

# **The Gods of Wind**

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1/24/22

~ 016 ~

I pull my phone from my jeans. Two thirty-five. How the hell? Only sixty sad seconds have passed since I last checked. Again, no new texts. I thumb through my messages, as I did a minute ago. *Thanks babe, you'll hear when I hear*, from Mary, is the most recent and it's hours old. Her appointment must have ended by now, so why hasn't she texted? One simple character would end my agony. But I can do this, I can surely do this. Mary will be perfectly fine, everything will be okay. The news I'm waiting for will only confirm that. But if it doesn't? No—not even a consideration. Positive thoughts, like everyone says. And no more checking my phone. I'll feel the vibration on my leg anyway.

Now I just need a distraction, which shouldn't be difficult to find, since I'm technically working, after all. I take a deep breath and lift my glass to eye level. Half-full, indeed. I down my bourbon in perfect sync with the Johnny Cash bass line that's pulsing the air from the corner jukebox. I turn to face the room and am met by an olive face framed by shoulder-length brown curls. Hello, distraction.

"I'm sorry, didn't hear you come in. What can I get you?" I ask and slide a cocktail napkin to her. Coffee-bean eyes pivot up to mine, but she's silent. Then she blinks, exhales, and her lower lip drops from the upper one. The gap lingers like a drop ready to fall from its faucet.

"I'll have a sidecar," she says, and the inflection means I should be impressed. How ironic and mysterious. She probably stumbled across the recipe while perusing used-book stores for manuals on hunting older men. Transparent, but not completely ineffective.

"I've probably made two of those in the last decade. We'll see how my memory serves me." I flash a smile. It's true—I haven't made this drink in years, but I know what I'm doing. "Cognac preference?" I ask.

"Hennessy."

"Perfect."

First into the jigger is the liquor. One, two, three, four—flip of the wrist and into the shaker. Next, a two-count of Grand Marnier. Last, the orange juice—fresh, of course—for a slightly quicker two-count and flip, same as the rest. Like I've done thousands of times. But this time, my left hand shakes the jigger empty, tossing an ounce of juice that bounces from the bar onto my T-shirt and her black halter top.

"I'm so sorry." I scramble to clean up, which isn't easy with the fat tail between my legs. "Not exactly on my game today." I toss her the freshest towel I can find. She dabs at the triangular cutout of flesh just south of her neckline and wanders down and across her chest.

"I must say, that's the first time I've ordered a sidecar and have had orange juice spilled on me." She pauses. "Because . . ." She looks through a coil of curls, her fingers clenched around the balled-up towel still on her chest. "It is . . . supposed to be . . ."

Shit. I catch up.

"Lemon juice. It's supposed to be lemon juice," we say in unison. And there you have it—inattentive service, sloppy build, wrong recipe. I'm sure she's impressed.

The proper ingredients eventually make it into the shaker. With that, it's a vigorous shake, strain, and garnish with a lemon twist.

"On the house."

She holds the drink to her nose, then sips. "It's good." And slides a ten and a five across the bar. "Keep the change."

“I’m glad you like it.”

Curly Brown shifts her attention to the television over my shoulder and the regional satellite loop that’s been running for the last day and a half. “Ready for Logan?”

Before I can answer her, Ron Beidler chimes in from a few seats down, “Logan? That bastard is staggering up the Atlantic like a drunken fool, has been since he got to the Bahamas.” He downs his lager with three dramatic gulps. “And that, ladies and gentlemen, means that somebody’s gonna win the jackpot—the sort of jackpot where God puts your house in a blender, if you know what I mean. My grandfather always said that hurricanes are God making milkshakes. Well, Papa, God’s gonna be making one hell of one this weekend. Maybe he’ll give you a taste, God rest your soul.” His empty mug hits the bar as the exclamation point.

Ron holds no PhD in meteorology, as far as I know. More like one master’s in spewing bullshit and another in filling his hair-covered face with bar nuts and cheap beer. Of course, on this particular occasion, his weather reporting is spot-on. Logan the category-three storm is meandering north and forecast to make landfall anywhere between Wilmington and Richmond.

