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Storaged

Dane AW Bowman

My new office was once a shipping crate. For those first few nights it served as my sleeping quarters. It stood out from the rest of the lot, seemed alien because it was the only 'movable' storage option – *if* you had the equipment to move it. All it did now though was mark the entranceway.

Because of its size and my fresh ignorance, the lot itself felt unfamiliar to me. Nightmarish, it was this maze most likely home to a Minotaur. A warren of face-bricked boxes, lined up in lengthy corridors which stretched further than the naked eye could see.

The layout had this haphazard feel to it as if, without any sort of forethought to its construction, the place had simply been built and then, when needed, layered with extra lanes of storage units. This 'here-and-there' nature, the disorganization I felt, made it all the more daunting. And this bothered me greatly because uniformity is the one thing you wanted in a place like this. Here, a map was a must.

And me being mapless was maybe what drove me to plot the place out. I guess I wanted to know what I'd gotten myself into, what I'd rushed into accepting. Maybe if I knew this place's true extent I'd be able to better gauge what lay in store for me. My bed – makeshift, uncomfortable – contributed to keeping me awake but it was being mapless that made lying there unbearable. With my *actual* furniture arriving the following day, tomorrow night could be reserved for sleeping soundly.

Tonight's expedition: a quick walk around the premises, would be the ticket to a good night's sleep. After a stroll I'd become dopey and then, regardless of what I was trying to sleep on, I'd be able to doze off. Plus, getting a sense of bearing would be good for me.

Considering how cold it might be outside, I wrapped myself up in something warmer than my pyjamas. I grabbed the ring of keys I'd be given – a rusted relic – and, as I was leaving, I grabbed a torch, just in case the moon did a disappearing act whilst I was out.

I locked the door, slipped the keys into my jacket pocket, and, flashlight in hand, marched into the darkness. Hoping to help the process of 'tiring myself out' along, I decided that I wouldn't give too much thought to where I was actually going and instead simply meander the maze.

My plan – a rousing success, I don't mind saying – resulted in an almost immediate tiredness. Sadly, an unforeseen consequence of this was that I had also become disoriented. At just after ten o' clock I had managed to misplace myself.

The first thing I tried to correct this, was to look around and, hopefully, latch onto something familiar. This didn't happen though because, realistically, it couldn't. I had arrived at the lot for a faux 'handover' in the early evening and, tired from the drive, had resorted to a brief catnap once I was eventually left alone.

Stranded now, I decided that my best bet would be that of 'celestial navigation' whereby one looks at the stars, susses out where north is, and then completely fails to remember where his office is located in terms of cardinal directions. Even if I *had* known its position this wouldn't have mattered because I had no handle on navigation by stars.

I looked up and, hoping to see those aforementioned bodies, was disappointed by some clouds which had appeared. Grey plumes monopolised the night sky and as I watched them they seemed to spin themselves slowly around the moon, further darkening the night.

The lot felt a different place by night, though this was speculation on my part as I hadn't seen it by day yet. Everywhere I sent my torchlight seemed averse to me having done so and tried its best to swallow the beam whole. Occasionally, my light would glance off heavy-looking, chrome doors – each a separate storage locker – and would simply fade into oblivion whenever I sent it too far down some apparently never-ending alleyway.

I wondered why more effort hadn't been made to floodlight the place. *Maybe it's meant to discourage these sorts of nighttime expeditions*, I thought. Perhaps it made the place seem less desirable by night, not *worth* visiting, a feeling that was meant to extend to both paying customers as well as unsavoury types.

In the middle of my consideration, an unexpected noise erupted from one of the alleyways nearest me. I shone the torch into the darkness, positioning it where I believed the noise to have come from, and tried to focus my eyes on the nothing that the space seemed to contain. *This is the first night*, I reminded myself. That alone was reason enough to be jumpy.

I hoped that the noise, a sound bite I'd constructed in my head as 'piece of wood slides down brick wall before hitting gravel', was nothing more than that. However, my attempt at rationalising it, the description I'd given it in my head, had holes fast poked in it by my logic. What I hoped I'd heard… that lie… had never happened.

The noise, I knew, was a product of my being there. In some philosophical sense it belonged to me because I had been the only one around to hear it. This was part of the reason I decided to face up to it.

"Who goes there?"

No immediate reply was forthcoming – assuming, that is, whether my question had actually been heard by whatever the darkness was hiding from me.

I cleared my throat and, peering into what little my torchlight could reveal, asked ag-

A wolf appeared.

"!"

The creature stepped out of the darkness, walking towards me. Stilled rigid, I could do nothing but watch this massive canine's approach. I wondered briefly whether death by mauling would be more or less painful than death by burning alive.

In a situation like this, that is: face-to-face with a dangerous predator, there are often certain prescribed actions for self-preservation. From what I had learnt – via television or otherwise – I already knew how to deal with: bears – you play dead (usually a nice warm-up for actually being dead); sharks: you punch them on the nose or, alternatively, avoid the sea; and lions (or any 'big' cat): remain calm and then begin backing away slowly. Whilst some of these may sound risky or, in some instances, downright fatalistic, it's easy to point out that they have worked *at least once* in the past by virtue of their existence. Somebody somewhere punched a shark on the nose and lived to tell the tale.

Obviously there was nothing wrong with knowing all of this but, sadly, without a single wolf-related survival solution, I realised that if the time came I would simply have to wing it.

When the animal had become uncomfortably close, my torchlight flickered and then died. Luckily, in this little moment which felt like forever, my imagination dusted itself off and stepped in as a substitute for my sight. Alone and unlit in the blackness which my faulty torch had abandoned me to, I started thinking.

…about how the creature before me probably had 'slavering jaws' and how it was almost certainly espying me through its blood-hazéd eyes. I thought about how, without doubt, every part of the animal was tensed. In my mind's eye, this creature was a coiled spring, all pent-up energy just waiting to lunge at me. This imagined leap would terminate at, say, neck height, where the beast would then sink its teeth (read: 'razor-sharp incisors') into my throat before hungrily ripping out my jugular.

It was in the middle of my imaginary artistry – the painting of my soon-to-be-splattered-blood – that my torch, miraculously resurrected, shone brightly once more.

The wolf, now up close and able to be identified, was, I could see, only playing the part. Merely looking wolfish but not actually being one. Seated there before me, waiting patiently whilst resting on its haunches, was a large dog. The torch, currently focused on my own feet, shed just enough light for me to get an idea of its size. I bought the beam upwards slowly and, as I did so, took note of the massive white-painted paws, its matching, muscular legs, and the beautiful grey-black coat that it wore. The pure white face that peeped out of this mixed black-tinged greyness was set with fierce, blue eyes whose pupils constricted in the glare of my torchlight. In its mouth it had a tin of what appeared to be tuna.

I raised the beam higher, leaving it to shine well above the pair of us. “Sorry about that. Wasn’t intentionally trying to blind you...”

Motionless, its eyes fixed on mine, the dog sat.

I racked my brain for similar experiences, tried my best to recall any encounters I’d had with dogs in the past. My rustling returned nothing except those celebrity animals who had somehow managed to survive in my memory. When their rote behaviours had finished playing out in my imagination – their escapades of helping kids out of wells or saving folks from burning buildings – I found myself wishing for a more memorable childhood. One with pets.

Deep in thought for what was likely a long time, I was surprised, on my return, to find the animal unmoved.

Now, and perhaps this was me projecting, I had the distinct feeling that this creature expected something from me. As if, with good reason, it had settled down before me and would continue to do so until I eventually delivered what was needed.

“I haven’t got anything for you. Certainly nothing of a doggy nature, I mean. I’ve got my cell phone but I doubt that’d impress you.”

None of this seemed to be getting through to the dog.

“You’re probably after a treat or something.”

The word warranted a response and, once the message had been relayed, resulted in some mild tail-wagging.

“Treat?” I tried.

The dog tilted its head to one side.

“I don’t have any.”

I tapped my hand against my jacket pocket to demonstrate this and, as the keys jangled violently per pat, the dog’s tail wagging slowed. A low grumble began and as it slipped past the dog’s teeth, it turned into quite the growl. I produced the keys with as much quiet as possible and displayed these.

“It’s just keys.”

I placed them on the ground in the same way one might lay down a weapon after surrendering. Once I had retracted my hand, the growling began to fade and, after releasing the tin, the dog leaned in cautiously, and began to sniff. The keys, nudged about in the process, noised, but were eventually judged non-threatening. The dog seated itself once more.

I picked the keys up, pocketed them, and then confessed to my lostness. “Do you belong here?” I asked hopefully afterwards.

Regardless of being uncollared – and in my mind: unowned, a delinquent – the dog had this air about it, as if somehow this lot *was* home, as if it had no real need for a handler.

"What are the chances that you'd be able to help me navigate this maze?"

The dog regarded me and then, after picking up its tin, stalked off. I followed at a distance, winding through various corridors and pathways, some of which seemed previously undiscovered. Eventually I could see, though still a-ways off, the lights of my office. Reassured with my whereabouts, I padded behind the dog – a bitch, as it turned out – and when she stopped somewhere I considered to be in the middle of nowhere, I too stopped.

In my sightlines were a collection of doors – I counted around twenty before the lane itself ended – and amongst these were some lockers that had been forfeited.

"These," I began, shifting my eyes between the various doors, "these are the left-behinds." I checked the numbered plaques which had been fixed above each of them and tried to churn up the same numbers I'd been told earlier on. "I think so, at least… At the handover earlier, he said something about these…"

Whatever they might contain, that is: whatever the tenants had abandoned, had basically been re-abandoned to me during the hand-over.

"These belong to the lot," I said.

How this all works – the process of renting storage space – involves entering into a contract. Any item a person chooses to store on the premises exists in a state of lien. What this means is that should the renter fail to meet their obligations – in this case, not paying rent, usually for a couple of months – then the owner of the lot has a legal claim over the stored goods and may use them as a means to secure the payment of a tenant's debt. An auction typically does the trick.

It's nowhere near as cut and dried as that. There are other hurdles to clear before anything can go under the hammer but, for now, this explanation would suffice. I had a feeling I'd be handling my fair share of failure-to-pays in the future and I could go into the finer details then. *I'll burn that bridge when I come to it*.

In the here and now though, whatever was left inside – though a bolt-cutter might be needed to reach it – belonged to the lot, belonged to me.

"I guess there isn't any harm in seeing what's inside." I looked down at the dog who had seated herself beside me. "Is there?"

Whilst sharing the torch between the four doors which surrounded us, I thumbed the keys in my other hand, counting them quietly. Only one of these would be necessary. Bequeathed to me during the handover process, one key in particular could handle the base lock used on all of the

doors here. Whilst they were still 'mine', this key kept them secure. Once rented, I'd unlock the locker, leaving it up to the tenants to employ their own security measures.

My eyes skipped around the immediate area, indecisive as to which I should open.

I felt swamped by my options. "I'm no good at this kind of thing. You choose."

I looked at the dog and waited patiently for her to do something. Eventually my watching must have unsettled her because she stood up and began sniffing at each of the doors. After giving each one what seemed to me to be the same amount of attention she returned to the second door and plonked herself down in front of it, the tin beside her.

I glanced up at the number tagged above the locker's door. "That one?"

The dog barked.

I slipped the torch into the crook of my neck and lifted the key ring so that I could read their meticulously handwritten tags by its light. I isolated the key labelled 'Skeleton', shook my head at it and then took the torch to hand once more.

I crouched down beside the dog – who sniffed my ear briefly – and felt around for the lock which kept the door secured. The designated key did take some shifting before the mechanism eventually clicked open – probably a sign as to how long this particular locker had been abandoned – but click open it did.

"Isn't it odd how all of these abandoned lockers just happen to line the same lane? If you ask me," I said, realising that the dog would never do this, "it's all just a bit *too* neat."

I removed the lock, examined it by torchlight, and griped internally about the amount of rust on its 'galvanized' surface. When I tossed it into the darkness behind me, it thudded.

"Here we go." I slotted my fingers around the door's handle and lifted it upwards.

The dog never said anything when we found the body. I didn't either, mind you, but I had expected her to at least alert me *somehow*. A heads-up would have been nice. Towards the rear section of the room a prone figure could be seen and, though I was at first uncertain of their condition, I soon realised that nothing could smell that bad and still be alive.

"That doesn't bother you?" I asked, covering my nose and mouth with my hand.

Instead of shying away from this discovery, she wandered over curiously and began sniffing at it. I suggested that she shouldn't do that.

"This looks suspicious," I said.

The stench was putrid, heavy, and seemed as if it had seeped into everything around us. An odorous combination of iron, decay, and stored-away mustiness overpowered the rest of my senses. It was, for me at least, unbearable. For the dog: not so much. She gave the body a rather thorough

going-over, nudging it here and there with her snout and, because I could see her tail wagging, I assumed that maybe this was the sort of thing she did for a living. Perhaps she was a police dog or something of that nature.

"Full disclosure here: I'm feeling rather out of my depth."

I had moved a little closer to the body and, now just a few steps away from it, paused. I traced my torchlight around it, a 'chalk outline' of sorts, and then rested the beam on the dead man's face. He was unfamiliar to me. I sighed loudly and the dog, seeming to notice this, stopped its sniffing, sat down beside the corpse and focused its attention on me.

"You seem oddly… *au fait* with what's going on here and, well, to be perfectly honest with you, I am not."

Tilting its head to one side, mildly interested in something I'd said obviously, she kept watching me.

"We should call somebody, I think."

The dog barked and her utterance echoed all throughout the room, bouncing off the varied bric-a-brac that had been abandoned therein. When silence returned once more I felt surrounded, stifled by the stacks of which stalagmited the place. I had a feeling that if the room had been better lit I would have perhaps realised there was just enough space to feel claustrophobic in.

"I'm going with my gut here but I think that calling the cops is our best course of action." I nodded, reassuring myself. "That's just prudent, I think."

The dog didn't respond.

"Nothing good ever comes from finding a corpse," I said.

Time had buried the body beneath a thin layer of dust which made it hard – at least at a glance – to see what exactly had happened. Perhaps to well-trained eyes a sequence could be seen – the 'why' of this man's death.

"I suppose finding a body's a good thing if you actually wanted the person dead..."

I stopped talking and watched the dog watching me. This went on for a few seconds.

"Can we pretend I never said that?"

The dog let out a soft bark.

I had hoped to make a call from the locker for immediacy's sake, but cell signal inside was non-existent. Something about the room's walls seemed to have a dampening effect on my device. Further, not knowing the local police station's phone number was another hurdle I hadn't cleared.

“I’ll have to head back to the office.” I stepped backwards and felt somewhat safer with added distance between myself and the body. “Come on,” I called hopefully. The dog, still seated beside the body, pricked up its ears at these words. “I want to close up here.”

She stood then, padded towards me and, once the two of us were outside again, I brought the door down. The room, sealed now, seemed safe. It looked plain once more and, just like the rest of the lockers here, it was impossible to know what was going on within.

I started making my way back towards my office, pausing for a moment to watch the dog wrest the tin from where she’d left it.

My office had become this beacon of light, a landmark which might save me future lostness. I tried desperately to remember it, to burn the image of it into my brain.

I was glad to be back and, in my eagerness, I had hoped to take the steps two at a time but having only a pair of them leading up to the door meant that this action sadly ended right after starting. Once inside I headed towards the desk, sat before my laptop and, rooting around in the cupboard beneath, re-discovered a phonebook which I’d seen earlier.

“Here we are.” I placed this behemoth beside my laptop.

This placement, side-by-side, made the phonebook look even more archaic. The laptop, I knew, would be the faster option and also unlikely to cause paper cuts. Unceremoniously, I pushed the phonebook off the desk and, after it landing with a thud, I opened my laptop, onned it, and entered my password.

A quick search online, a text box filled with the words 'contact number of nearest police station', returned the result I was after. Its position, pinpointed by some satellite in space, showed up beside the digits I would soon be dialling. A short distance away from this station were the words 'you are here'.

Nearby, I thought to myself. I keyed the number into my cell phone and listened as it rung. I heard a woman’s voice relay the station’s name – compressed into a single word – before she eventually introduced herself. “Walker speaking, how can I be of assistance?”

“Hello,” I said. “Look, I don’t really know what the procedure is for reporting a dead body but I’ve got one of them.”

There was a pause.

“One of what, sorry?”

I hesitated. “A dead body. There’s a dead body over here and I don’t know what to do with it. I thought contacting the police would be the best thing to do.”

Silence. “This isn’t a prank, is it?”

"No, it's not."

