. This room was solely dedicated to the prospect of having company over, and it was Valerie's favorite place to fool around. She would kiss me here with a passion undetected in any other location. Something about how forbidden this place was—the fact that Viv had every speck of dust, every fiber in the carpet accounted for—made Valerie want to tear the place apart with our desire for each other.~~

I leave the un-living room, a room I never felt so alive in, and check the bathrooms, the office, the back porch. Everything is immaculate, set strategically for show. It was never a wonder to me why Valerie left the day she turned eighteen, so imagine my surprise when Ma told me she moved back. This house was so full of rules and regulations that there was never any place for the children.

Arriving at Valerie's bedroom door, I find it closed and almost knock to be polite, but polite is probably the first thing to go during the end of the world. I turn the knob, pushing the door open with the tip of the bat. I stand at the threshold until the door is fully open—until I can see every corner of her room.

Valerie is in bed, covers off. She's wearing only her underwear, with a t-shirt I'm relatively certain belonged to me in high school. I look away—my gut reaction—as though I've just walked in on her changing. Her closet is open, clothes spilling out as if she'd stuffed everything she owned inside, and then later, opened it like she'd forgotten where she put it all. I let the grip on the bat slip through my fingers until the head touches the floor. I use it to hold myself steady. I take a few steps into her room. I am underwater and sinking fast, a ship forever lost to the sea. There's no hope for me now.

My lips dry, cracking. I run my tongue along them, tasting blood.

Valerie looks at peace. Hopefully whatever happened to her happened naturally and without pain. Overwhelmed with an onslaught of grief and fatigue, I crouch at the foot of the bed, tucking the bat beneath my chin, a slight sway in my stoop.

Noticing the phone gripped in Valerie's hand, I stand, approaching her for the first time in what could be hours since I've entered this room. I've lost all sense of time the way you often do in dreams. I do not touch for I do not wish to disturb. I'm almost fearful that if I did touch her, she would snap back to life, startling me so, and I might just die next.

On the opposite side of the bed: a discarded photograph. Leaning over this body once so full of life, this body I've been inside of, I snatch it up. Photographic evidence of the life Valerie once shared with me. She's glaring in my direction, one eyebrow cocked, and my fingers are pistols, locked and loaded. The look on my face clearly says I swear to God I'd shoot her if I only had a gun.

And Valerie, she's saying something like, "Go ahead. Make my day."

I grip the bat, return the photo. I stand. I swing. The lamp on the nightstand explodes. The alarm clock is next to go. It lets out a shrill cry for help before I pulverize the thing into a million little pieces. I take out the bedposts, then go swinging for the mirror above the dresser, daring the Universe to grant me seven years of bad luck. A crack and explosion of what could be a hundred shattering light bulbs comes raining down around us. I swipe at every trinket, every piece of memorabilia, every framed photograph along every surface, sending them all into oblivion. When there's nothing left to attack, I go for the walls until plaster splatters my face and swirls in the air around us, until I'm breathing in dust and paint and can't feel my arms; until I can't see through the tears and the spit. I drop the bat. I don't even pause to catch my breath. I don't even bother to

say goodbye.

I find the same, sad story in Viv's room, and in Victor's. I leave them undisturbed, the need for going ballistic having subsided.

I try the phones. All the landlines in the house: dead.

I trudge back down the stairs and prepare for the arduous journey of returning home.

But home to what?

I skip the garage, open the front door, and there, a wolf on the porch, lips curled. All three hundred razor sharp teeth appearing to be accounted for, but I'm in no mood to be eviscerated this afternoon.

"Is there nothing else in this town to eat today?" There's a smorgasbord of gazelles and birds around here this afternoon, but somehow I am the easiest target? I'm talking to her like I'm hoping she's learned the art of negotiation since we've last met. My hand is still on the knob, and I am still inside the house. All I have to do is shut the door and this whole debacle will be over with. The house has yet to become fetid from its dead occupants. I am sure there's plenty of food to eat. I can outlast this son-of-a—

The wolf makes her move. I'm not fast enough. This directly affects my ability to close the door hard enough to cut the bitch in half, but it certainly slows her down. She lets out a whimper and a sneeze so human I almost say, "God Bless You."

The stairs are directly behind the front door, so I go scrambling up them instead of running into the kitchen where all the knives are. The beast is on top of me before I make it three feet, her teeth slipping into my shoulder. I scream, I cry, and instinctively roll over, slamming the overgrown mutt into the wall. Twenty teeth slipping through my flesh with the ease and precision of surgical scalpels. I flip back onto my butt. I kick and I thrash and my boot lands right on her snout, but she's too quick, taking a mouthful of my pant leg. I shake and twist, making my way backwards like a crab, but her jaw is a goddamn bear trap. I will not win this unfortunate game of Tug of War.

I bang the edge of my free foot against the stairs until my boot falls off and goes tumbling down. I'm hoping this werewolf will go tumbling after in a game of fetch, but her yellow eyes haven't yet left mine. The undomesticated hound just tugs and tugs, harder and harder, my jeans ripping, her snarling growing louder. I can feel drool on the skin of my ankle, and for some reason I am most disgusted by this. I am about to have a heart attack. I can't make it up the stairs. She's too strong.

I unbuckle my belt, undo my pants. I slip the belt from its loops, and down my pants go, to my ankles and beyond. The wolf stumbles back, mid-tug. I scramble up, my socks making the climb increasingly difficult. I watch as the wolf tears my jeans to shreds in a matter of seconds before she realizes I'm no longer in them.

By the time I get to the top of the stairs, I can already hear this relentless machine slinking up behind me. I take two seconds too long assessing my next move, knowing there is no way out of the house or back to the first floor from here. There are no balconies or roofs outside these windows. I look back just in time to see my new friend arrive, all wild-eyed and smiling. The belt still in my hands, I use it like a whip, screaming like an Indian running into battle, the buckle smacking her right across the eye. She snarls and snaps and bites, jaws closing around the leather.

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