“Hey, man, can we get two more?” The request comes in a Deep South accent, Alabama or panhandle Florida, from the guy in the Baltimore Orioles hat who arrived half an hour ago with his friend, who hasn’t made a sound since they’ve been here. It’s striking, actually. There’s been eye contact and facial movements that typically accompany laughter, but not a peep. The two of them have mostly stayed near the jukebox and are responsible for Johnny Cash, who is now singing slow and low about a lost love. Their prior selections—modern-day bubblegum “artists” I proudly haven’t heard of—made Ron visibly agitated and made me wonder if I should have checked their IDs.

“I’ve got to ask—I assume neither of you are driving?” Six shots each over five songs should have the room spinning, especially for guys of their size.

“No, sir, we’re staying down the road at the Tidewater.” Orioles Hat points as he says it, but in the wrong direction, and in doing so almost jabs the Mute in the face, who somehow manages to evade the flailing hand and remain perfectly silent. They are sloppy drunk. But not violently or belligerently so, and as long as they’re on foot, who am I to deny thirsty customers another round?

“You got it.”

“Did I hear talk of Logan?” The barstool squeals as Orioles Hat redirects his attention to Ron.

“Sure did.” Ron assesses the pair. “Where are you punks from? You’re about to be ingredients in a milkshake. Which one of you wants to be the ice cream?”

“We’re storm chasers up from Florida,” Orioles Hat says. “It’s been a big pile of nothing this year, so figured this one was worth the trip.” He pauses and looks over one shoulder, then the other. “Who else wants in on this?”

“What are we drinkin’?” Ron asks. Curly Brown declines with a wave and fills her mouth with more cognac, as if to block her tongue from expressing disgust with the fraternal ritual. I find no such reason to judge, and that itself is reason to join. So I line them up and pour four one-and-a-half-ounce servings of chilled Jägermeister. We raise our glasses and, after a short toast by Ron to his grandfather, throw back the shots.

“So goddamn good.” Orioles Hat slams his glass. “They’re recommending evacuations, right?” He takes a lighter from his shirt pocket and twirls it through his thumb and forefinger.

“Fuck them. I ain’t going nowhere. If it’s my time, it’s my time,” Ron says as Johnny Cash and his bass line fade like a weakening heartbeat, leaving the bar quiet enough to hear the

weather woman from the TV expounding on storm surge and the damage it causes. Things I need no lesson on.

“What about you?” Orioles Hat stops fidgeting and holds his gaze on me.

“What about me?”

“Are you . . . evacuating?”

“Yeah, heading to Charlotte in the morning.”

“Smart man. We’ve seen up close what these monsters can do. Couldn’t get near them without special equipment.” He releases the lighter from his grip. It tip-taps and settles on the bar.

“Sounds like we need more music.”

“Cut it with the pop bullshit, would you?” Ron barks.

“You got it, old-timer,” Orioles Hat says on the way to the jukebox with the Mute following like a trained pet. As the banter continues, the front door claps shut and Larry Roenick finds his spot at the end of the bar. He slaps the framed dollar bill on the wall while I pull a Natural Light from the fridge.

“How’s shit?” Larry asks and pops the top. “Maria is great to look at and serves one hell of a beer, but I was hoping to catch you in here Tuesday. Slipped my mind that you’d be teaching already.”

“Yeah, only nights, Monday through Wednesday. I’ll still be here quite a bit,” I say.

“Plenty of time to get into trouble.” He looks to Curly Brown and adjusts his stool. “How’s Mary?” he asks.

“Much better, and we are actually hoping for some good news today. Keep your fingers crossed.”

“Of course. We’re all thinking of her—and you, for that matter. Pass along a hello.”

“Thanks, Larry. I will.” I give in and check again. Two forty-one, no texts. It’s been a small feat making it six minutes. Still, what the hell is taking her so long?

“Hey, boss, pretty dead in here.”

I look up from my phone and find Tanya across the bar. I meant to call her an hour ago.

“Yeah, you probably didn’t need to come in. Can’t imagine we’ll stay open past seven or eight,” I say. She greets the regulars and wipes up the remnants of my spill.

“This yours?” She picks the lighter from the bar and dangles it in front of Ron.

“Nope, not mine, sweetie. Where did our little storm chasers go? I expected more shitty music by now.”