"It's just you sound awfully calm for somebody that's found a dead body."

"Well it's not *my* fault there's a dead body here."

"Whose dead bod-?" She stopped, corrected herself. "Who is it? Do you know?"

I shook my head.

"You there?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Sorry, I was shaking my head."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do you know who it is?"

"Nope, no idea," I replied. "Good thing too. I'd probably be a bit more flustered if I did."

"Okay, well, I'll have to send somebody over," she said. "Give me a second." I could hear her moving papers around on what I imagined to be a desk. In my mind's eye she had a pencil in her hand, perhaps a pen. I thought maybe she wrote with her left. "Do you know where you are?" she asked.

"Of course I know where I am," I said. "What kind of question is that?"

"Well, sir, you could've been in a field or on the side of the road somewhere."

"What would I be doing in either of those places?" I asked. "Hold on a sec." I took the phone away from my ear and double-checked the number I had dialled, compared it to the one on my laptop's screen. "This isn't a prank, is it?"

"No, it's not."

"It's just you sound awfully calm for somebody that's been told there's a dead body."

"I'm only going through procedure here, sir," she replied. "I have to ask these sorts of questions."

I shook my head again, this time for my own benefit. "There's a storage lot a short distance down from your station. Know where I'm talking about?"

"The one with all the corrugated roofs? All quite rusted? Yeah," she said, "I know the place. It's not too easy on the eyes."

"Well, that's where I am," I replied. "I'm the new owner here."

She didn't say anything.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry."

“Why? What for?”

“The whole 'not too easy on the eyes' comment,” she said.

“Look, I’m not really bothered about that. Dead bodies are much more pressing than stimulating visual aesthetics.”

“Bodies?” she repeated.

“It’s just a turn of phrase,” I said.

“It is?”

“It is now,” I replied. “Look, there’s just the one body here, but I’d like it seen to.” I hesitated and, after listening briefly to the widening silence, became agitated. “Can you send someone over?”

The pause that followed my question was one in which, I imagined, the officer spent a few seconds deep in thought. “Yes, I’m going to send someone over,” she replied.

She asked after a few of my details and then said her goodbyes.

I ended the call, placed my phone down beside my laptop and then turned my attention to the screen before me where I watched the cursor in the search bar flash in and out of existence. S*earch engines have come a long way*, I thought. Case in point, global positioning. Mine was an afterthought in the search I had just conducted. Another variable that had been automatically included to streamline things.

Nowadays you don’t even have to type to reach the result you’re after. This is especially helpful when you have something you don’t know as opposed to knowing something you don’t have.

I looked at the dog. “This is about you, by the way,” I said. “I’m thinking about you here.”

The dog was sitting nearby, wholly focused on me. I began fiddling with the pinhole webcam on my laptop. Once I had its output showing up on-screen – myself in motion, pixelated – I twisted the laptop slightly to the left and tilted the screen down.

I pointed at the camera lens. “Look here,” I told the dog.

And, well, she didn’t, the reason being that dogs don’t understand symbolic gestures like that. She doesn’t know that a pointed finger is meant to call attention to an object other than the finger itself. The dog stared into my eyes and didn’t do much else.

I held the laptop beneath my chin, its screen facing outwards, and maintained eye contact with the animal. After ensuring she was actually in the frame, I took her picture.

“That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

I placed the laptop on the desk once more and waited patiently, watching as the 'image upload' progress bar slowly filled. Once complete, this was replaced by the words 'SEARCH RESULTS' and a torrent of text links and similar images.

“Alaskan Malamute, it says here.”

I scrolled through the pictures and then skimmed over select pieces of text.

Whilst occasionally glancing at the dog, I listed mentally what I was reading through. The phrase: 'strong, independent, and used to harsh environments' stuck fast. The words 'intelligent', 'emotional', and 'loyal', all felt like fitting descriptors. 'Fond of people' made quite a bit of sense whereas the words 'unreliable watchdog' did not. The final point on the list, even less so.

"It says here that you're known for your ability to 'talk'." I made the quotation marks gesture and then wondered whose benefit I had done this for. "Sounds like a bit of a stretch. That's a textbook example of projection right there."

I looked at the dog beside me and considered whether she was even listening to me at all.

"There's a video here." I clicked the link.

On-screen a doppelganger appeared and, after some coaxing from its owner, it produced a 'woo woo' noise that, apparently, this breed is known for. The video was lengthy, perhaps overlong, the product of a person proud of something that appeared quite pointless.

"Don't know if I'm one hundred percent on-board with that," I said once the clip had ended. I looked at the dog who, it seemed, was paying attention to the screen. "Your thoughts?" I asked.

There was a brief pause. "Woo woo," she went.

I watched her for a few seconds.

"I don't think that counts," I said. "Actually, it might be better if you don't talk. Mala*mute*."

The pun received the coldness that it likely deserved and I watched as the dog picked herself up, then her tin, and trotted out of the office. I stepped away from my desk in the hopes of following her but as I reached the door I caught sight of an approaching police car.

The vehicle's lights – an obvious hazard to the epileptic – assaulted me, and were so bright that they seemed visible even after I had shut my eyes. They made my eyelids feel thin. As the car proceeded slowly towards the front-of-house come office area, I dragged shut the bulky rail-gate which served as the lot's only entrance.

The car stopped a short distance away from my office and I heard its engine die out. After its lights were switched off, the driver's side window rolled down a little.

I could see, silhouetted by the single floodlight pinned onto the office wall, an individual within, fiddling with something in the vehicle's centre console. I assumed that they were currently relaying their whereabouts to whoever was on duty back at the station.

I gave the vehicle a wide berth as I came up alongside it, hoping not to spook the person inside. I waited, watching patiently as the officer replaced the receiver.

The window rolled down further, until eventually a female officer was revealed.

“Evening,” she said. “Sorry for the delay. Had to load up the kit before leaving. It’s not too often that I get this sort of call-out, you know?”

I didn’t know but I didn’t say. Ultimately, the delay didn’t matter because it wasn’t as if the body was going anywhere. I shrugged and then smiled at her. “Are you the officer I spoke to on the phone?”

She nodded and, after opening her door, climbed out.

“You sounded taller.”

She looked at me for a few seconds before eventually running through what appeared to be a mental checklist of the various things in her possession. She tapped herself here and there until, apparently satisfied, she finally stopped.

“Just need to get the kit out and you can show me this body of yours,” she said. “*The* body, I mean. Not your body.” I watched as she shook her head.

I waited more, looking on as she rooted around in the backseat of her vehicle for what eventually turned out to be a small, black briefcase.

“There we go,” she said, slipping it under her arm. She removed a small notepad from her pants’ pocket and, as the string attached to the pad tugged too, a rather stubby-looking pencil bounced out, eagerly tagging along. She took the pad in her left hand and, pencil ready in her right, she appeared poised to start taking down whatever I said.

“You said your name was?”

I reassured her that my name remained unchanged, was the same now as it had been on the phone earlier. I watched as she scribbled it down. She jotted a few other notes, probably details of where she was and what time all of this was happening before she eventually came back to me.

“So,” she began, “think you can tell me how you found the body?”

“Well the dog found it,” I said.

“The dog?” She looked around and then back at me expectantly.

“Oh, she’s not here currently,” I said. “And I’m afraid I can’t call her for you.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“I don’t know what her name is, but I think that maybe she lives here. She probably comes and goes whenever she pleases,” I said.

“Oh,” the officer replied, eyes down, scribbling away on her notepad. “So you’re saying it’s not your dog then?”

“Not my dog, no,” I replied. “Not anyone’s dog, I think. She seems like a bit of a free spirit.”

“She?”

“The dog?”

"The dog."

I squinted at her. "Yes, the dog," I said.

After nodding and then writing down a few further things, she looked up at me.

"Are you making notes about the dog?" I asked. "Because if you are I really don't think she's implicated in things here. She seems a good enough sort."

"The dog?"

"The dog." I delayed for a few seconds. "That's by people standards, mind you. I couldn't tell you what other dogs think of her."

She looked at me and her expression was one I'd seen before, that of concern. She didn't say anything.

"Can we get back to the dead body?" I asked.

"Certainly." I watched as she flipped over to a new page in her notepad. *Good: business-like*, I thought. "Tell me exactly what happened."

And so I did.

The moon hadn't managed to fight its way through the clouds overhead and so the two of us used our flashlights as we made our way to the locker.

"Any particular reason you were out this late?"

"Restlessness," I replied. "Couldn't sleep."

"Why were you trying to sleep here?"

"Because I'm trying to live here. Just haven't had my actual bed delivered yet. Hopefully it, along with the rest of my life, will arrive here sometime tomorrow."

She didn't need to know these details, but I found myself telling her regardless.

"Are you allowed to live on the property?" she asked.

"Well, it *is* my property. Don't get me wrong though, I do understand zoning laws. I know certain places serve certain purposes, but I think that my living here is going to be on a rather grey basis."

She gave this some thought and eventually nodded. "I suppose it'll be quite under the radar," she conceded.

"Even after this?" I motioned to the door which stood before us. "I've got a feeling this might put me on the map."

I grabbed the handle and lifted the door upwards. Above the two of us it concertinaed away noisily. The room beyond was complete pitch, though the outlines of stacked boxes, furniture, and various other knick-knacks could be discerned. Well, by me at least.

"I closed the door to preserve the scene," I told her.

"Good thinking."

The stench too had been preserved and, unlike the body, it seemed alive, well, and only too willing to flood our nostrils.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"About what?"

"The smell."

She shrugged. "It comes with the territory, I suppose." Assisted by her torch she peered into the darkness. "Is there any kind of light in here?"

My earlier self must have been in too much of a hurry to notice the light switch. I flicked this up and down but nothing happened. "Still quite a few things which need fixing up around here."

She lifted her light towards the ceiling and illuminated the lone fluorescent bulb implanted there. For a few seconds she squinted at it. "Leave it on," she said eventually.

She crossed the torch's beam between the walls slowly, obviously trying to get a sense of this locker's dimensions and, more importantly, its depth. Somewhere towards the very back was the body which I had called her out to investigate. She focused her torch on this.

"That's it," I said, realising afterwards that this was a somewhat stupid thing to say.

She nodded and, tracing a line back to the two of us, made sure that the way ahead was clear. When she stepped into the locker, I trailed behind her. Our progress, governed by her torch's sweeping, was halted at one point. She gestured towards a broom leaning up against the wall.

"Grab that," she said. "Then use it to – *carefully* – press the bulb above us back in."

As told, I did. There was some give in the bulb and, after urging it back into its former position, it flickered hopefully. Erratic at first, the lighting did nothing but creepy up the place but, after a short while, it worked solidly, lighting the room.

"That certainly makes things a bit easier," she said, turning off her torch and fastening it back onto her belt.

I rested the broom back where I had found it. *Exactly* where I'd found it, in fact, because I was able to see the dust-free area its removal had left behind.

The body, well-delineated now, lay a short distance ahead of us. She approached this with an apparent ease and, after placing her briefcase down, she crouched. She rested the notepad and pencil beside her.

"I'll tell you one thing," she said, opening up her kit. "This guy's been dead a while." She freed a pair of white gloves from their once-hermetic housing and, with the sound of latex slapping tight around skin, slipped them on.

“Do you have some gloves for me?”

She tore her attention away from the body and frowned at me. “No.”

“Oh,” I said, deflating slightly. “I thought I might be able to help.”

There was a cautiousness in her reply. “Are you in any way trained to help?”

I hesitated, knew that answering with the name of some acronym-heavy procedural police drama would simply not suffice. I shook my head.

She went back to examining the body whilst, every now and then, reaching over to the notepad to jot something down.

“So… is this a crime scene now?”

“It’s a… something,” she replied. “Or at least it’s going to be eventually.”

Whatever was happening seemed, at least in my opinion, to be quite exciting. I had no clue what exactly *was* happening but I knew this could be remedied.

“I watched a detective show once,” I said.

She dragged the word ‘okay’ out, made it longer than it needed to be.

“And, well, the detective talked to himself whilst he was wor-” I interrupted myself, “*processing* the scene.”

She glanced up at me. “And?”

“Do you think you could do that here? It’s just I’m a bit inexperienced when it comes to this sort of thing so it’d be nice if you could do that.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“I’m fairly serious most of the time,” I replied. “Having a dead body around could be heightening that though.”

The two of us stared at each other and, in this moment, I wondered what meaning she was making of it. She broke us apart with a blink, sighed exaggeratedly, and then started narrating.

“What I’m doing here,” she began, “is taking a cursory look. Right now I’m paying attention to how the body’s lying. I’m trying to figure out if he died here or whether he was maybe moved here after death.”

“If he’d been moved then it’s a murder, right?” I asked.

“It’d be classified homicide until further evidence became apparent. The body being moved just implicates another person or persons.” She pencilled away at her notepad. “This guy, however, died alone.”

“He did?”

“Judging by the emaciation, I’d say this poor guy got locked in here and then starved,” she said. “There’s nothing suggesting trauma. No signs of a struggle.” She noted both of these things.

“Faster rather than slower, that’s how I’d want to go,” I said. “Starvation’s probably a terrible thing to die of.”

She ignored my comment. “This room was locked earlier, yes?”

I nodded.

“That means somebody must’ve sealed our friend in here, either with intent or not.”

I offered to show her the lock. “It looked old, if that helps at all.”

“Let’s finish up here first.”

After removing her gloves she slipped them carefully into an evidence bag. She scribbled down a few more notes and then slipped the notepad back into her pocket. After removing a camera from her briefcase she proceeded to take a few snaps – a pictorial preservation – of the scene. Once done, she returned the camera to its case. She ushered me out of the room.

“Show me the lock, would you?”

I did and watched as she bagged it up without directly handling it herself.

“My fingerprints will be on that,” I said. A hint of uncertainty had crept into my voice and it appeared that she was well aware of this.

“Of course. That’ll be taken into account. Besides,” she added, “you only got here – when? – yesterday?”

“Today,” I replied.

“I was in the area myself yesterday. I’m sure I would’ve seen you,” she said. “Didn’t know a place like this needed on-site managing. People have their own keys, don’t they? Surely they can just come and go?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“Thought it just… got along on its own.”

“It *can*, but shouldn’t. For a while it did, then someone said as much, and I was contacted.”

She nodded. “Anyways, a busy first day for you.”

She followed this up with a laugh, which I added to.

“Mind closing up here?” she asked, nodding towards the room behind us. “I’ll secure the door and – first thing tomorrow morning – we’ll have him removed.”

I reached in and switched the light off before bringing the door down. She removed a transparent cable-tie from her belt and threaded this through the old lock’s once-home and, after tightening it as far as she could, nodded.

She began walking back towards her car and I fell into step beside her.

“I have a few more questions.”

I nodded. “Ask away.”

“All of this is exactly as you found it, right? You didn’t remove anything from that room, did you?” she asked.

I thought about this. “No,” I lied.

“Okay,” she said. “Well, there isn’t much else for me to do here. For the moment I’ve got everything I need, but tomorrow someone – if not me personally – will be around to remove the body.”

She opened the passenger-side door of her car and placed the kit on the seat. Beside it she rested the bagged lock.

“Someone will get a hold of you in the morning,” she said, shutting the door, “and then we’ll go from there. At first glance what’s happened here doesn’t seem malicious but perhaps a more thorough investigation might turn something up.”

“Time tells,” I said.

“It most certainly does.”

I watched as she climbed back into her car and swung it around. She did the window down and drove slowly past me as I followed her down to the rail-gate. I smiled at her and waved.

“Goodbye,” she said.

Now I’ve never been a frequent taker of things that don’t belong to me but, given this particular situation, I was willing to make an exception. I *had* in fact removed something from the scene and said something was a sheaf of papers, a tatty-looking collection kept together by a staple. This had caught my attention just after the dog and I had discovered the body. It looked old, yellowing in places, curled in others.

After letting the officer out and watching her lights as they disappeared, I locked up the rail-gate. I headed back to my office and settled down behind my desk. The papers were nearby, enticing, and I was about to give it my attention when a shuffling noise shifted my focus.

“Oh, it’s you,” I said. “I was wondering where you were.”

The dog strolled into my office, lay down.

“The police woman from the phone was just here. She was looking for you.” I thought about this. “Not that you’re in trouble or anything.”

I regarded the papers that I was holding, felt their texture beneath my fingers. “I, on the other hand, might be. I… uh… took this from the scene of the crime.” I held the pages before the dog. She sniffed at them briefly before opening her mouth and gingerly clamping down on them. I let go and she just sort of stood there with them clamped between her teeth. “Well?”