They aren’t at the jukebox. They aren’t playing darts. The men’s room door is cracked and the inside is dark. Orioles Hat and the Mute are nowhere to be seen.

“Was anyone at the jukebox when you came in?” I ask Tanya and check the front window.

“No. But two guys walked out as I came in.”

At the front door, I spot them northbound a block away. “I see them.”

It’s too far to yell, so I take off in a jog through the autumn air, which has grown heavier since the morning.

“Hey, guys! Guys. You forgot this.” Breathless, I slow to a walk.

Orioles Hat stops and turns. “Shit. Thanks, man.” He shoves the lighter into his back pocket. “Goddammit, man, you’re a hell of a lot taller than you looked. What are you, six six, six seven?”

“Six five and a half at best,” I say. “I get that a lot, something about being behind the bar.”

“And your eyes.” Orioles Hat leans in and squints for a closer look. “Those are pretty fucking cool.”

Another reaction I’m not foreign to.

“You guys calling it quits?”

“Yeah, getting smokes and then back to the hotel to sleep this off. We’ve got to get after Logan early.” As Orioles Hat answers, the Mute hops on his right foot and grabs at his left shoe. Jäger is known to have strange effects—for me usually vomit and regret—but this is a first. He continues the hopping, almost falling to the ground more than once.

“Dude, what the hell?” Orioles Hat sounds as confused as I am.

“This fucking thing has been pissing me off since this morning. I can’t. Fucking. Get. It.” The Mute breaks his silence. “Can you help?” It’s a normal, vanilla, adult-male voice. A letdown indeed. Orioles Hat obliges and holds his friend by the shoulder, steadying him while the Mute flicks at whatever is lodged in his shoe. After a few whiffs, a shiny something springs from his outsole and bounces high off the sidewalk, where a gust of wind catches it and carries to a patch of dirt.

“Logan might be early.” I crouch to pluck the small, silver, plastic bead from the ground.

“We better get going. If we’re ever in town again, we’ll stop in. Stay safe, man.” They turn and continue up East Getty Street.

“You too. Good luck tomorrow.”

I take my time getting back to the bar, fanning my chest with my T-shirt as sweat collects at the base of my spine.

I cave and check. Two forty-six, no texts.

And now there’s something else. I can’t get that simple plastic bead out of my mind. With each step, it pecks at me more.

But why?

*Shiny silver bead.*

*Shiny. Silver. Bead.*

The conditioned air of the bar refreshes my skin but dizzies my head. I lean against the wall to collect myself. *Shiny silver bead. Shiny silver bead. Shiny silver little motherfucking silver shiny bead.* It’s so familiar, but I can’t shake loose why.

“I’m sure they could have afforded another two-dollar lighter,” Tanya says.

“Maybe it was his lucky one,” I say. “Interesting guys.”

“Not exactly the word I’d use,” Ron mumbles and sucks down his fresh lager. I squeeze behind the bar, and my eyes catch something bright red.

*Rosalie’s 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Costume Party and Contest*

*October 31st, 9:00 p.m. – Midnight*

*1<sup>st</sup> Prize: \$50 Gift Card*

I tear the outdated poster from the wall. This year’s prize went to a worthy recipient indeed. The girl was a sweepstakes winner—dressed in a bathrobe, slippers, and hair rollers, accepting one of those gigantic checks from . . . and it hits me.

*Shiny silver bead.*

“Shit.”

“What?” Tanya looks up from her phone.

I need to think this through—there must be a reasonable explanation. Hell, maybe I brought the bead to the Mute. I look to my own shoe. It's a brown dress type, the bottom flat and smooth, not a single nook where anything could hide. What about my clothes? A wrinkle, a pocket—something? Maybe, but the only way to know for sure I'm the culprit is to go home and check. Unless I can track them down at the gas station

“Tanya, can you handle this alone? Actually . . . close up whenever you want.” I shimmy around the bar and beeline to the front door.

“Yeah, what's wrong?”

“Nothing. I think I left the stove on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Stay safe, everyone!” I bolt back into the tropical air.