She didn’t say anything, though this was probably due in part to her mouth being full.

“I really don’t know what you were thinking.” She sat down before me and for a while the two of us watched each other. I took the pages back from her and wiped off some saliva. “I think this might be a letter.”

The dog tilted her head at me.

“Well, it looks personal, whatever it is,” I said. A quick glance at the clock that hung above my desk showed me how long my nighttime wanderings had taken. “What say we take a look at this tomorrow, rather? I’ll give this a good read once I’ve caught up on my sleep.”

I opened the drawer, found a safe, flat space for the pages to inhabit and, after a minute spent shifting its contents about, shut it.

“There we go. Now,” I said, standing up, “I’m going–”

The dog was gone.

“…to get some sleep.”

Shaking my head, I shut the door and then put myself to ‘bed’.

As Walker had mentioned the previous night I was contacted that following morning. Rather early as it turned out. Though half asleep and not as coherent as I would have liked to have been, I still agreed to the seven AM meeting.

Regardless of the weather – overcast, cold, tinged with drizzle – I was standing by the gate. Beneath a haze of rain I waited patiently for somebody to arrive. This entailed about ten minutes of staring out onto an empty street before a car eventually appeared. At range, said car appeared to be a hearse-looking thing – *sensible given the circumstances*, I thought – but when it reached the rail-gate it turned out to be nothing more than some kind of repurposed minivan. There was a police siren on its roof.

I manned the entranceway – now opened – and as the vehicle turned in it stopped beside me. The window went down and the driver became apparent to me.

“Sorry for the delay,” he said. “Had trouble finding the place.”

I frowned. “I’m practically down the road from you. Surely, Walker mentioned–”

“Must’ve missed you. Your sign’s tatty. That’s probably why we went past it.” He stuck his head out of the vehicle and appraised the sign once more.

“Oh,” I said.

Although I didn’t really want to agree with the driver, I had to. That sign, along with a few other fixtures around the lot, *had* fallen into disrepair. When I eventually did get around to them, I resolved that I would get around to them good. The sign – a billboard, really – was all that greeted

potential customers as well as any renters the lot still retained. Being the most obvious item in need of work here, it was first on my 'things-in-need-of-fixing' list.

"It's just… lifeless-looking," he added. "Could probably do with a new coat of paint."

He slipped back inside, rolled shut his window and drove the car up the incline ahead of him. The wheels spun and some fast-congealing sand was thrown up in the midst of this, but I wasn't really bothered by it. As I dragged the gate shut and watched the car making its way towards my office, I wondered how they could've driven past the storage lot without me having seen them.

By the time I had summited the slight hill, the pair had already exited their vehicle. One of them, the driver, the sign-hater, was stood beside the car, emptying out the contents of a pipe and letting it fall at his feet. I watched as he ground this mess up with the sole of his shoe. His partner, markedly less offensive, was tying his shoelace. When he was done looping his way to surefootedness he looked up at me, wiped his hand on his pants leg and then presented it to me.

"Hiya. You th'owner of this lot? Got sent out t'collect body o' yours."

His greeting, his question and his directive rolled around in my head and I thought that if I could slow all of it down, prune away his unusual accent, and maybe space them out a bit better, what he'd said might turn into a normal-sounding sentence.

"Whereabout's it?" He looked around.

There wasn't much of a man stood before me. He was a head shorter than myself and, what with the way he looked, the word 'compressed' could be applied to him. I wouldn't have called him fat, per se, but when gravity exerts such an obvious force upon a body, its contents tend to spill out proportionately as a result. He had tried his very best to keep himself confined to his clothing but, regardless, I could see his stomach peeping out between the buttons straining to keep his shirt together. I felt the piercing gaze of his navel.

I shook his hand, nodded.

Neither man had bothered to introduce himself to me and, instead of wondering why, I thought perhaps that I had failed to pick up on some important social cue. Missing said cue obviously meant foregoing introductions completely. This sort of thing was not unusual for me and so I had no trouble dealing with it. If these gentlemen weren't going to be forthcoming with their actual names then they would be provided new ones.

The man before me: short, squashed, and squat, was – I could see it now – Sergeant Stubbs. Actually, *the* Sergeant Stubbs: that flatfoot extraordinaire, always with an ear close to the ground. This, however, was due to his genetic predisposition rather than his acumen.

"Th'body," he said. "Where's it?"

I pointed into the distance, some area that could best be described as ‘over there’. I watched as his eyes traced a path from my fingertip to the labyrinth nearby.

“Need y’t’be a bit mo’specific than tha’.”

“I’ll show you,” I said.

Stubbs looked across at his partner and my eyes followed. The pair of us watched as smoke began to curl upwards out of the pipe he’d had just lit. Only one of us assessed him further.

This pipe-smoking fellow *was* in every way that his partner wasn’t. An almost-comedic foil of his counterpart, he was tall, 'towering' some might say, and – at an estimate – easily three heads higher than his associate. Though he was a thin man, in some places perhaps unhealthily so, he wasn’t by any means wasted away. I could see, outlined beneath the thin material of the shirt that hung loosely from him in places, the contours and ridges of what was most likely musculature.

I wondered whether somebody down at the station had put these two together for a laugh, had seen small-and-stocky Stubbs and thought that there was only one person with whom he could be paired: Sergeant Stringbean.

My reverie was interrupted by Stubbs calling over to his partner. “You walkin’?” He went around to the driver’s side door and stood beside him. “Give us th’keys, then. I’ll drive slow-like ‘n’ you can follow.” Stringbean, with the pipe wedged between his lips, nodded and then handed over the keys. Stubbs took these, slotted himself behind the steering wheel and, after adjusting it to satisfy his stature, he leaned across the passenger-side seat, opened the door and told me to get in, which I did.

“Y'only need point,” he said, whilst craning over the steering wheel.

Even seat-belted I felt somewhat unsafe because Stubbs gave me the distinct feeling that he wasn’t driving the vehicle so much as aiming it. Regardless, I directed him and, after some slow-coasting so as to allow his partner to keep up with us, we arrived at the locker in question. He overshot the door and, with a bit of hand-waving from his associate, proceeded to back the vehicle closer towards it.

“Seems like Miss Walker tied the place up last night,” Stringbean called. I watched him in the wing mirror as he tapped his foot on the cable-tie.

“Good f’her, tha’s procedure,” Stubbs said as he hoisted himself out of the car.

He waddled over and stood beside his partner who, crouched now, was about the same height as him. I watched all of this, reversed, in the wing mirror. Stringbean took the pipe out of his mouth, eyed its contents briefly, and then knocked it against the locker’s door twice as a means of emptying it. Whatever fell out lay smouldering beside him on the ground. He slipped the pipe back into his pocket.

It was then that I undid my safety belt, climbed out of the vehicle and went to stand beside the two policemen who had been sent to remove my body.

Stringbean made this gesture, a hand alternating between open and closed, at the pair of us until his partner eventually passed him a multi-tool. This he used to cut through the cable tie. I watched as he tossed the resulting pieces aside.

There was no real reason not to make conversation and so I went ahead and made some. “Does this sort of thing happen often?” I asked.

“Which par’?” Sergeant Stubbs replied, taking the multi-tool back from Stringbean.

“Body-fetching callouts?”

He shrugged. “Now ‘n’ ‘gain. Say once e’ry few months?” He looked at his partner who nodded. “Ain’t always suspect though,” he continued. “Walker made this‘un out t’be a bi’ odd. Usually it’s nothing unt’ward: bodies found in un’standable circu’stances.” He interpreted the frown I gave him as me misunderstanding. “So tha’s things like car crashes or suicides. Callouts where th’See-Oh-Dee’s known.”

He gazed toward his partner and then ran his eyes up and down the door which stood between us and the body. Before he could disappear too deep into his own thoughts I asked him what his acronym meant.

“Means 'cause o' death'. As in: 'why’s this ‘ere body a body?' ”

After nodding my understanding, I tried, in what I hoped was a manner most casual, to direct our conversation elsewhere. “Any idea where Walker is today? She said maybe she’d be here.”

Before Stubbs could reply the conversation between us was quieted. Stringbean had lifted the locked door open quickly and the noise of it rolling away overhead was somehow louder than it had been the previous night.

He peered into the darkness which lay before him and rested his hand on the flashlight fixed to his belt instinctively. Stubbs leaned over, teetered uncertainly for a second before regaining his balance, and squinted past his partner and into the locker’s depths.

“O!” he said, executing a rather sudden about-turn. “D’you say summat?”

I shook my head.

Like their predecessor, these two seemed unfazed by the smell. I switched the light on and we all waited until its flickering had stopped before proceeding. The scene – as it had been left the previous night – was undisturbed. Ahead lay the body.

“Do you think you’ll be able to get the gurney in?” Stringbean asked.

Stubbs, after scanning the room in what – at best – could be called a very brief assessment, shrugged. “Mebbe,” he concluded. “Though I may’t bash summat.”

“What?” I asked.

“You’ll have to excuse my partner’s indelible accent. It has proved *rather* hardy regardless of his transfer.” Stringbean turned his attention to Stubbs. “What he means is that the gurney might hit something. I’d rather that *didn’t* happen,” he said. “So what I think we’ll do is move things aside as we make our way along.” Stringbean then looked expectantly at his partner who, after a brief delay, started looking expectantly back at him. They both appeared to be waiting for the other to act. “You have the keys,” Stringbean eventually declared.

“Right y’are,” Stubbs said whilst sauntering towards the rear of the vehicle. He rattled the keys in the lock there for quite some time before eventually opening the thing up. I watched as he began to remove a rectangular metal board from it and, once enough of this was outside of the vehicle, a pair of cast-iron supports came away from its underside, unfolding until their wheels bounced against the ground, clattering loudly. The black bag lying on the board’s surface rustled with this movement.

After the rest of the gurney had clunked down and cleared the vehicle, Stubbs dragged it towards the locker’s entrance. His partner placed himself at the front of the apparatus, gestured that his associate should take up the rear, and the pair proceeded slowly inwards. I fell into step behind them.

Occasionally Stringbean would halt our procession so as to clear the path and if he wasn’t loud or quick enough in terms of his orders – variations of: 'hold on a sec', 'stop now', or 'give us a moment here'; then Stubbs would more likely than not end up pushing the gurney into him. I could hear Stringbean’s loud sighing from where I stood.

At every deliberate stop I watched Stringbean press aside the detritus of perhaps once-important possessions. Moving them this way and that, sometimes by foot, other times by hand, he led the gurney towards the body. The dust he kicked up in the process, disturbed for the first time since it had settled probably, rose up and thickened the air around us, adding to its overall unpleasantness.

It seemed as if we moved at a slower pace than Walker and myself had done the previous night and I thought that the gurney was most likely to blame for this. On top of this there was an added delay which – I eventually decided – resulted from the dynamic that existed between the two sergeants. I tried to imagine what sort of other escapades they might have been on, or whether they had ever been involved in anything wayward enough to be deemed a ‘shenanigan’.

When we were about three quarters of the way in – a distance estimate from somebody not too savvy with distance estimations – the light in the storage locker went off, and with it the characterisation I was conducting in my head. Not for reasons of fear, mind you. Instead I had realised that with the lights now dead, this little moment right here – well! – it had this newfound potential, this ability to perhaps morph into some kind of antic for all three of us.

Stood there in the darkness I beamed.

For what felt like an eternity we three waited in the murk. This ended when the two officers eventually removed their flashlights and shone these around, first sweeping the room before pointing their lights at each other, and then finally at me.

"Check the light, would you?" Stringbean shone his torch toward the locker's entrance as he ordered me backwards.

I took a few steps away from the gurney before turning towards the locker's entrance. The natural light there – or at least whatever the weather had done with it today – wasn't making any sort of effort to press its advance into the unlit locker. Instead it waited just inside the door. It was still something to walk towards however. I approached it slowly and, once there, I flicked the switch up and down.

And then up.

And then down again.

Stringbean and Stubbs, both with their beams on me, watched my meaningless switch-flicking. I made my way back towards them after leaving it up, hopeful that the light would return once whatever was wrong righted itself.

The taller of the two shook his head. "You shine up ahead of me and I'll keep mine low," he said. "I need to see what's at my feet here."

The going was slower and, due to the lack of light, fraught with more laboured pauses as our leader cleared the way ahead.

"Locker's long," Stubbs observed.

Only after he had said these words did the reality of the room dawn on me. And maybe it was the darkness that did it, which warped the locker and made it seem larger. Without light I was left doubting this place's bounds, its shape. Without sight leading my senses, the room had become infinite. Here was a place that simply couldn't be pinned down or plotted.

Lights, it seemed to me, always chose the most inopportune moments to go out. Somehow they demonstrated something by disappearing. Their absence made previously unconsidered aspects – things like space and scale – readily accessible. It was paradoxical how they were able to put things into perspective.

This darkness was an uneventful one wherein each man kept to himself. When the darkness eventually ended – the bulb overhead flickering before re-lighting solidly – we were a few footsteps from the body. Stringbean stopped abruptly, switched off his flashlight, and slid it back into his belt. Following this he grabbed the body bag and gestured that Stubbs should set the gurney up alongside the corpse. He rested his flashlight on the one end and then repositioned the rig.

The body hadn't changed since last night. Or perhaps it had, just at a molecular level which was unavailable to everybody present. I knew decomposition was unavoidable. Even if there was no-one around to watch it happen, things fell apart, broke down.

This gentleman seemed to have escaped, for now at least, the degradation one usually associates with being dead. What with the way he looked, and maybe a spot of makeup for the occasion, he could perhaps still pull off an open casket. However, judging by how long he had been left lying here, I was doubtful as to whether this man would receive a funeral at all. Maybe his friends and family *had* hunted for him, *had* tried their damnedest to find him, but because of this locker and maybe his unwillingness to disclose his having rented it, he would remain hidden.

"It looks like our man here might've missed a few meals," Stringbean said.

Stubbs guffawed at this. I, however, chose to laugh sensibly.

After shushing his partner, Stringbean held the body bag at head height. Clasping one end of it, he let loose the other, leaving it to unravel. He shook this out twice before laying it down between the gurney and the body. He took the zipper between his thumb and forefinger, rested his foot on the one end of the bag to secure it, and then pulled. I watched the teeth separate. He opened the bag, preparing it for the body it would soon be holding.

I watched as each officer gloved himself and fought at the latex whilst pulling it, one-by-laborious-one, over their fingers. With their gloves on, the pair changed, became more solemn somehow, and the moment we were formalised, as if only now the dead deserved something resembling respect. Stubbs' raucous laughter – an eruption only a few moments old – felt as if it were part of the far past.

Stringbean stooped slightly and slipped his gloved hands beneath the dead man's shoulders whilst his partner wrapped his around each leg at the shin. Without much effort, the pair hoisted the body up, then over and ultimately into the bag laying beside it.

The process was a neat one, practiced almost, and the body, solid-seeming when it was on the ground, was actually rather limp when lifted up. This flaccidity helped though as it afforded Stubbs and Stringbean the opportunity to, gingerly, lift here and rearrange there so as to get the gentleman inside the body bag. Eventually they reached a point where the whole thing could be zippered. I watched Stubbs start this process, tugging the zipper until the halfway point – all the tiny

teeth meshing together perfectly. Stringbean then took over, drawing to a close the entire affair. The last thing I remember – for its vividness – was the man's face disappearing, swallowed up and sealed away, as Stringbean secured the bag. He was evidence now.

With the bag closed and the risk of contamination averted, each officer removed their gloves and, after these had been bagged, their sequence continued. I watched as the pair readied themselves for their next lift – ground to gurney.

The next moment had this odd synchronicity to it as, following both men laying hands on the body bag, something in the locker made itself heard. It came in the form of a low growl which, after having gathered enough momentum, became omnipresent. Both men tensed up before freezing.

There was a moment's silence.

"What was that?"

"Dog," Stubbs replied, matter-of-factly.

"I know it's a dog, you idiot," Stringbean hissed. "I mean: where is it?"

He looked at me as if I might have the answer and in his eyes I saw something that resembled fear. A horrible sentiment to see in the eyes of any individual, fear in the eyes of a policeman was worse still. I thought that if there was any way for me to allay his feeling it would be through effective torch use. I grabbed Stubbs' torch and shone it into those darker recesses of the room, into those spaces dingy enough to create good hiding spots. I cast the beam around us – an expanding circle – whilst both men watched.

And the beam made light work of the necessary exploration, illuminating a wide variety of noteworthy-but-not-now objects; various possessions whose descriptions would raise questions as to why they were even worth possessing at all. Sadly, what with all this uneasiness about, the only pressing thing warranting extra words was the dog and its whereabouts.

Three rounds of the room via torchlight showed nothing, though this absence had no calming effect.

"Let's get this gentleman up, onto, and then out of here," Stringbean said. His suggestion of 'up, onto, and then out' sounded like a 3-step procedure he would be happier running through. "I'll feel a bit more comfortable once I'm out of here." He jerked the body bag upwards, urging his partner back into action.

"You got a dog on property, mister?" Stubbs asked.

"There's a dog here, yes, but she isn't mine."

"Whose then?"

"No idea," I replied. "Only found out she was here last night."

"Is it dangerous?"

Stringbean's question bounced about in my head for some time. Obviously upsetting, this brief delay of mine caused him to rush ahead in our conversation, meaning he skipped me and took two turns in a row.

"As in: will it bite me?" he asked.

"I think anything can be dangerous," I replied. My answer, late now, sounded mismatched and meant nothing to Stringbean. I hurried on. "And I don't know whether she'll bite you or not," I said, in an attempt to re-sync our conversation. "If it's any consolation to you, she does have teeth."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

I shrugged. "The potential for biting is there, I guess."

This didn't seem to ease Stringbean at all and so I began describing the dog in the hopes of calming him. In the same way that a criminal's identikit may feel like a life preserver to curb that lost-at-sea feeling, perhaps me describing the dog could provide them with the same feeling.

So I told them about the encounter I'd had with her the previous night. And, for safety's sake, I did so exhaustively.

Throughout my tale's retelling I watched as Stringbean's facial expressions changed, switching whenever needed. He went wide-eyed when necessary. When the story called for it his lower lip trembled. When I mentioned the sudden noise I'd heard the night before he glanced over his shoulder nervously. Judging by Stringbean's reactions I had done a pretty good job of retelling it.

Overall though I found his showing of fear to be misplaced. All of it made me wonder whether perhaps a similar dog- or wolf-themed encounter had occurred somewhere in his own past. *That had to be it*, I thought, because following my story, Stringbean looked as if he had lived the whole thing rather than having just listened to it.

Or maybe nothing bad had happened to him previously. Perhaps I was simply projecting onto the poor fellow. Placing my past onto his present. Maybe the only reason he looked as if he *had* lived through the whole ordeal was because of my top-notch storytelling.

That, I decided, was it.

"It wasn't a wolf though," I eventually finished, adding a little laugh afterwards to amplify the light-hearted nature of the story.

The simultaneous conclusion of my private thoughts as well as my public speaking left a rather lengthy pause in the air. Stringbean, mouth slightly ajar, stood there watching me. I wondered whether maybe he'd misheard me.

"I said: 'it wasn't a–"

"May't've slipped in when th'lights dipped," Stubbs said.

I wasn't completely certain of that and, judging by his tone, neither was Stubbs. For one thing, there would be paw prints evident on the floor behind us, because that's the sort of thing you'd expect from a flesh-and-bones animal. I swung around and admired the pathway that the three of us had left in the dust behind us and took note of how the gurney's tracks bordered these. These fresh marks had been made over those Walker and I had made last night. Amidst all of our varying shoe-sized prints, dappled here and there, were doggy ones.

"It looks like the dog *did* follow us in when the lights went off," I said, after turning back to face the pair. I felt somewhat calmer. "Fancy that."

Stubbs, sensing a moment in need of moving along, jerked the body upwards in the same fashion his partner had before. I watched this brief undulation as it carried from one man to the other. For a moment the corpse between them became a conduit, a medium for sending messages.

"Come on, then," Stubbs ordered, tilting his head towards the gurney. "Let's get goin'."

Stringbean nodded silently and the pair sidestepped, took up positions at each end of the gurney and then lowered the body onto it. The taller of the two gentlemen – when the time finally came – was quick to take the lead in leaving, practically jumping towards the front of the reoriented gurney. His partner, aft, gripped the rail there almost absentmindedly as the body was wheeled out into the light of day. What with the hurry Stringbean seemed to be in, Stubbs appeared to be dragged, hanging onto the handrail as if only along for the ride.

Once the three of us were outside again, Stubbs lined the gurney up with the rear of the vehicle and slotted it back inside. I watched both sets of wheels fold away neatly and appreciated how well designed the whole rig was. Stringbean, who wasn't watching how well designed the whole rig was, was instead fumbling his way through the routine associated with preparing a pipe. He did this shakily.

With the gurney stored away and securely fastened, Stubbs closed the rear door. "That'll be us going, then."

The door's closing – sudden, noisy – drew my attention and made it his. I heard the keys rattle as he went about the re-locking procedure.

"D'you need a lift back to your office?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I replied. "We aren't that far in."

Stubbs shrugged. "Suit yerself." He looked across at his partner who, now finished with packing his pipe, was searching for something with which to light it. "Leave't for now," he called. "Can smoke all y'want once we're back at station."

Stringbean nodded and compressed himself into the passenger-side seat of the car. Stubbs made himself comfortable behind the steering wheel once more and, before firing up the vehicle, summoned me to his window.

"Walker may't come 'round 'ventually," he said. "Mentioned summat 'bout paperwork, thought maybe there'd be records on property what could 'elp identifying your man back 'ere." He jerked his thumb backwards and pointed at the body bag behind him.

"You don't need to do that," I said. "I know we're talking about the dead guy." I looked at the body bag and then back at Stubbs. "I'll wait to hear from her," I said. "If there's anything around here resembling a records department I can't say that I know about it, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt anybody if I went looking for it."

Stubbs did a bit of nodding and, as an unintentional by-product of this, some jiggling. This gesture seemed like it might go on forever, as if he had accidentally built up too much momentum with the first few nods, but he managed to stop eventually. "Well, be seein' you," he said.

In the midst of his window going up I asked if he wouldn't mind leaving the rail-gate open after the pair of them had gone through it.

"What with the body gone I guess it's alright to open up shop now," I said.

Stubbs chuckled at these words. "Righto." He nodded. Spurring the car into action, he revved the engine and then drove off, the still-silent Stringbean in tow.

The walk back to my office was a slow one and all throughout I pondered what the rest of my day might hold. I doubted whether any other dead bodies would feature in it. Not that there was anything wrong with having a normal sort of day, I told myself. There was a relief that came with shifting deadweight off my shoulders and onto somebody else's.

After unlocking the door to my office, I went inside. Sitting down behind my desk, I switched my laptop on and checked the time on my cell phone. It was just after eight o'clock. The day had barely begun, and here I was sitting in my office, the most thrilling part of it fast-disappearing from memory. I tried not to dwell on this. The rest of the day wasn't something I could write off this early in the morning.

On my mental horizon, there loomed a feeling, and at first appraisal I thought it might be boredom. This, however, was foolish. *How now?* I thought. I couldn't possibly be bored after only having spent a single day here. Me, I was… *otherwise* – some uncommon-for-me feeling – a new sensation at which I was inexperienced. Dissatisfaction, disappointment, or perhaps some combination of the two, was what plagued me perhaps. What lay ahead of me, I felt, was this dreary afternoon; one that couldn't best the morning it followed on from.

Positivity, I knew, would prevent or at least waylay this odd sensation, and so I tried to reframe my thoughts. As in: yes, it *was* just after eight o'clock, and the day had barely be-blah-blah-blah – but! – who knew what kind of potential it might hold?

It was just then, on the cusp of me telling myself that anything could happen, that I knew, realistically, there had to be boundaries. The day was in no way obligated to excite and wouldn't better or worsen itself to suit me. Its interest lay in progression, movement from one end to the other, regardless of what happened in-between. The width I wanted – the excitement that I demanded from the day – was something I alone could provide. And, failing that, what was wrong with having a normal day?

Perhaps settling into some kind of routine would prove good for me. I could do with things around me happening in an ordered fashion. I'd been told that things in series were safer.

Just then, padding in silently, the dog entered my office. Without anything in the way of ceremony, she lay down.

"You've got a thing or two to learn when it comes to sneaking about in the darkness. Namely, that it's the sort of thing you shouldn't be doing."

She paid me no mind.

"People don't like it," I said.

I waited for something to happen – anything would've done, really – but it didn't. Beside the bed the dog fell asleep or, with her eyes now closed, wanted to perhaps give me the impression she had done so.

The best thing for this overabundance of time I was currently experiencing, I decided, would be to waste it. Doing something like thumb-twiddling or rearranging my meagre stationery collection would do the trick. That would certainly spice things up. Excitedly, I opened the drawer to my right, safe in the knowledge that I would be able to pass some time by reordering its contents. All of these newfound activities would help keep my boredom at–

Nestled amongst the drawer's varied contents I saw the papers.

"Well," I said, taking it out. "Now's as good a time as any, I guess." I ran my fingers over it, examining it closely, the way I should've done yesterday. It was dusty still and I tried to clean it. Whilst doing so, I got the overall impression of brittleness. As if, at any moment – were my touch anything other than gentle – the staple might give, the pages disintegrate.

I ran a hand over it, felt its texture beneath my fingertips. The previous evening, in my haste, I'd designated it as some kind of letter. Now though, in better light, brighter-eyed, I could discern more.

"It's a story, I think. The handwriting's… interesting." I narrowed my eyes, brought the page closer to them. "I mean, there's words here that are illegible. Important words, too. Not just silly article ones."

Running my finger along the first line of that first page left me wondering why some people bothered handwriting at all.

"'He – *whatted?* – her'?" I read aloud. "Come now, this is key information I'm missing. Am I supposed to just guess what's going on here?

"No," I muttered, shaking my head. "These are necessary words. I can't just go in and… and… and… *add* here and there. I can't just guess what you meant. That'd alter the meaning," I said. "This is yours, not mine." I scratched my head. "Who takes the time to painstakingly handwrite something indecipherable?"

Peering over the page's edge I saw the dog watching me intently.

"You're awake," I said. "Good thing too, otherwise I'd have just spent the last little while complaining to nobody. Here's what I'm dealing with, listen to this:

Up until this point in time she had believed that things between the pair of them were going quite well. As well, she thought, as could be expected. All of this was set to change though when, late one night, he [redacted] her. And horribly too.

"Do you see? That's critical information missing right there and here's me left guessing what's been said. What happened? Did he *beat* her? Did he *kill* her? Did he *leave* her?" I pressed my finger into that smudged-beyond-recognition scrawl, hoping that the pressure would bring some kind of clarity to it. I tried to rein myself in. "Perhaps all he did was call her," I offered. "Maybe all he wanted to do was *talk*."

I read ahead, deciphered what I could from the next few lines of text.

"Okay, well, he definitely *didn't* call her. Or talk to her, or be reasonable in any way, shape, or form. *Is* this supposed to be a story?"

I flipped the script over, regarded the emptiness of its last page, then flipped it back. I found myself wondering – at a per-page rate – just how much of his own meaning he'd actually transferred and, because of his poorly-selected medium, how much of my own I'd have to supply.

"You know, the only thing this really has going for it is the fact that we found it close to a dead body. I mean there's the very real possibility that this could be disappointing."

That's not to say that the [redacted] history was rainbows and butterflies. Things [redacted] hem had suffer[redacted] casion. B*ut what of it*, she thought. Everybody knows tha[redacted] teran married as well as the newlyweds all go through their fair share o[redacted]. Right?

"Okay, sure. This all seems fine. We'll go with 'their entire history' and 'things between them'. That seems sensible. Nothing's lost there."

[redacted] ugh she'd noticed this shif[redacted] an she loved. *An odd and above all noticeable change*, she thought. Fo[redacted] reason, [redacted] asn't hims[redacted] and Susan simply [redacted] finger on the rea[redacted] why. *And it bothers me*.

Sat there, I squinted at the text.

"This guy's got quite a long name…" I tapped the word I worried about and then found myself wondering what purpose this would serve. I shook my head. "Doesn't matter," I said. "The first word missing here's time-specific… maybe 'recently'… or 'lately', because it's only just happened, hasn't it? Susan's still trying to deal with it all still." I nodded. "Right! So! Something about him had changed – except, no, it hadn't! – because then we'd have two changeds too close together. That wouldn't work. No, no. What he did, I think, is 'shift'."

All th[redacted] new [redacted] was that all of this started – [redacted] *w long ago it felt too*! – [redacted] dearest Rutherford had received a telephone [redacted] night. After having spent about half an hou[redacted] phone he became decidedly unset[redacted] of course, she had been quick to notice this. *He's agitated… how very unlike him*. Such an oddity too, for [redacted] this was the sort of th[redacted] Rutherford wouldn't mind discussing. Instead, it seemed to he[redacted] he had decid[redacted] keep it [redacted] [redacted] lf. There was an air of reluctance to her husband that[redacted] ver borne witness [redacted] fore. *Whye*[redacted] *do that*?

I shook my head. "*Rutherford*. I already don't like him."

[redacted] cided to press him for inf[redacted] who had called – *and why* [redacted] *ngodly hour* – Rutherford didn't [redacted]. This, already, was out of character [redacted] sband but [redacted] sked a second [redacted] he had – and this was something [redacted] experienced before – lashed [redacted] hissing 'none of your bloody business' [redacted] bared teeth. *Who* [redacted] *man sat before me*?

Flabbergasted to say [redacted] had stormed out of the room[redacted]sband alone, angry, and staring silently into [redacted]ying fire. She wouldn't be spoken to [redacted] would not. *Inexcusable behaviour*, sh[redacted]

"I always thought that you could only be flabbergasted if the surprise was a pleasant one. Good for you, Susan. Good for you."

Susan didn't [redacted]eaking to him for [redacted] night and, when he came to bed – *finally* – she rolled [redacted] from him, and slept on. *The cold shoulder*, she thought to herself.

[redacted]logy she deserved and the conversation [redacted] come, could only occur followi[redacted] work day. [redacted] opportunity to hear him out would be when evening [redacted]erhaps over dinner – [redacted] *and meatballs*? – she would give – *nay, allow* – [redacted]he opportunity to apologise for his uncharacteristic outburst. Maybe thesre [redacted]eason for him having been so short [redacted] *to hear him out, whatever the problem may be*.

The topic was nev[redacted] table sadly. [redacted] spoke only about their respective workdays. His, mediocre. Hers, uneventful. *Yawn-filled, actually*. [redacted] tonight's conversation was trivial. After they'd both finished eating [redacted] clear the table, her Rutherford [redacted] – *in quite a hurry too!* – because the telephone [redacted]

A lonely five [redacted] their 'shared' washing [redacted] inform her that tonight's phone call [redacted] from yesterday. [redacted] *same person, perhaps?* She simply had to know and so, with this in mind and filled with the hope [redacted]oing on with her husband, [redacted]ft the sink and [redacted]pstairs, tip-toeing [redacted] *I'll know,* she thought, *and soon too.*

The tele[redacted] bed was an old thing – *not even a cordless!* – but it would allow her to listen [redacted] call. [redacted] trepidation – *why ha*[redacted] *so untrusting?* – she slowly lifte[redacted] ear. *Why've I been driven to this?*

[redacted] total silence. *Have I been overheard?* Perh[redacted] manner in which she had lifted [redacted] *Deafening, probably,* she thought. Patiently waiting for something – Rutherford's admonishing tone perhaps? – she listened [redacted]ut nothing [redacted] *made a peep*.

[redacted] just then, as her suspicions were fast abating, [redacted] quietly – *am I hearing things?* – came the sound of breathing.

I looked at the dog.

And the dog didn't look back at me because, somehow, she had managed to fall asleep again.

"This is creepy."

The dog stirred, stood, stretched, and then circled the spot she'd been lying on. Eventually she lay down once more and then yawned hugely.

And regardless of the fact that yawning isn't actually contagious, I yawned too.

"Where were we?" I looked down at the page and ran my finger along the last line of text I had read, mumbling it to myself as I went. I turned over.

Hungrily, I consumed the first sentence–

I… hesitated.

"There's nothing here." I raised the paper above my head, held it up to the light. "It's just… blank."

The dog wasn't at all interested in my predicament.

"Is there a page missing?" I brought my face closer to the blankness, peered at the staple there and tried to see whether one had perhaps been torn away. I saw nothing untoward there, no remnants. "This is on *purpose*. Nothing's missing. The story is… finished… just incomplete."

I returned the script to the drawer, pressing it as far back as I possibly could. After shutting it away I sat silently, there in my chair, reordering my thoughts, trying my utmost not to feel betrayed.