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The seven minutes driving home feel like seventy—talk about anticipation—especially after checking the gas station, driving through the hotel parking lot, and scouring the neighboring blocks. There’s no sign of Orioles Hat or the Mute. At this point, it’s best to see the evidence, which will probably prove me crazy anyway.

Once I do finally reach my driveway, it’s a scramble out of the car and up the porch steps. I collect myself at the front door and test the doorknob. Still locked—a good sign. Camus is frantically scratching and barking. Another good sign. I insert the key, turn the knob, and before the door is fully open, I’m up to my waist in chocolate Lab.

“Hey, bud, I’ll be right back.”

He keeps at it and follows. I scale the twelve steps in three strides, reach the bedroom doorway, and check both sides of the floor.

There it is—resting against the wall, where it was this morning. A silver shiny bead, just like what the Mute plucked from his shoe. I hold the two side by side and find no distinguishing features. They are the same size, same material, same sheen, and they belong to a bracelet that was part of Mary’s Halloween costume. There must be a reasonable explanation.

Camus whimpers and swipes his paw at my thigh.

“Okay, let’s go.” We race back downstairs and out to the yard, where he searches for the perfect piss spot while I consider the possibilities. Maybe the two beads aren’t from the same source. Unlikely, but possible. Even if I somehow brought one into Rosalie’s, the Mute said it had been in his shoe since the morning, and he and Orioles Hat were at the bar for less than an hour. If only I had checked their IDs. What would Mary think?

Shit—Mary. In my rush to play detective, I forgot about the message I’ve been stewing over.

I retrace my steps to find my phone, but it’s nowhere. Maybe I left it at the bar? No, I didn’t—it was sliding back and forth on the passenger’s seat during the trip home. It must be there. As I reach the front door, it swings open, and there she is. Mary.

In a single instant, dozens of other moments shuffle through my mind. The end of our second date and our first kiss. When our eyes met at the altar for the last time as an unmarried couple. Each time in the hospital receiving bad news and then treatments that only seemed to make things worse. Moments I’d spend a lifetime trying to re-create and others I’d gladly end it all to avoid repeating.

She breaks the silence. “Did you get my text?”

The embrace is traditional in form. Most since her diagnosis have served as a way to hold on to Mary as she's seemingly been being dragged away from me and the world we've built. Sure, I'm equipped with the typical clichés—*We will get through this*, *You're going to be fine*, and all the rest—but those are mostly bullshit, said to fill the agony of silence. True comfort has come in sturdier forms; smelling her freshly shaved head, helping her write a will, sneaking notes into her chemo bag. And this now, is just as real. The lone difference is purpose. No longer am I providing solace in the midst of a grim reality. Instead, this is two healthy bodies joining in celebration.

Mary is okay! And we will have the future we always dreamt of, the one that diminished to an abstract beacon flickering off in the distance, only bright enough to capture the interest of our slimmest of hopes. Everything is going to be okay. Of course it is.

Not wanting to let go first, but also not wanting to lose complete sensation in my arms, I loosen my grip and clear my throat.

"That means it's not in the lymph nodes either?" I ask.

She shakes her hair free of my stubble.

"That's what they said. Full remission."

Her arms stiffen against my waist.

"And if you'd read my text, you would've seen two smileys." She steps back, completing the separation. "What do you think the second one means?"

We've used the same format for countless occasions over the last decade: one smiley face for good news, one frown for bad.

"Uh . . . I don't know what it means, other than that you broke the rules."

"Maybe I did, but what do you think it means?" Her voice is gentle and warm, but her eyes are intense, even piercing. It's best to play along.

"Okay. I think it means . . ."

I pause and consider what amount of time is adequate to make it seem like I'm actually pondering the question. What I arrive at is slightly more time than it takes to figure. So I wait a bit longer, then look to the ceiling and scratch my chin.

"Um. Oh! You got a raise!" I throw my arms up. It's probably too much.

"You're an ass. That was pathetic."

I notice it between *ass* and *pathetic*, a glint to her tone I only now realize has been missing. It probably went the way of so many other things, slowly conquered by the invasion of cancer that changed more of her than I ever imagined possible.

"What?" she asks—though I haven't said a word.

"Nothing. This is just really great news."