The frown that found its way onto my face wasn't wanted and so I tried to shake it off. "It's like a contract, isn't it? Between speaker and listener, writer and reader, there's this… unspoken agreement… It's inherent in the entire process. It's *supposed* to be give and take."

I shook my head.

"If you're going to do this sort of thing, if you're going to tell a story, there's things you have to do, things you have to pay attention to. A plot's supposed to resolve, it arcs upwards, excites, and then it's supposed to be unravelled artfully. That's denouement."

I looked at the dog, unmoved still.

"This," I said, tapping a finger on the gathered pages, "is a deception. And, whilst that's okay to a degree, being blatantly incomplete isn't."

I thought about direction. I thought about the shapes of stories and where they seemed to be going, about their titling, their simplifying, and synopsising. I thought about the reader being

forewarned, foreshadowed, and foreplayed. I thought about stories and the ways in which we judged them. I thought about signs.

Erected on the roadside just before the storage lot, was a rather straightforward sign. Maybe just a little too no-nonsense. The words, faded from age now, still proclaimed 'STORAGE LOCKERS FOR RENT'. Beneath this were some haphazardly placed dollar signs that likely served as de facto instructions for those individuals who maybe didn't understand fully what the process of renting entailed.

Although the storage lot did have a name, it apparently wasn't something deemed worthy of signboarding. However, what with all of the dirt and muck crowding out the visible words up there, something might have been hidden underneath. All would be revealed after my ascent and liberal application of elbow grease. With a bit of work and maybe some touching up of the lettering, the name buried beneath that layering of dirt would hopefully match the one I'd seen on the documentation I'd signed during the hand-over.

From down here it was quite hard to consider the amount of work that necessary. Not only that, but I couldn't wrap my imagination around exactly *how* I could add some kind of flair to the thing. Here was the opportunity to create something eye-catching, an opportunity to really stamp myself all over this place, and squinting up at it from ground level simply wasn't conducive to creative thinking.

This I thought as I set the ladder up alongside the sign's base whilst occasionally glancing upwards to ensure closeness to my soon-to-be work area above. Finding the flattest surface possible meant that I could significantly lessen my chances of tipping over, toppling off, and becoming yet another person in that percentage of individuals who fall accidentally, albeit hysterically, due to improper ladder use. I have always been cautious when it comes to using ladders because my brain's knee-jerk reaction to recognising one in the wild is to remind me that around forty percent of fatal falls involve them. However, once my setup seemed sturdy enough – the sort of thing that *every* potential ladder user most likely thinks – I set a tentative foot upon the first rung. Unwilling to become just another statistic, I took the subsequent steps slowly.

Shortly thereafter I had summited the thing and the area directly before me was dominated by the signboard. Below me, only three or so metres down actually, was terra firma. Here, up close and dominating my sightlines because of it, the sign seemed more worse for wear than I had previously assumed. The job was no longer a simple 'touching-up' and I began wondering whether starting anew was perhaps the better approach here. Starting over would mean effacing what was already there, would mean adding extra work to the overall project. Having to clean the slate completely was an overwhelming thought.

Rather work with what you've got.

So I pushed this from my mind and instead considered how much easier things would be if I simply dusted the sign off and, after a bit of by-eye colour-matching, went over the letters and gave them a newer, brighter, and above all livelier coat of paint. Being up this close meant that I could also get an accurate count of just how many new bulbs would be needed to make the sign visible at night, for those times when, *obviously*, people needed to know about storage lots most.

All of this maintenance, however, only if I had the correct tools for the job. I sighed, and then descended slowly.

Amongst the scattering of possessions that I had managed to bring with me was a hammer and a screwdriver. Inevitably, the screwdriver would never be the correct size whilst the hammer would often – because of the grip's cheap quality – slip from my hand at the most inopportune moments. However, as luck would have it neither of these tools would be necessary for the job I had set myself. Still, I had decided that removing them from the drawer and then giving them a stern look before returning them would be the first step on my journey towards leaving the lot in search of new tools at whatever local hardware store I might find.

I was in the midst of fumbling through my overloaded key ring in search of the key to the office when I noticed that the tag presently lodged between my thumb and forefinger read 'Tool Storage'. I stared at this for a few seconds before realising that maybe I no longer had to leave the lot to find what I was after. This was wonderful – *deus ex drawer* – a solution to all of my maintenance-related problems. All I had to do now was find the lock to which this key belonged. My pathfinding from the previous night left me feeling hesitant and I took my first few steps outside cautiously. Away from my office I paused, facing the lanes of lockers which lay ahead.

Even now, though sunlit and quite safe-looking, the maze still felt daunting. The sheer size, the general unexplored-ness of it all, left me worrying about simply walking in. Without a guide rope or a scattering of homeward-bound breadcrumbs there was no real guarantee that I would ever find my way back.

Preparedness was something I could give a bash today. Perhaps even a little bit of expecting the unexpected too. I'd been told to do this sort of thing, to make these little 'plans'. There was no reason to go in blind as I had done the previous night. The results had proven less than satisfactory, though this all depended on the view one took of the situation. Perhaps getting hopelessly lost before being nearly maimed by an almost-wolf and then stumbling across a dead body could be the sort of eventful night some individuals yearned for.

Having reached a decision on this I swung about. I would return to my office and prepare some sort of expedition kit and, regardless of the fact that I didn't have a clue as to what such a kit might contain, I found that the thought alone helped strengthen my resolve. Yes, once kitted out, I would then journey into the unknown feeling better prepared for whatever I might face there.

I still had the tagged key clasped between my fingers when, off to the right side of my office, just *there* toward the rear section of the crate itself, I saw a sign sprouting up out of the ground that read 'Tool Storage'. Judging by the script, these words had likely been handwritten during some kind of earthquake. The sign upon which they had been scribbled was so confusing that I had to gather myself before approaching it. The outline was that of an arrow pointing left, but the text – again, barely decipherable – instructed right. The sign wasn't at a crossroads, it *was* the crossroads.

My destination as it turned out, was off to the left, and its proximity to the sign rendered the poor, confused thing quite unnecessary. It was a small, rather haphazard-looking shed which most likely hadn't felt the influence of the tools it supposedly contained. Though it appeared as if a slight breeze might be its downfall, the shed still had a solid door which, on closer inspection, was locked. Key in hand, I remedied this.

Though there was a light inside (that of a large, dust-covered bulb), the gaps between the pieces of wood that made up the walls were large enough to allow sunlight to stream in. The interior of the shed, which from the outside had appeared quite makeshift, was anything but. The shelves within were in pristine condition, spotless as if they had been cleaned quite recently, and the tools that lined them were many in number. I soon discovered that somebody had taken the time to organise these alphabetically. Some of them were still sealed away in their original packaging.

I began searching for those tools that I was after. Brushes, organised here by bristle length, were my first concern and so I took what I needed. Following this and nearly next in series, was a chisel which I would need to open paint tins. In another place entirely, the 'el' shelf it seemed, were light bulbs which had been arranged according to their wattage. Bordering these bulbs was what I thought might be a lathe – a slightly uninformed guess on my part – and then an assortment of locks which were sorted by size, from large to small. Beyond this were the paints which appeared to be organised according to hue. This feat must have taken ages to accomplish.

I tried my best to remember the colours I had seen on the sign prior to visiting this shed and then selected those that were clearest in my mind's eye. The last thing I needed was varnish which wasn't towards the rear section of the shed as I had expected but rather towards the middle, just before the lathe, due to the fact that it had been labelled as 'lacquer'.

I gathered up what I needed into a small heap and then placed this beside the door which I had left hanging open. Better equipped now and with my thoughts on the work ahead, I decided to

pass some time before returning to the sign by rootling about in the tool shed for my own pleasure. The best thing about procrastination is that you can start doing it immediately.

I paid particular attention to those tools that hadn't been opened yet and wondered whether somebody before me had had loftier dreams about maintaining this storage lot. Evidently they hadn't gotten around to achieving them, but having purchased the necessary tools seemed like a strong enough start in my opinion. A foot in the door. Careful so as to not shift their positions or lose their places, I handled these tools cautiously, and as I ran my fingers over them I tried to divine what their intended purpose might have been. How much better could things have been if these tools *had* actually been put to use?

I laid a hand on a drill which – still stored away in its box – rested between a pair of clamps and a rather horrendous-looking disc cutter. The drill – a cordless one, obviously, due to its position in series here – gave me a firm indication as to just how anal the person who sorted these tools probably was. There was a delightful order to the tools here which I quite enjoyed but I found myself thinking that any person more particular than me would be a very particular person indeed.

In the midst of hoping that I'd never cross paths with said person, I busied myself with reading the boxed drill's description and amongst the information printed thereon I stumbled across a single phrase that bothered me. Similar to how the sign outside had made me feel uneasy, here was a string of words that had the same effect. Printed partway down, just there beside the image of a smiling gentleman using the drill, was the phrase 'new ***and*** improved'. Clearly this paradoxical phrase meant nothing to this fellow. He was probably just some paid model after all. An individual who, besides having never dealt with this sort of ambiguity before, had most likely never had to make use of drilling equipment either. Because nobody smiles whilst operating a drill. Nobody sane, anyways.

New and improved, these two 'states', for want of a better word, were mutually exclusive. Being one basically meant not being the other. Improvement negates newness whilst newness implies improvements never having been made. The cordless drill that rested in front of me could be either, but never both, or at least not at the same time. People didn't take the time to think about these sorts of things though. Instead they simply said them and then confronted their paradoxical natures after the fact, or not at all.

This was the case with the drill.

And it made me itch, so I did my best to put it from my mind.

I shifted the box slightly and, in doing so, noticed the thin black outline that had been traced around it. Somebody – most likely the alphabetising individual from before – had also taken the time

to dictate via permanent marker the *exact* positions in which the tools of his (or her) collection should be placed. I marvelled at the orderliness.

During my reflection on the shed's nature – a period in which my senses were heightened and I was a tad twitchy – somebody addressed me. Their voice boomed and it made me think that the collector, perhaps returning now to find their collection tampered with, was about to do the same to my wellbeing. Tamper with it, that is.

I stooped slightly, focused hard, and tried my best to align the box with the black frame that had been traced around it. Though my heart was pounding away in my head I still managed to squeeze my tongue out between my lips and benefit from the increased concentration this action brings.

When I was happy with things being exactly 'as they were', I placed both hands behind my back and then swung about to face the door. I might have been caught at the scene but I definitely wouldn't be taking the blame for anything being awry.

"Anybody in here?" the voice asked, uncertainty-tinged. "Sorry to interrupt whatever it is you're doing, but I have your delivery."

The person responsible for these words, now framed in the doorway, moved their head from left to right, their eyes likely roving about before finally locating me. The still streaming-in sunlight coupled with my cautious nature was a combination that resulted in me squinting at this individual quite intensely. Although I couldn't see him, the look on my face seemed to have an obvious effect, forcing him to offer up an apology almost immediately.

"My delivery?"

"Sorry to interrupt," he began, "it's just the gate was open so I brought the truck in. I thought you'd been told I was coming today."

"Coming for what?"

"To deliver the things," he said. "*Your* things. You would've spoken to one of us on the phone yesterday morning. I'm from the moving company." He pointed to the logo stitched onto the pocket of his jumpsuit and then prodded it for – I assumed – good measure. Just to get the point across, in case I ended up thinking *his* name was 'Life-in-Motion Movers'.

"Nobody called you today?"

I shook my head. "How did you find me?"

"I overheard you talking," he said, looking around the shed quickly, "to… yourself… and then wandered over here from the… office." He paused. "Well, I assume it's an office."

"It's an office, yes."

"And you're the manager here now?"

I nodded.

“Wasn’t it a lady before? I’ve dropped stuff off here before and it was a lady.”

“My aunt,” I said. “She’s away now. I’m in charge.”

“Are you?”

I nodded again. “I was just back here preparing myself for some maintenance. Do you see those tools beside you there?” The pair of us regarded the heap beside him. “Well,” I declared, “that was me. I was just about to repaint the sign out front.”

After regarding the tools for a while, he shrugged, cleared his throat, and then motioned towards a clipboard he was holding. “I have some paperwork which needs signing and then a manifest which needs going over.”

I echoed the word. “Do you mean 'inventory'? A list of my things?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Manifest, inventory, same difference. Think we could run through it quickly? The faster we do that, the faster I can unload everything and then be on my way.”

“Sure.”

“Well, the truck’s ‘round front.” He thumbed the air behind him, turned around, and then trundled out of sight.

The sign repairs would have to wait. Even though I hadn’t even upped them I decided to down tools and follow this gentleman. Before closing the shed, I did my best to shift outside that heap I’d left at the threshold, though doing so by foot – arguably not one of my better ideas – meant this was a feat that took some time to accomplish. I closed the door, locked it, and slipped the keys back into my pocket. After launching myself a few paces so as to catch up with the chap I eventually fell into step behind him.

“There’s a fair amount of things here and I doubt any of it’s going into your *office*, right?”

“Why’d you say it like that?” I asked.

“It’s just… you’re working out of a glorified shipping crate.”

We were walking alongside said crate presently. “I don’t think it’s glorified. Just a normal shipping crate,” I told him. “It’s a box for doing work in. That’s every building everywhere, basically.”

He shrugged.

“So what’s *your* office then?” I asked. “And why’s mine so unsettling?”

“Don’t have one, don’t need one,” he replied. “I spend the majority of my time in *that*.” He had partially rounded the corner and I could see him pointing at *something*, but I couldn’t actually see the something itself.

“I have a feeling you’re trying to show me the moving van you drove here in, but I still need to get around the corner before I can see it.”

Post-rounding, I saw what appeared to be a rather petite van of the orange persuasion. This had been reverse-parked in front of my office. It shared the same logo as the man's jumpsuit. I wondered – after guesstimating the size of the vehicle – exactly how all of my worldly possessions might have been squeezed inside, but I eventually figured that if bending, breaking, and folding were all allowed then the fit would perhaps make more sense. This reality could also be achieved if the moving company had simply elected to leave certain less important items behind.

There *were* things I'd elected to leave behind, but still.

"All of my things are in there?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I find that rather hard to believe."

"Your instructions *were* to clear the place out," he said. "That's what we did. Everything's in here."

I looked at the van, uncertain still.

"Look," he said, "we'll run through the mani– the *inventory* together and you can mark things off as I go about unloading them." He handed the clipboard over to me and – after fishing about in one of his trouser pockets – a pen too. "I'll call something out and you tell me 'check' or whatever. I just need some kind of indication that you've crossed the thing off."

I nodded.

"Alright?"

I shook my head.

"What's the matter?"

"Can't unload it all into my office. That's a workspace. Just back the van down there," I said, motioning towards the row nearest us, "and we can shift it into one of the empty lockers."

"From one box to another, hey?"

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind," he said. After removing his car keys from his person, he made his way to the driver's side door and then climbed in. I stood behind the van with the intention of directing him back towards the locker in question but, after tweaking his rear view mirror and locking eyes with me in it, he shooed me out of his way. Beeping as it went, the van backed up.

Me, I never did anything as I went, just got on with it silently. Eventually I ended up behind the moving van once again. After returning the thumbs up I had been given by the driver, a switch he toggled somewhere within the vehicle caused an electronic lock to click open. The door began moving upward. The process was a slow one and gave the driver enough time to situate himself beside me before it had finished. The snail's pace at which the door moved would be the sort of

thing one typically expects before a stunning – read: worthwhile – reveal. Instead, once the door had rolled away completely, all that was visible were my things. One of the chairs had fallen over.

"Though that's not a big deal or anything," I said.

"Excuse me? D'you say something?"

"Was just muttering to myself there. Sorry."

He shrugged and then clambered up into the back of the van. "Just need to get my gloves on." After patting himself down in search of these, he put them on. No surprise. "Ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Are we just unloading things onto the ground here or are you going to open that thing up?"

The 'thing' he had referred to was the locker in front of which he had parked his van.

"I'm going to open that thing up," I said, before doing just that.

"And then you'll need to keep an eye on that list I've given you," he began, "because when I move something out of here I'll need you to mark it off on there."

"There's only one of you though. Not that that needs pointing out. What's going to happen when it comes to the bigger things?" I asked.

"We'll handle those together."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to send additional movers?"

"Judging by the list… and after a quick look at this lot," he said, hiking a thumb back into the van's depths, "I think you and me'll be fine."

"Okay." I lifted the clipboard up in what I hoped was a business-like manner.

"Besides, business like ours…" His sentence trailed off into silence as he disappeared deeper into the van.

"A *small* business," I corrected.

"Sorry, what was that?" He had reappeared with one of the chairs in tow. This he lowered onto the ground before hopping out of the van. "You say something?"