"I know. And the second smiley was because Dr. Lee said we can start trying again. Next month if we want."

"Trying? As in . . ." But I know what she means.

"They can't guarantee anything, and even if we can get pregnant, it will probably take longer than normal."

"Holy . . . shit. This soon?"

"I know."



I pull her back in. This never even crossed my mind. Well, of course it did, but only in a fleeting *There's no shot in hell* way.

"Is it next month yet?" I peck her cheek, then dimple, then chin, and ignore the whimpering from the backyard. As I move to her neck and chest, Camus's impatience grows more annoying. Mary caves, and so ends the most intimate contact we've had in months. What's another week or two? While dog and dog mama complete their greeting ritual, I mull over how to update the fridge calendar with the news. I flip the page to December. The marker squeaks and bleeds red on the glossy paper.

*December 1: BABY MAKING!*

*December 2: MORE BABY MAKING!*

Mary's hair tickles my arm from behind as she sputters at my immaturity. So I continue.

*December 3: SHITLOADS OF BABY MAKING!*

"You're crazy." She slaps my ass. "I have to call my sister. If we leave by eight, we'll get to Charlotte by noon, right?"

It's what I've been dreading. Great news should never be spoiled by a story of busted Halloween costumes and random bar patrons. What are the chances that anything mischievous happened? Can I keep it from her? Would she keep it from me? This is my usual moral compass, not because I always agree with her but because, unlike me, Mary's firm in her positions. If I'm going to question myself either way, I'd rather do so with a happy wife. And that settles it.

"You know the bracelet from your gypsy costume? With the silver beads?" I ease into it.

"That Camus destroyed?" She grabs her phone from the counter.

"What? Where?" I ask, my surprise genuine.

"I don't know. He must've found it in the bedroom and tore it apart. There were beads everywhere."

"Were they outside?"

"Yeah. I thought you heard me yesterday screaming at him. Why?"

This changes everything. Beads outside the house expands the range of culprits to cars, bikes, anything with tires really, even animals.

"Something strange happened today, but I think it was nothing."

Mary looks up from her phone.

"It's actually why I missed your text," I say.

"What happened?"

"There were these two guys at the bar, probably early twenties—they were storm chasers from Florida. They only stayed for a few drinks and left a lighter on the bar. When I brought it to them, one of them was hopping on one foot and waving his arms."

I mimic the Mute. She's not amused.

"I thought he was drunk, but then I realized he was actually picking at something in the bottom of his shoe. One of these." I present the bead. "It didn't hit me until I was back at the bar. I saw this one on my way out this morning." I show her the second bead. "Up in the hallway."

"What are you saying? You think they were here?"

“No . . . I don’t know? . . . I was just trying to figure out how it happened. Now that I know Camus had them outside, it makes sense. Besides, they were completely harmless.”

“What does that have to do with anything? They could still have been here.”

“But why?” I ask.

She answers my stupid question with her eyes.

“Who would rob us?” I say. “We don’t have anything worth taking.”

“Is anything missing? Did you check?”

I follow her upstairs to our bedroom, where she rummages through drawers. I do my best to stress the ordinary nature of the interaction at Rosalie’s. The jukebox. The shots. The small talk about the weather.

“And they described the equipment they use to keep them safe in the storms,” I say.

“Wait, they said what?” She shuts the bathroom vanity door and faces me.

“What what? About the equipment?” I ask.

“No. Before that—about us evacuating.”

“I know what you’re thinking, but it was nothing—”

“You told them we are evacuating?”

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Early-morning air rushes in through the open window, carrying a perfectly intact crimson leaf. What a strange existence, that of a leaf, dangling there with the sole purpose of trapping sunlight and converting it to energy. For what? Just so its host—in this case the giant oak I climbed as a kid—can grow thicker and stronger, only to eventually toss the leaves aside for a new army the next year. Are these leaves, the things that make the whole cycle possible, aware of what they signed up for? What's in it for them? Perhaps their reward is an honorable discharge, released from duty and sent falling to the earth in a grand performance for the world to witness, decked out in the signature of colors they earned throughout their brief careers. If that's the case, this one is out of luck. Instead of dancing gracefully to the ground, it ends up on my right thigh. I hold it to my nose and twirl it by its stem as the chair beneath me rocks back and forth and back again, a fitting metaphor for last night.

Mary is convinced that the pair of bar patrons have been to the house with malicious intentions and she's certain of their return. It's mostly about Orioles Hat's evacuation question. I get it. Of course I get it. And I'd be concerned too were I not privy to his tone—something Mary has no way of knowing. Sadly, the bar surveillance camera footage was no help. The highlight of the video for her was watching me serve a curly-haired brunette. With no audio, she added her own soundtrack that went something like *Hey, babe, can I make you a drink?* and *Oh shit, I accidentally spilled it on your boobies*, all in a douche voice landing somewhere between *Miami Vice* and *Jersey Shore*. I'm glad she got a kick out of it. After movie time, she did her best to convince me to stay through the storm to protect our home. Even if her suspicions are justified, I see no reason to rush judgment, especially if it means messing with another major hurricane. We agreed to sleep on it and check the updated forecast in the morning.

Unfortunately, I lay awake most of the night, my head littered with joyful images of making babies with a healthy Mary and watching those babies grow into curious toddlers and beyond, while far less appealing visions of hurricane damage and bracelet beads pecked at my idyllic fantasy. Even after my brain quieted enough for me to sleep, a familiar nightmare jolted me awake no more than an hour later—the third time in the fifteen weeks we've been here. Maybe my fear of its reemergence was self-fulfilling. Or maybe the soul of this home is trying to speak to me and has been since I was a kid.

Either way, the terror, sweat, and tears felt the same as they did back then. But I'm much better equipped to deal with it all now—at least I like to think so. The occasional sleep deprivation is annoying, but other than that, I'm actually more comfortable being back here than I ever imagined. It's no palace, but we have no need for one, and with Mary on the mend, I should have more time to give the old house the attention it begs for. The list is long and wide-ranging, from installing a new boiler and roof to peeling away hideous floral wallpaper my mother plastered on the walls of three different rooms.

And then there's the newest item—fingers crossed—building a nursery. We never once discussed which rooms are candidates before moving in and haven't since. I've thought about it and assume Mary has too, but it seems like a subject neither of us will dare broach, fearful of casting a jinx.

This room probably makes the most sense—I'd just need to ease Mary past the morbid history. Hell, the bulk of the work would be emptying the floor-to-ceiling shelves that I recently took most of a weekend to repopulate. Shelves with thousands of pages held in hundreds of notebooks, binders, and folders of every form and type. It's impossible that each has been

returned to its rightful home—the only snapshot I had to work from was from my nightmare. But they are out of the storage container. Tommy deserves that, at the very least.

These materials surrounding me are my brother's life and contribution to the world, though *contribution* might be strong. They are his thoughts, theories, and incoherent ramblings on any and every discipline and subdiscipline. Pieces on his hypothesized connection between blueberry muffins and speed-reading lean against a four-hundred-page thesis on the Gettier Problem. Thoughts on interspecies communication rest on designs for perpetual motion machines. Years ago, a few specialists showed enough interest to request copies of certain items. I obliged and received a thank-you note when parts were cited in other works—snippets on formal logic. The rest has been ignored or dismissed by various academic communities as hogwash, musings of a mentally unstable teenager who lacked the formal training to be considered credible.

It's impossible for me to judge. I've glanced at some of it and delved into the few pieces I'm able to process. Among my favorites is a 350-page analysis proving, through at least a hundred detailed steps, that if evolution were not a valid theory, cell phone technology would not, could not, exist. It concludes with an eloquent plea for those who question Darwin to promptly discard their mobile devices.

I never knew my brother. But from what sits atop these shelves, I know he yearned for a deeper understanding, an underlying truth to his existence. Did he find what he was searching for? Does that explain what he did? Or were the professionals right—that these walls are merely evidence of and witnesses to a life cut short, abruptly ended forty-four years ago by demons of the human psyche.

It happened on a fall day—maybe just like today, but my nightmare lacks the details. In my subconscious's version, Tommy sat at the desk in the corner, head down, pondering, muttering something to himself. Then he stood and stripped off his clothes—sweatshirt, T-shirt, jeans, and underwear—and methodically folded and stacked them on his bed before reaching into his backpack for a rope.