"Probably just muttering again," I replied.

He lifted the chair up once more, shook it as if to say 'look, here is the chair I'm talking about', and then said the word 'chair' whilst staring directly at me. In response to this I ran the pen down the clipboard in search of something that fit the description. This wasn't a particularly speedy process because the list itself, as far as I could tell, didn't seem to have much going for it in the ways of sensibility and coherence.

"Did you type this up?"

"I did," he replied. "Why? Something wrong?"

"I can't find 'chair' just yet," I said.

“Should be right near the top. Hold on. There’s a few more coming as well, so just wait before you go scratching it out.”

“Ah, found it!” I made a mark beside the word. “Oh! I see you were sensible enough to list the 'bed' things first. Good thinking. Very important.”

“The list is alphabetical,” he said.

I ran my eyes down the page quickly. “So… it… is… That’s good thinking there. Very orderly.”

“You won’t see beds till the very end though,” he said. “They’re all the way in the back there somewhere.” His sentence ended and then he pointed into the van’s recesses.

People always seemed to do that. Just gesture meaninglessly. When it’s clearly *not* needed, they’ll perform these non-verbal duplications. Filler stuff. The physical movement for 'um', the hand gesture for 'er'.

“Isn’t it weird seeing everything you own all listed out like that though?”

With my train of thought derailed, I looked up from the list, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he began, “what I’m getting at is the fact that everything on that list’s what you’ve gathered up over your lifetime. That list… it’s basically everything you own, right? All of this… it’s sort of like *you* in a way, isn’t it?”

I thought on this for quite some time, but my thoughts on the subject were unruly and disconnected. Still, some time went by, and I had to account for that.

“I am not the things I own,” I told him eventually. “You can’t just say that because it’s actually the other way around. These things are an extension of me. I’m the reason they’re here.”

“I don’t think I’m making sense. Maybe what I mean is that it’s like… humbling… or something,” he explained – or at least tried to. “When everything you own is written out small like that, all in one place,” he said, nodding towards the list I held, “it makes you feel a little small too, right?” His voice sounded uncertain. “As if… maybe you haven’t gathered up much at all…”

Before I could reply he gave a quick shrug and walked the chair into the storage locker behind the pair of us. I was left looking at the list which may or may not have been my life. I pored over it and wondered just how much it said about me, how much it gave away. How much of who I am – who I *was*, maybe – could be extracted from these things I owned? I looked at the list:

bed frame (queen w headboard atached)
bed frame (single)
books boxed 1 of 1
broom
chairs (four, one with wonky leg)
cleaning box
cloths horse
clothing boxs (multiple)
collection ~~toys~~ model cars
couch (& cushins x3)
desk (drawers taped shut)
dishwasher
door-mat
dresser
electronics box (various)
fragile box 1 of 2 (???)
fragile box 2/2 (glassware)
framed artwork (x5)
framed photos
fridge
ironing board
ketle (w base)
kitchenware (crockery, cutlery, fork)
lamp X1 (desk)
lamp x3 (standing, no bulbs)
linen 1 of 1 (sheets, pillows, blankets)
matress x2 (queen & single)
mirror x2
microwave
non-perishables box
pot plant
shelfing (flat-packed)
statute
stove
table (dinning area)
tables (side) x2
telescope
televsion (cables, remote with rest of electronics)
toaster
washing machine

And my things didn't speak, or at least told me nothing. There were items that I hadn't expected to see, spelling errors too. Clearly unbothered about the words he'd used, the letters the mover had left out really told me something.

"Are you paying attention?"

I wasn't, but then I was. "You've spelled a few words wrong here," I said, trying to recover. "Did you know that?"

I watched as he unloaded one of the `tables (side)` from the rear of the van. After placing it down he rubbed his gloved hands together.

"Well, were you able to understand what I was trying to say?"

I nodded.

"So does it matter, then?"

It *mattered.* Of course it did, but "I suppose not," is how I replied.

I wanted to tell him that as long as the first and last letters of a word were correctly positioned that the brain would unconsciously 'solve' the jumble served up in-between them, though I doubt he would've appreciated it.

"Just a friendly heads-up, I guess."

He muttered 'thanks' without actually meaning it, before carrying on with the unloading process. When the time came for those larger objects to be hauled out – the part I had secretly been dreading due to the high chance of me having to get involved – he instead made use of some hydraulic trolley device which I had mistaken for a pallet. This device was clearly some tool of the trade and there was a handle that extended from one side of it. On this handle there were a few buttons. After pressing one, the device hissed briefly whilst lowering itself, flattening so much that its belly was probably rubbing up against the non-stick flooring which the van was plastered with. He manoeuvred it – my guess was that it moved about on tiny wheels – into position beneath my fridge. He made sure the whole thing was secure before finally pressing a different button that, after another hiss, caused the fridge to rise upwards slowly. The whole affair was quite something to behold and so I beheld it, enjoying the spectacle up until the point when the fridge tipped slightly to the left and then toppled into the wall beside it.

This led to an outpouring of swearwords from the mover; a continuous, breathless string of them, some of the best cussing I had heard in a long while.

The fridge, now leaning at a forty-five degree angle to the van's padded interior wall, appeared undamaged. "It looks alright. Casual, even."

“I’m really sorry about that,” he muttered. “The pallet has to be dead, dead, dead center before you’re supposed to start lifting. I must’ve… misjudged it. I really can’t tell you how sorry I am.” The words came out of his mouth in a stream, furious.

“No harm done,” I said, climbing into the van. “What say we get this back to normal and then you can try that whole thing again?”

He acted as the resistance as I levered the fridge out of its lean, making sure it didn’t just end up toppling over the other way. Once steadied, he used the handle to shift the pallet about beneath the fridge again. Any movements he made appeared miniscule to me, though I had little doubt that he was trying to get things just right, *perfectly* precise, so as to avoid a repeat performance.

“Dead centre this time,” I said. After hopping out of the van and picking up the clipboard again, I waited patiently for him to wheel the fridge out.

“Dead center,” he muttered, still fiddling with the pallet’s position beneath the fridge.

I readied my pen beside the word `fridge` but would wait until the thing had been fully grounded before marking it off.

When the fridge was quite close to the edge, that overhang signalling the end of the van, he pressed a button secreted somewhere on the interior wall and a ramp shot outwards from the vehicle. Once in position on this new extension, another press of the button lowered the whole apparatus onto solid ground. The fridge, on terra firma once more, could now be marked off.

“Fridge,” I said, greatly exaggerating my use of the pen. “Good stuff.”

He dragged the refrigerator off into the storage locker, backed it up against a wall and, after lowering the pallet slightly, removed it.

We kept at this for quite some time, him backing and forthing between van and locker, whilst I marked things off on the list as he went. His 'item name' shout, my brief search and then 'item name' parroting in the midst of his movement, was the cycle we repeated for the next half hour or so. We continued like this, all call-and-response, until the only things left in the van were the bed frames and their matching mattresses. Far too big for his professional moving pallet, I had to climb back into the van once more and help bring these items out. After going slow and having to tilt them every now and again, these eventually ended up in the locker.

I didn’t bother wondering why I’d brought both along.

With the van emptied and the two of us just standing about, him a bit awkwardly, the time had arrived for the kind of conversation reserved for these situations.

“So do you *live* here or something?”

He had said the word 'live' in the same way one might perhaps say the word 'survive', the phrase 'eke out an existence'.

“I don’t live in this locker specifically,” I replied. “But on the premises, yes.”

“We unloaded everything into this locker, though.”

I had been there the entire time. “Yes, *I know that*. The other bit’s not ready yet.”

“The 'liveable house' bit, you mean?”

I nodded.

He nodded.

And then not much else happened after that.

Eventually the two of us left the locker and, as he readied some paperwork for me to deal with, I brought down the door and locked my possessions away inside.

He drew my attention to a sheaf of pages beneath the inventory which required my signature. This I was happy to do, though the reading that every page probably required, less so.

“What is all of this?” I asked, handing back the clipboard.

“It’s… indemnification of sorts. Basically states that you’ve received everything in the same condition you gave it to us in. Also means everything made it here,” he said. “That there’s nothing missing, basically.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the now-sealed locker. “We didn’t check that.”

“You were going through the list though. *Was* anything missing?” he asked.

After considering this for a while I eventually answered. “I think I’ll only know that when the time comes, I guess. When I find myself missing it, I’ll know it’s not there.”

The moving man both frowned and squinted at me. It had a horrible effect on his face.

“I’m sure it’s all there though,” I said in an attempt to soothe him. “I mean I *did* check off everything on the list you gave me.”

He nodded and then looked down at the clipboard again and flipped through the pages attached to it, most likely double-checking that I had signed in all the right places.

“With the fragile stuff,” and here he broke from normal English to rattle off a single word that sounded like 'glasswarecrockeryvasesurnspotsstatuesyouknowthatsortofthing’, “you’ve got two weeks, that’s fourteen days, to check through and confirm everything arrived intact.”

I hesitated before responding. “Did you just tell me how long two weeks is?”

“Sorry. Force of habit. I have this like… script in my head of what I’m supposed to say when the whole moving process ends. Helps me get through it.”

“I do that as well,” I said. “Doesn’t everybody?”

“Sure, maybe.” He finished leafing through his papers and brought the clipboard up against his chest before finally tucking it away beneath his armpit. “Well, my work here is done.” After an about-turn he reached upwards so as to start bringing down the van’s rear door, but didn’t.

I watched as he leaned forward slightly, peering into the darkness. “What’s wrong?”

“Looks like there’s something in there…”

There was an uncertainty in his voice and so asked if said 'something' was of a scary nature. I didn’t do this though. I did, however, take two steps backwards. “What is it?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Just a box, I think. Hold on, I’ll grab it quick.” He climbed into the van, plod-plod-plodded into its bowels – fearlessly, I might add – and retrieved the package. “Weird, I’m sure I double-checked that list of yours. Fairly certain everything was accounted for.”

He plopped down beside me, handed over the box, and began the slow-closing of the door behind him. I regarded the thing I now held in my hands. It was a long, thin box, most likely designed to hold a bottle, and it bore no markings or labels of any sort. To be honest though this little package was mysterious enough without throwing any kind of ambiguous symbols into the mix.

“Should I open it?” I asked, already halfway through positioning my fingers to do so.

“Everything in the back of the truck *should* be yours. He rubbed the back of his neck. “*Is* this yours?”

The lid was already partway off. “I can’t recall.”

“A family member’s, maybe?”

There was a bottle inside the box, and inside the bottle there was a ship.

I re-entered my office and placed the box containing the bottled ship on the desk, *just* there beside my laptop. I sat myself down and, after re-gathering myself mentally, tried to lay the foundations for what the rest of the day should be built on. There was still more in need of doing around the lot and, what with me being the doer in this particular situation, I couldn't spend my time sitting around thinking about mysterious ships.

I tried my best to pick up where I had left off so as to somehow re-position my interrupted past-self with my *completely* focused present-self. If I could manage this feat then perhaps I would be able remember to what I had been doing prior to the interruption... prior to the moving man arriving.

Eventually I recalled the sign as well as the amount of work it still required. This was only the beginning though as I knew that more tasks lay ahead of me – nothing Sisyphean, mind you – but if one's mindset isn't firmset then these kinds of chores can loom large like mountains.

When I laid them out, listed them for what they were, it felt ordered but also more threatening. Lists, routines, events occurring in something resembling a sequence, these were supposed to put a person at ease, were supposed to make things feel manageable. I'd been told they'd make my life easier. Now though, in my eyes, this list only looked threatening:

- With
- Each
- Bulleted
- Item
- Appearing
- Angry

I sighed, but then tried to brighten myself up by coupling this list together with the fact that all of this work I was doing would, in time, make the place liveable.

And that word, 'liveable', it made me think of other things like comfort, and having my own space, perhaps possessing some kind of home in which to live, and above all freeing myself from the life nomadic. Now all of this left me feeling somewhat down and so I sighed once more. I thought about dominoes and saw myself standing at the unfortunate end of a lengthy sequence of them.

In the midst of this performance, that is: 'Man Feels Sorry for Himself', the dog made its way into my office. This should have been a trivial moment, the sort that wouldn't derail my own, but seeing as how the door was shut I realised that the dog had somehow manipulated the handle to enter. I wondered where she might have learnt such a thing and then ended up reminding myself that it was probably from the same source from which I had done: an accomplished door user.

I cannot rightly recall ever being expressly educated in the art of opening doors or, conversely, of closing them, yet I operated them still. The whole process was an automated one, something easy to overlook, and thus I reasoned that it would be wise to offer the dog the same hospitality.

"Well done, you," I said, though carefully, in the hopes of conveying mild appreciation without sounding *too* congratulatory.

She lay down on the floor *beside* the bed, though this was only ironic for one of us.

"You were missed," I offered casually. "*And* you missed *out*. I started work on the sign, discovered a tool shed, and had *all* of my worldly possessions returned to me. The moving man's come and gone already.

"Though I am by no means moved." I sighed. "Sure, I have all of my things huddled together in one spot but not in something that resembles a home. Life in a locker just isn't for me. I need to find something suitable around here to *actually* live in. I can't be like you," I gazed at the dog, "I can't just lie down and sleep wherever I please.

"I doubt you're one for staying still. Always roaming about, being nomadic, that's your bag, isn't it?"

The dog didn't nod or anything but I knew I was right.

"And that kind of… homelessness, it doesn't bother you?"

No answer. An answer still.

"I guess some people would call it 'freedom'. I just don't know how you can be this… unruffled or… unworried – maybe? – about having nowhere to stay. You just seem so… unflappable." I considered this for a moment. "Or perhaps you are somewhat flapped and have no way of showing it."

She rested her head on her paws and looked up at me, and though her eyes appeared soulful and understanding, I assumed this was simply me projecting.

"Even if it's small," I began, rallying somewhat, "wouldn't having any kind of home be wonderful? Something fixed in space you could call your own? Wouldn't that be nice?" *It would be nice*, I thought, regardless of what beliefs the dog held on the matter. "What I really need is just somewhere to store my things. Someplace that isn't a locker. I don't even care if it's small. An approximation of home, that would do."

It's as if once you have a home you can keep your life all in one place. It can be contained, all stored away and saved up. After enough time, a home becomes a place where you can live with all those things you've accumulated over the years. When surrounded, squeezedsmall and stuck in place by everything that ensnares you, you can reminisce about how every piece you have is

important, has meaning, has some kind of bearing on the direction your life took, takes, will take. You can feel good about it all.

Stored away like that, life becomes so much more… manageable. This I thought as I lifted the bottled ship out of its box, off the struts that helped keep it upright.

I toyed with the ship for a while, but then, after considering its nature and deciding it wasn't a plaything, I began manipulating it more responsibly and with greater care. I peered down the bottle's neck and came face-to-face – or eye-to-face – with the maidenhead there. Somebody must have sunk quite some time into crafting this, I realised, because the mermaid was correct in an anatomical sense, and it impressed me no end.

"That's very fiddly work," I said, squinting. I wanted to whistle my appreciation at this but sadly nobody had bothered to teach me this as a child and so I went back to using praisesome words. "*Wonderful*. All those curves and… uh… proportions," I volunteered eventually, so as to not sound like some kind of pervert.

I looked at the dog and although I felt somewhat guilty, I doubted whether she cared. I steered the conversation elsewhere.

"I really don't have any idea where this little masterpiece came from. Maybe it was a gift given me by some long-ago friend." I longed for this ship – alien-feeling beneath my fingertips – to find a place in my memory, to trigger something. "Or perhaps it's some kind of priceless heirloom passed down from generation to generation," I said loudly whilst internally prodding away at those older, harder-to-reach memories. "And, after countless years, this precious keepsake finally reached me, and I then promptly forgot about it.

I nodded. "Yes, that sounds like me.

"No," I said, rallying, "this isn't mine, isn't my handwork, I mean." It was as if I was trying to explain away some kind of wrongdoing, obscuring it so that I couldn't be held responsible if the ship's true owner ever did come calling. "This," and here I verged on shaking the offending bottled item I held, "was just *there* amongst my possessions, rubbing up against them so as to catch their belonging most likely."

The dog shifted then and made a great fuss of licking at her paws.

"Trying to be mine when it isn't… I don't remember it. I *don't* remember it." Holding the bottle above me, I looked at the ship's underside but saw no maker's mark. "The moving man left it to me, gave it to me even though it probably wasn't his to give, or mine to receive, for that matter. It was just a thing amongst those other things of mine. A stray. Perhaps he thought it was looking for a home?