*Ding—beep-beep-beep—ding—beep-beep-beep . . .*

Mary's alarm wakes me from the daydream about my nightmare, the fifth time it has sung since I've been counting. In the thick of her battle, this would have tipped me off about her well-being and what lay ahead for the day. She often talked about waking up on the good days and how glorious it was, especially when they were sparse. *Worthy of doing it twice, maybe more*, she'd say, and plop her head down for another seven-minute dream. On the bad days, the alarm couldn't complete its second tone before she was upright, dressed, and attacking the morning straight-faced, almost like she thought she deserved the punishment.

Her bedside fan putters to a halt, signaling that her waltz with the snooze button has ended. My keys, still in the doorknob, jingle as she brushes by them.

"Good morning, lady."

She replies with a grumble.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask.

"Like a baby—first time in three years." She scratches the back of my head. "The nightmare?"

I nod.

"I'm sorry." Her palm slides around my neck and rubs my shoulder. "What's the forecast?"

"It wobbled west. They now think landfall further south, no worse than a strong cat-one for us, sometime this evening. If you still think we should stay, I think so too."

She sighs. "I just really don't feel comfortable leaving if—"

“I know.”

“I’m going to shower.” She steps back into the hallway, and I’m again alone with my foliage friend. Not one to spoil dreams, I reach into the sky and release the leaf from my grip. It’s caught by the breeze and soars up and up, then around like a pirouetting ballerina, and pauses at a pinnacle before beginning its descent. This is it, the motivation for trapping those billions of photons over the course of the growing season. It passes me and continues toward its final resting place. But the dance is interrupted again, this time by the backup generator just off the house. Not exactly the romantic finale I imagined.

“I tried, my friend.” I laugh and shut the window, but before the seal is tight, something stops me. What are those white specks in the lawn? From up here they look like cigarettes.

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It's beginning to look like Mary is right. Uninvited guests visited our backyard, at the very least. The Marlboro butts confirmed that, one smoked to a nub and the other half spent. Aside from DNA testing, nothing can prove that either belonged to Orioles Hat or the Mute. Besides, isn't Marlboro an old man's brand? There are plenty of explanations for the cigarettes and plenty more for the beads. Of course, Mary has found each idea I've concocted to be a stretch and has expressed as much with logic and sarcasm. Yes, it's beginning to look like Mary is right.

So, our plan for the night is simple—to make it obvious that we have not evacuated, and that shouldn't be a tough sell, considering Logan's early-morning pivot. Barely a hurricane now, he made landfall in Myrtle Beach just after noon and reset his course directly toward Frandale. Spiral arms of light rain and wind swept over the region hours ago, and now we're in the worst of it, awaiting the eye from the living room. Mary's on her three-cushion couch with Camus at her feet and a murder mystery in her face; I'm on my two-cushion version with my makeshift hurricane survival kit—a flashlight, a blended Scotch on the rocks, and a stack of papers written by my sophomores. I grab the top one and skim it for something to hold my attention. I find it three-quarters of the way down the page.

*A mindless task, by definition, can only exist for something, or someone, that possesses a mind to begin with. Being human, Sisyphus meets this requirement. And if there is a mind, there is an inherent ability to be content, to find happiness. In this spirit, Sisyphus being happy must be a serious consideration.*

It's a straightforward idea, but a variation I haven't seen in seven years of giving the assignment. I generally loathe grading papers as much as my students do writing them—most subjects spawn the same predictable garbage, time after time, year after year. Mythology is different. Something about those stories, so grand and fantastic, stokes curiosity in a way reality cannot. My grandfather knew that'd be the case, and set the hook into me I now use on my students. Fiction is my greatest tool in the classroom, and Sisyphus is my most reliable character, for good reason. When King Sisyphus was caught trying to outwit the gods, he was sentenced to eternity in the underworld and left with only the mundane task of pushing a boulder up a mountainside. Each time he reached the summit, his rock raced back down and sat there at the bottom, waiting for him. He would return to it to repeat the task. Again and again, forever. Stripping his existence of any possible meaning was the most grueling punishment the gods could fathom. But Albert Camus, author and philosopher, felt differently. He wrote that the gods had miscalculated, that Sisyphus was actually happy.