"I mean I don't think I even have it in me," I said, whilst carefully repositioning the bottle so as to see those finer details on the ship's deck. "The ability, the talent, to reproduce something in miniature, I can't do that." I tried to take in every aspect of this assemblage, even those finer, more evasive details, and whilst doing so I made a ledger of all those things I didn't have it in me to do. "I think if I tried to do this sort of thing now I'd only get frustrated," I muttered, "and quickly too. I just don't have the patience for this sort of thing, or hands steady enough to make it happen."

I could never do this sort of thing, not alone.

"I mean all of that string-pulling, that oh-so-particular fiddling, I'd need the help of younger hands to do that… I – no – I… couldn't. I'd watch, sure, and I'd motivate, I'd guide… but never do."

Despondency was setting in and I could feel myself getting lost, slipping. This failure to remember, I felt myself fixating on it, then drifting along with it.

"Things of this nature are beautiful to behold but oh-so-hard to understand. There's art in here, the essence of a person's creativity captured, contained, but the real *how* one associates with this whole process happening isn't shown here." I held the bottle in my hands and saw the ship for what it was: the solution to an equation without its working out shown "This isn't paint on canvas or words on paper, not some statue coaxed out of stone. There's an illusion here. As if making art simply wasn't enough for the artist and they wanted to bother their audience by hiding the how behind their creativity." I shrugged. "Not that they need show their working, mind you. That sort of thing can remain unseen… but still be implied somehow. Rather have that than obfuscation, than mysticism. Rather that than… magic." I exhaled.

"The apparent paradox here, that of squeezing something improbably big into something impossibly small, this ship-bottling, well," I said, "that's just fluff. It's a hurdle one has to clear before approaching the art. When you strip that away, when you peel away that veneer, you're left with the only thing that's necessary.

"When you expose all of this as a sham…" I paused, looked at the dog. "That's you-*me*, not you-you, obviously. When you show people it's just a bit of string-pulling on a pre-made model squeezed neatly down the bottle's neck, well then the magic just… goes. Poof."

The dog wasn't paying attention.

"POOF!"

The dog was paying attention.

I nodded. "And then the model-maker ceases to be. They're just some sap who bought themselves a do-it-yourself bottled ship – that's yourself-*my*self, not yourself-yourself. They're just a person passing off someone else's creativity as their own. They avoided the lion's share of the work, but still leapt at the credit."

I was at the edge of myself and the chance of me giving the bottle a good shake was heightened. “This is only playing at being paradoxical though. It’s just smoke and mirrors in there.”

The dog either *was* still paying attention or had learned the obviously human ability of being able to feign such. Her paws were crossed daintily before her and she watched me.

“The true paradox is bothersome because the moment you think you’ve managed to wrap a neat little bow around it – once you’re able to grasp it – you realise that you’ve knotted a couple of your fingers up in the process. Your understanding comes at a price.

“But the paradox tantalises, causes debate, raises questions. By its very nature, the paradox stirs. Here’s this conundrum that demands belief in something you can just see is impossible.”

The dog tilted its head to one side and, though it likely wasn’t a signal for me, I took it as such. “Fine, maybe it doesn’t *demand* belief but it does ask for it. It begs the question, you know? It’s like being given an instruction you *must* follow but can’t execute.”

I wanted to flesh my words out with an example, something practical that the dog could use–

“You don’t need an example.” I shook my head. “This sort of thing,” I said, peering down the bottle’s neck once more, “asks for the seemingly impossible and, by doing so, it demonstrates our oh-so-human need to label things that simply can’t be… This kind of thinking, it, it, it pokes holes in us. It exposes our flaws.**”**

I looked at the dog and she looked back at me. “Have you ever heard about the Ship of Theseus?” I asked.

Regardless of her answer, of whether she knew anything about ships or sea-faring, even if she had no knowledge of this Theseus character at all, I elected to speak on, because now the story was started and all I could do was tell it.

I began with a standard 'once upon a time' and then I recounted as I was able to recall it, the story of Theseus. That is, the Greek hero in possession of a ship with which he travelled the seas – however many in number – going about adventuring and the like.

“Pay attention, now. The ship is important. Theseus is important.” I nodded. “What he did, what *they* did together, well, those are stories for other days. What’s important for us is the toll these tasks took.

“They were difficult, dangerous, but they did them nonetheless. They quested, adventured, and then returned afterwards, sometimes worse for wear. The ship that is, not Theseus.” I pointed at the ship in the bottle for the dog’s benefit.

“Now, the first time Theseus returns to Greece he notices a hairline crack in his ship’s mast and then sources a replacement prior to setting out on the high seas.” I looked at the dog. “That’s

smart, right? Imagine being out at sea and then your mast goes. Where would you keep all the food?" I frowned, considered the soundness of my maritime knowledge. "Doesn't matter. *Any*ways, Theseus' friend, that's Homer in this particular story, he asks Theseus if he wouldn't mind giving up this hairline-cracked mast because he has a method for fixing hairline cracks. Theseus agrees and so Homer has a mast.

"After replacing his own mast, Theseus sets off adventuring once more and it's the same series of events as before, he gallivants and then returns home afterwards. On his return he now notices his hull looks a little worse for wear in places. Not in ruins, mind you, but it's enough to warrant his attention and so Theseus makes good on removing these boards and then replacing them.

"Homer, aware of this change – *don't ask me how* – asks after the boards that Theseus parts with and, because Theseus is such a good friend, I guess, he obliges. So Homer's now got these older boards, these planks, these pieces of wood, and he puts them to one side with the mast. In the same way that he fixed the mast, he does for the boards.

"And so it goes – maybe you know how the rest of this unfolds," my eyes met the dog's, "Theseus roams and returns, and each time he does, he ends up replacing some small part of his ship, and each time he relinquishes these replaced parts to his good friend Homer, who in turn sets them aside with the rest.

"After enough time, Theseus has eventually replaced every part of his ship and, the whole way through, he's been handing over his replaced parts to Homer.

"Now, some time ago, probably when he had the right parts with which to begin, Homer started work on his own ship." I nodded at the dog. "That's right. Building *his* ship from only those parts that Theseus gave him. When Theseus replaced the final piece of his ship and handed it over to Homer, Homer was able to complete the ship he'd been working on.

"The story sort of… ends there," I said. "The audience – that's *you* – is faced with two complete ships and a bit of confusion as to which one can really be said to be the ship of Theseus. At the end of it all, consideration has to be given to whether an object that's had every component part replaced… can still be considered the same object."

I saw that the dog's eyes were closed and I marvelled at the fact that she too could listen in a fashion similar to me.

"So, why am I telling you this?" I scratched my head. "I think it's because I'm a bit like Homer in this regard. Used to be like Theseus, now I'm like Homer. I have these sort-of memories from not long ago… I think. It's a bit like… a memory, a story, some combination of the two." I looked at the

dog. “You know how it is. Anyways, over time, things… jumble. I no longer have it in my head as a clear-cut thing. It’s… out of order.”

I couldn’t find words to shape my thoughts.

“A lot of what I’ve got is like that now. As if Theseus just plonked everything down unceremoniously and said 'get on with it'.” I sighed. “That’s fine and well with a ship, obviously. I have a basic understanding of where everything *should* go with one of them but with a story, a memory, I’m not as sure.

“But I do my best. I do well with what I’ve got, I think... I put together something bigger than the sum of its parts. That’s what I have to do since–”

I clicked my fingers, brought her back. “Are you paying attention?”

“*I* certainly am.”

Unbeknownst to me then, but knownst now, Walker had entered my office, sneakily, so as to go unnoticed.

“How did you get in here?”

“Well, the gate *was* open so I assumed that to be an invitation of sorts. Also, it *is* a weekday. People do come here to see their things, don’t they?” She smiled.

I thought about this. “Not yet, actually,” I replied. “With me taking over, the lot is in a transitional period. The only callers I’ve had thus far have been you, those sergeants you sent, and today’s moving man. And, of course, the dog, though I doubt she can be any kind of caller.” I could feel myself rambling and so I reined myself in. “What were you saying?”

“Just that I was paying attention… Is that the dog you were telling me about last night?” She pointed at the dog as if there might perhaps be some confusion on my part, as if there was a line-up of dogs here and I’d been called in to determine the correct one.

“Yes…”

“And – what? – you’re in the middle of telling it a story?”

I squinted at her. “Have you been standing there long?”

She shrugged. “I heard the parable–”

“Para*dox*.”

She nodded, continued, “But I really didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“What you’ve done, what you’re doing *still*, well, it’s rude.” I labelled her behaviour 'eavesdropping' regardless of the fact that there were no eaves nearby.

Her apology for all of this was a well-mannered chuckle, and somehow it defused me.

“All of that for the dog though? Why?”

I looked at the dog and the dog looked back at me, and then at Walker, and then at me once more. “I guess she’s a good listener.”

“The *only* listener.”

Maybe that was all I needed in this particular instance.

“Would you have been happier finding me here nattering away to myself?” I asked. “We both know that sort of thing’s rather frowned upon. Besides, I *know* the story already, I don’t need to hear it again. She, however,” I said, pointing at the dog, “hasn’t heard it before and is clearly somewhat captivated.”

My finger hovered, aimed at the dog in the same way that Walker’s had only moments ago. There was a little bit of silence shared out amongst the three of us.

As if on cue, the dog swung over onto her back and began rolling about as a means of scratching herself. This went on for some time, the dog between us flailing, and every now and again she would make those equivalent doggy noises that one associates with overcoming a particularly bad itch. On the whole it was the sort of action that, I think, did not reflect positively on my ability to maintain a captive audience.

After a time, the dog settled.

“Well,” Walker said, stifling her laughter, “carry on then, don’t let me interrupt.”

I frowned at her because this had clearly *already happened*. I wondered if she was perhaps having a dig at me, but then I remembered the fact that people sometimes made these kinds of perfunctory comments to one another. When the situation called for it we sometimes said our pieces like lines out of a poorly-written script. We talked formalities.

“I was finished,” I muttered. “You interrupted at the end.”

She smiled.

“Well?” I asked after a lengthy pause.

“I think I’ve heard it before… Or something similar. It’s… interesting.”

I shrugged.

“Thinking about it though,” she said, “it makes me feel uneasy. Can I say uneasy?”

I told her she could, and then she shrugged.

“I don’t think things can change though,” I said. “Not that drastically. The core remains, always remains, but what’s *around* it… that’s different. It’s about identity. It’s just moving things around, isn’t it?”

“Moving but not *changing*.” When the words were out, she smirked.

I shrugged. “It’s not the same, is it? It can’t be held alongside what it was. It’s not one-to-one with its previous self. Just think about how it is with people… with places or, or, or ideas, or words even… can it be said that they’re still the same?”

Walker opened her mouth, said nothing, then closed it.

“It makes you think.”

Walker was busy inspecting the bottled ship. When she was done she rested it carefully on its struts. “Does it?” she replied, smiling.

I believed this to be a rhetorical question and so I chose not to answer it, and instead smiled back at her. This may very well have been a 'sweet' moment, but I couldn’t be one hundred percent sure of that. In the past, people had smiled at me and I’d felt unsettled.

I made an attempt to move things along. “Why’re you here anyways? Is there something you need my help with?” I asked. “Or were you perhaps hoping to rent one of the lockers here?”

“Me, rent space? No thanks. I don’t have a life that overflows.” She chuckled before speaking again. “No, I’m here because I have some forms that need filling. There’s a procedure to be followed.”

“I’ve already done one batch of form-filling this morning,” I said, “so I’m sure I’ve got it in me to do another.”

“Was that to do with the moving?” She produced a folder which I assumed she had been holding behind her back.

I nodd– frowned. “How’d you know about that?”

She looked at me intensely. “You told me. You *said* you’d seen a moving man today.”

I blinked, rallied. “What’ve you got there?”

I watched as she sifted through the pages in her folder – a sizeable number of them – before eventually finding what she was looking for. She removed same and placed it down on the desk for me to look at.

“You need to give a statement about everything that happened last night,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you were there,” she replied.

“But you were there too.”

“I’ve already done mine. Last night back at the station.”

I frowned, pointed at the page. “This’ll be duplication then. We saw the same thing.”

“What about before I arrived?”

“Does that bit count?”

“Yes it 'counts',” she said. “Of course it counts.”

I removed a pen from the drawer. “The dog was there too so I’m mentioning that.”

“That’s fine.” She held a hand up, showed me her own pen. “I’ll be doing the writing though. You just have to talk.”

“Alright then, what should I start with?”

She tapped the pen on the page. “The bit *before* you found the body, please.”

“There’s a lot of that, but I’ll just start with not being able to sleep.”

Walker nodded at me and, as I recalled the events leading up to me having called her, she listened and wrote patiently.

“And then I got a hold of you on the phone,” I concluded.

“Nothing after that?” She tapped the page.

I nodded.

“Sure?”

Again, I nodded.

She smiled, seemed satisfied with this, and put her pen away. “So the move, huh?” she said, after full-stopping the final sentence. “Where’re you staying now?”

“*No*where just yet,” I replied. “Everything’s just crowded into a locker. I need to look about a bit and find something suitable.”

“Just as long as you’re not squatting, I suppose.” She chuckled.

I had no idea what I was doing, so I chuckled too.

“Thanks for your statement. Much appreciated.”

I smiled, watched as she started filing the pages away neatly, realised I didn’t want her to leave just yet. “You don’t have to go yet.”

“Pardon?”

I coughed and then, for good measure, I coughed again.

“What I meant to say, was that you don’t have to go with just the statement. I was thinking, if you’re up for some sleuthing, then perhaps we could go in search of something like a record book?” I volunteered. “Might be able to find out who rented that locker. They’d be a suspect, right? That’s a good place to start, isn’t it?”

“Sleuthing?” she said, chuckling after. “Well, honestly, any kind of start would be good here. I take it that means you probably don’t have any of those sorts of records here? In your office, I mean?”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing useful in here, I don’t think. This place is rather out of touch. I still need to bring everything into the modern era. Computers and whatnot.” Deep down I knew that saying 'computers and whatnot' wouldn’t suffice when it came to explaining away *all* of

the work that lay ahead of me. The size of this place, all those people who now leased the space from me, I didn't know the extent of it all and, without some kind of assistance, I probably never would. "Yeah, computers and whatnot," I repeated.

"Well, I'm sure we can hunt around for this record room. Who knows what we may find." Another smile. "I'll just wait for you outside."

"Give me a second here."

I closed the bottled ship's boxy home, shifted it about on the desk.

And then shifted it about some more.

I thought about… change, about re-creation, about the exterior unchanged, the interior differenced. I thought about how human the process of growth was – *is* –, how fallible people are in what they do. I thought about attrition, about loss. I thought about leaving things out without any knowledge of their ever having been there. More importantly, I thought about how, in some new construction, it might never be realised that they were even there at all.

And if something goes wrong, if, given enough time, this new thing falls apart, how could you know that it's because of this absence?

Is that how a story works? Is that how a memory–

"You coming?" Walker had popped her head into my office once more and although I knew the rest of her was hiding just around the corner the effect was still disconcerting.

I nodded. "Was just… getting my keys."

She smiled and then disappeared again, though I could still hear her footsteps as she paced about in the gravel. After enough time, these stopped.

The dog, not wanting to be locked inside my office, got up and left.

"Any idea where we should begin? Do you have a map maybe?"

I shook my head. "If I'd had a map last night you can bet the first thing I wouldn't have done was find a dead body."

"So what?" she asked. "You've been getting around on guesswork then?"

I told her that it was fairly bad guesswork.

"How odd, a man unwilling to ask for directions." She shook her head and then removed her cell phone from her pocket. After tapping its screen, something eventually happened which satisfied her. She held the phone up to me and smiled.

"That's us." She maneuvered her thumb to signal the small green circle that had an arrow jutting out of it. "And, if we zoom in…" She placed her fingers on the outer edges of the screen, then

dragged them together centring on the circle. “We can see the rows and rows of lockers in this place,” she muttered. “And, well, would you look at that…”

And I *would* look at it, so I did.

Walker had centred the view on an open area that existed or, at the very least, appeared to exist somewhere within the bowels of this place. There was what I assumed to be a structure of some kind near this area that was larger in size than those lockers which seemed to encircle it.

“At least there’s something for us to move towards, right?”

She smiled, and began walking in the direction that her phone now pointed her. I fell into step beside her.

“It’s weird,” she said, looking around briefly. “Everything seems so samey here, like uniform, and then there’s… whatever *this* is.” She brought the phone closer to her face and scrutinized the image.