The annual challenge to my class is this—how could Sisyphus possibly be happy? Early on, it was my biggest struggle with the Camus essay. I never questioned the conclusion—I was hardly in any position to—but I couldn't appreciate how it was reached. My grandfather did his best to walk me through it in typical Grandpa Tabs form, with the help of a prop, in this instance a solid green marble. He held it in his fingertips and, as he steadied his trembling hand, asked me—at the time a gangly tween—to describe what I saw. What I saw was an ordinary green marble. Satisfied with my answer, Tabs tossed the marble up and clapped it out of the air. He held it up again. “What do you see now?”

I saw precisely what I'd seen before and said so. He tossed and caught the marble again. And again. And again, at least ten times. Nothing ever changed. Finally, he got to the point. “A

sphere has perfect symmetry, which is interesting and beautiful in its own way. But it's identical from every perspective." He spun the marble in his hand. "Once you see a sphere like this from one view, you've seen it from every view. But people, like you and me? Our lives don't have that symmetry. Every single situation can be looked at differently. No exceptions. That was Sisyphus' gift. What seemed to be a horrible outcome, he flipped on its head and found something else."

The words sounded great—at that age I took every syllable out of Tabs's mouth to be absolute truth—but in practice it may as well have been telekinesis or omniscience: a far-out, whacky theory. I suppose the greatest mental exertion was no match for the roller coaster of adolescence my body and mind were riding at the time.

The local news forecast update flashes on the screen.

"Eye should be here soon." Before I complete the sentence, the lights flicker and yield to darkness, the third or fourth time this hour. As my pupils adjust, the power returns.

"Doesn't it seem like they're cutting out more often?" Mary peers over her book.

"Yeah, I guess so."

The lights go out again. Moments later, they're still out. I go to the back door and wait.

"If this one sticks, the generator will come on in one minute." I say it as if I have intimate knowledge of the machine, but it's probably all I can recite from the owner's manual I flipped through earlier this afternoon. After finding the cigarettes, I ran a test to confirm there hadn't been any tampering. There hadn't—the engine started up and purred like it should, and like it had the only other time it's been used, four months ago when a supercell knocked out the entire region's grid for eight days. Eight days that directly led to us being here needing the damned thing again. With no backup power at our place, we'd packed some bags to come stay here in the house I grew up in, which had been collecting dust since my father and mother started requiring twenty-four-hour assistance. I never considered it a long-term fix—that was Mary's idea. But I didn't need much convincing. We didn't have many choices anyway. Foreclosure of our Myrtle Grove house gave us precisely two: either move into my parents' old house or sell it for a down payment.

"Hasn't it been a minute?" She's right. It has.

"If not, pretty close." I flip the switch to the outdoor light but realize it won't work. How could it? So I crack the door for a better look. The windblown rain hits the house with a rhythm, like a percussion section building to a climax, and obscures everything beyond a few feet.

"It should have come on by now. I'm going to check it."

My boots swish and swash through the yard as I make my way along the side of the house, my flashlight revealing a disk of ground just large enough to guide me. As deliberately as I move, I still almost ram into the generator before it's visible. But it's here and intact. And the gas tank is full. It should be working. I find the main conduit and follow it from the back of the unit. Everything is in place. I continue toward the front of the house, wiping the drops from my brow. A handful of steps later, I freeze. Things are no longer fine. The metal conduit is severed. I crouch to make sure the rain isn't playing tricks on my eyes. It's not. The slice is flush, clean through, nothing that wind or rain would have the will or force to do.

"Hello?" I one-eighty and sweep the immediate area with light. "I know you're out there! The police are on their way, and I am armed!" I run to the door. My hood is swept back to my shoulders, exposing my head to the storm. But the rain has all but stopped. "I know who you are! You were at Rosalie's yesterday afternoon!"

The low fading howl of Logan is the only response. The thinning clouds reveal the crescent moon, like a sweater being pulled down over a mocking grin. I slam and lock the door while Camus laps the water from my pants. Not knowing whether to yell or whisper, I do both.

“Call nine-one-one. They are here.”