“What makes the desert beautiful,” I said, “is that somewhere it hides a well.”

“That’s a bit… dramatic, isn’t it?”

I shrugged and, after this, we walked on in silence for a few steps.

“Who said that?”

“Well, me just now… Before that though? I can’t say because I can’t recall. I’ve never been any good with attribution, but words like that are far too beautiful, far too perfect and precise, to belong to anyone but their creator.”

She kept walking, didn’t respond.

“I have no idea why this exists.” I took in the open amphitheatre that lay ahead of us, this oasis in a desert of lockers.

“Maybe someone thought the people coming here would want somewhere to relax and, I don’t know… perhaps picnic after visiting their things?” She chuckled.

“Maybe.”

“And *that*?” She pointed towards a building that stood overlooking the amphitheatre.

I shrugged again, and wondered if maybe she had forgotten that this was also my first time seeing the place we had wandered into.

“I bet it’s some kind of entertainment area,” she said.

We made our way towards the structure and, once through its unlocked sliding doors, we were greeted with an open room which had, off to one side, a pair of male and female bathrooms – the room designations, not the rooms themselves; and another area which, what with the unconnected water pipes, wiring, and plug points present there, was most likely meant to serve as a kitchen.

Walker moved about the room checking shelves, opening cupboards, pulling out drawers and peering inside. Where she could, she flicked switches.

“I could see myself living here,” I said.

She smiled. “Happy?”

“This was a good find,” I replied. Looking around the room once more, I thought about compartmentalisation, about erecting thin walls and then repurposing the newly-made zones into things like a bedroom and a lounge, and perhaps even a rumpus room but only because I had no idea what those were used for. I thought about labels, about–

“Needs a bit of cleaning up,” she said.

I followed her gaze, saw the footprints the pair of us had left in the dust behind us.

“Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Don’t even think about asking for my help.” She rested her hands on her hips. “It’s my day off today.”

I’d noticed that she wasn’t in traditional police uniform, but had elected not to mention this. “I guess that explains the casual clothing… I thought you’d just come here undercover.”

She frowned at me. “Why would I be undercover?”

“No idea.” I shrugged. “I just didn’t want to say anything in case I exposed you.”

“Exposed me to who?”

“I don’t know.” I tried readjusting our conversation’s trajectory. “If you’re off, why’re you here working then? You could be doing something else.”

"If I'd stayed at home today I would have been unable to avoid work-related thoughts. This sort of thing," she said, tapping the folder she carried with her, "distracts me to some extent."

I wondered about this. "It's more work though, isn't it?"

"It's *different* work," she replied. "That's important."

"Different from?"

This was a blatant press on my part. A lucky jab at knowing something more.

"A missing persons case," she said. "Hasn't happened around here in… let's say seven – no – eight years."

"Oh," I offered.

"I wasn't even in the force back then… When it happened I had to dig into our archives to figure out when last it'd happened."

I nodded slowly.

"The circumstances make it worse though. It wasn't *just* a kidnapping. Appeared to be a hit-and-run prior to the snatching. Happened nearby actually. Just up the road." She presented her phone to me once more, dragged the image around until she'd located the area outside the lot.

I could see the road out front, its endless stretch.

She tapped a section of it and the image zoomed. "Not *exactly* here, but nearby. A couple hundred metres up the road." She put her device to sleep, slipped it into her pocket. "As you can imagine, the whole thing's got parents worried."

I *could* imagine it, so I did, and it saddened me.

"Do you have anything to go on?"

"Tire tracks, a pair of shoes," she replied. "A few leads but nothing really solid."

"I understand why it's bothering you."

"The case itself is horrible," she began, "but the father, I see him *every single day* down at the station." She sighed. "He's constantly checking in. Always asking if we've made any progress, if anything new's come up. He can be a bit… imposing."

I couldn't think of anything to say to her, so I made a sad face instead.

"Strikes me as a bit of an amateur detective. The sort of guy who might go around asking questions himself, you know?" Her eyes met mine. "What'd you call it earlier? Sleuthing?"

I nodded.

"These kinds of things don't happen here, you see?"

And I sort of saw, in a figurative sense, so I nodded.

"It's just… jarring… and so the case follows me home most nights."

I felt regret at having coaxed this conversation out of her. Not for my sake, but hers, for now: head downcast, and feeling downcast too most likely, she stared silently at her feet. Sensing the need for a change of conversation, I decided that I would give up the location of what I assumed to be a door. It was painted the exact same colour as the wall beside it and so was doing quite a good job of going unnoticed.

"But no longer," I declared.

She looked up at me. "Excuse me?"

"Sorry about that. I was thinking something and then I let the last part of the thought out. I was meant to tell you about that door over there." I pointed towards the door and saw surprise register on her face as she noticed it. I stepped towards it. "Quite well-hidden."

"Do you think you have the keys for it?" she asked.

"I'm not too sure," I replied. "But I think that the door handle's missing enough to not warrant one."

I stuck my hand through the circular hole in the door, that place where the handle should have been, and the effect was troubling, even for me.

Unreal, almost.

She squinted at my wrist.

"The word 'abracadabra' roughly translates to 'I create as I speak'," I said. "Did you know that?"

“Why did you say that?”

“What do you mean?” I looked back at her. “The 'abracadabra' thing?”

She nodded. “You make moments creepier than they need to be.”

“That wasn’t my intention.” I removed my hand from the hole in the wall, looking at it once it was out. “I’m sorry. It’s just… I saw my hand disappearing through the wall and then I started thinking about magic and then my brain dredged up that little fact. I thought you might like to hear it.”

She frowned at me.

I shrugged. “It felt… relevant…”

She moved closer and then asked if I could open it and, because I could, I did. Without a sound the cleverly concealed panel swung inwards and the two of us were left peering into a windowless room. The darkness therein was only uninviting to me, apparently, and as Walker quickly flashlit her cell phone and entered, I stepped in after her somewhat cautiously.

“See if you can find a switch somewhere,” she said.

I could hear her hand running along the wall to the left of us and so I followed her lead, except heading off to the right. After a while Walker was eventually able to light the room and, once my eyes had adjusted, I gazed at the wall on which my own unhelpful hand rested.

There was a map beneath it.

“There’s a map over here,” I said.

She regarded the wall that I was standing beside and, to be fair, the map wasn’t as localised as I may have previously indicated. It dominated the wall, stretching from left to right, from floor to ceiling. I took my hand off it.

“Is that… *here*?” she asked.

A few steps backwards, I stood myself beside her, and tried to take the whole thing in. It appeared to be an overview of the storage lot, that much was clear, and though it wasn’t specifically marked on the map, the area in which we now stood appeared to be at the heart of the countless rows and columns of lockers.

“This is incredibly detailed.”

“It’s on the wall,” I said.

She stopped looking at the map and instead began looking at my ear and, when I turned towards her, my face. This, I was sure, had been her intention all along.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s actually *on* the wall,” I replied. “Somebody drew it on there.”

She sighed. “Do you see? This is what I’m talking about,” she began. “*Start* by saying the map’s drawn directly onto the wall, otherwise you just end up sounding odd.” She approached the mural, ran a hand along those lines that made it up. “I don’t know what to make of this, I really don’t.

“And what’re *these*?” She lifted what appeared to be a piece of paper, but carefully so as to not remove it from wall completely. “It’s here to mark something, obviously.”

“And we just don’t know *what*,” I said.

She looked at me, her eyes slits. “Why did you say that?”

I shrugged. “It felt like the right thing to say.”

“Sometimes, when you talk it’s like you’re reading from a script.” She pressed the piece of paper back into place with her thumb. “Does this go back to the whole detective show thing you mentioned the other night?”

I shook my head.

“With the body last night, you expected me to start 'acting' the crime scene out for your benefit. Are you doing that again now?”

I shook my head again. “No,” I added, regardless of the duplication.

She smirked at me before turning back to face the wall. “It shouldn’t take long to figure out what these are for,” she said. “I have a feeling the red ones show lockers that are in use or that have items in them.” She pointed towards a grouping of green markers that were closer to the lot’s entrance. “I think a cluster like this means the lockers are occupied, but belong to the lot owner, maybe…”

“I’m the lot owner,” I said.

She frowned. “Yes…”

“And the other ones?” I watched her eyes as they darted between those markers that carried text rather than colour-coding. “Various points of interest?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. “Could be clients the previous owner was concerned about, maybe? People who aren’t up-to-date with their rent?”

“Ones to watch.”

She patted the wall and then removed her hand from it. “I still don’t understand the lack of record-keeping here. A place like this should have some kind of system in place.” She searched the room quickly. “Hopefully something in here can shed some light.” She made her way over to a nearby desk and began searching it. “Let’s leave the map for now.”

The desk was dust-covered, layered thick with the stuff, a result of being unused for ages. There were various items on it, all with similar coatings from disuse, and when Walker moved these

around whilst conducting her search, a somewhat clean surface could be seen beneath them. A mouse, three pens, a paperweight, and a desiccated doughnut, were shifted about.

"And in the drawer?"

"A book – looks like a ledger of some kind…" She moved this to one side. "Some more pens." This was followed by a squelching noise. "And… some… food." She retracted her hand, waved food debris from it, and then wiped it on her pants leg. "At least I *hope* it's food. Gross."

With her clean hand she removed the book and, after blowing the dust off of it, she placed this beside the doughnut. She then shifted the doughnut off the desk.

"Where it belongs."

She looked up from the ledger which she had just opened. "Did you say something?"

I shook my head quickly.

"What we have here, I think," she said, leafing backwards and forwards a few pages, "is this place's records. There's names and contact details, locker numbers, and what might be payment figures here…" She ran a finger down one page and then did the same on another. "It all looks pretty consistent, if a bit untidy. Still," she continued, "how somebody can be this fastidious with manual record-keeping but still use a desk drawer to store food eludes me."

A shiver ran all throughout her body and at the end of it she grimaced. She was most likely thinking about the food.

"Also, whoever did this clearly doesn't understand the reason behind carbon-copying," she said. "I mean, they know *how* to do it." She demonstrated this by showing me a smaller segment of paper that had been tucked in-between two other pages. "But keeping both copies makes no sense. What'd the customer take?"

I shrugged.

"I guess you could make more than one carbon copy, sure, but that just seems… tedious." She flicked through the book's pages and then, after up-ending it, began shaking it above the desk. There was a downpour. "There's a lot about this place I don't really understand," she said.

"Me too."

She started piling together those pieces of paper that had come free from the book. "You *should* though. Understand it, I mean. You're running it."

"I'm trying to," I replied. "That ledger might help me get an actual database going. I could adapt the info in there into something on my laptop. If you aren't taking it away, that is…"

She handed me the ledger. "It's yours, use it, just please don't lose it. I'll hang onto these copies here." She had gathered these up and neatened them into a pile. "If I feel there's something

missing or something I can't make out from this scrawl, then I'll come calling for the original."

I nodded.

"And maybe you should consider making the 'database' thing a priority? I think having something like that might help give you a better handle on things here."

"Might make me feel a bit more in control too."

"Exactly."

I watched as she reproduced the folder from earlier, took a clip from its edge and used this keep the copies together.

"And now, moving on, can you tell me what you think of this computer here?"

"It's old," I said. "Archaic even. I'm fairly certain cavemen used this once upon-"

"Uh-huh. I get it. Very funny. No. I want to know whether you think you can get it working…" She ran a finger right down the middle of the monitor, drawing a clean streak in the dust there. "Might be something useful on here."

"For the investigation?" I asked whilst trying to chase the excitement from my voice.

It didn't look like she was going to nod, but then she did.

I regarded the fat-backed CRT monitor. "I'll try but I can't make any promises. I don't think the years have been too kind to this old thing."

"If it doesn't work," she began, "do you think you could maybe take it apart?"

"You're asking if I could use the hard drive in there… somewhere else?" I regarded the machine on the desk. "I doubt it. Whatever's inside is definitely old and, I'm fairly certain, incompatible with what I've got."

She frowned at these words.

And this caused me to make an earnest attempt to change this. "I mean, I can still give it a bash and, if anything happens, I'll tell you."

"Maybe whatever's in here," she said, tapping the ledger I was holding, "will make a bit more sense if we can connect it to something on there." She pointed at the computer.

I nodded.

"For now, I've got enough to go on… Before I head out though," she said, tucking the folder under her arm and held up her phone, "I'm going to take a picture of this and… a zoomed-in one of the locker where we found the body. Would you mind standing there and just pointing to it for me?"

"Like this?"

She nodded and I listened for the shutter sound. A necessary cue to know that the picture had been taken, a noise now completely disconnected from the way the phone's camera actually worked.

"Thanks," she said, lowering the device. "Would you like to see it?"

I still had my finger on the map, just *there* beside the locker in which we had found the body. I squinted at her. "See what?"

"The picture…"

"I'm in it?" I asked. "I thought you were taking a close-up."

She showed me the phone's screen and there I was.

"Is that alright?" she asked. "I mean, I can delete it, if you want?"

"Why?"

"Some people don't like having their picture taken."

I told her that I knew this and that I wasn't at all afraid of having my soul stolen away from me. She smiled.

"Could you take one for me? A picture, that is. Might help me when it comes to finding my way around."

She nodded, smiled. "I'll just send you this one later… I have your number somewhere…"

I nodded. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

"Not that I can think of," she said, slipping her phone back into her pocket, "though if you find anything during your read-thru of that little ledger, then make a point of reaching me. You have *my* number?"

"I have the police station's number…"

"Well… okay…" she said. "That's fine, but if you need to get hold of me in a hurry then use this." She removed her police badge and flipped this over to reveal a little pocket that contained a few business cards. After handing me one of these, she pointed out that it was her personal number.

I smil– nodded.

"Well," she began, "this was fun. Thanks for the help with the paperwork. Hopefully it'll be the last time I have to bother you about that."

"About the body?"

"About the body, yes," she said, arching an eyebrow. "I mean, I'll still have to come back eventually to return these." She tapped the folder.

I regarded the folder. "My statement?"

"What? No. The *copies* I just took from the ledger."

"They're in there now? I never saw that."

She frowned at me but didn't say anything.

“Anyways, *if* they’re not important, I’ll just bring them back.” She shrugged. “I’m sure all of this’ll eventually be written off as 'accidental'.”

As we trailed out of the well-hidden office, I glanced backwards at the map. I found myself wondering whether it was at all accurate, if being sketched by hand had left any hope of it being even close to scale.

The pair of us made our way back towards my office, the lot’s entrance, and Walker’s car (wherever she had elected to park it); and along the way we made small talk.

“So, that place was nice, think you’ll move into it?”

“It seems workable,” I replied. “I mean, it’s a nice distance from the office. Helps give the impression of being 'away' from work when the day ends.”

“Need help moving?” she asked.

“Are you offering?”

She chuckled, said 'nope' with apparent satisfaction, and then removed her car keys from her rear pocket. “You’re on your own there, I’m afraid.” She smiled at me.

“I’m sure I’ll manage. Should be able to do it with my car.” I scratched my head. “And then for the bigger things… maybe I’ll call somebody.”

She nodded, climbed into her car, and then did the window down so that she didn’t have to shout at me through the shatter-proof glass.

“Well, call me,” she said, and then added, “if you find anything suspicious in there, obviously.”

“Right.” I shook the ledger in what I hoped was a reassuring fashion. I mean, it wasn’t as if I was about to go and pore over the thing now, but perhaps she wanted some kind of heartening gesture on the matter.

“You have yourself a nice day. Again, thanks for the paperwork stuff.” She smiled. “And for helping me keep my mind off of things.”

“My pleasure.”

She did her window up and then drove off, leaving me alone on the lot once more.

To keep my productivity levels high, I elected to move a few things from the locker into the recently discovered soon-to-be living space. The single mattress would fit into the back of my car easily once the seats were down and so I decided that it would make a decent sleeping solution for those nights between now and when I would eventually phone somebody for moving-related assistance.

Until the fridge could be brought over too, I would survive on various tinned goods, other imperishables, and microwaveable foods. The kettle, the microwave, and an assortment of clothing

would also be making the journey over with me. I thought a few framed pictures might also help spruce the place up a bit.

I returned to my office to grab my car keys and then performed a series of actions that led to me, my car, and my fast-flagging enthusiasm being located outside the locker. After backing the car up as close possible, I opened the locker, and tried to prepare myself for the lifting that lay ahead of me.

This attitude adjustment would prove unnecessary though, as the locker I had just opened contained exactly zero of my own possessions. Clearly I had opened the incorrect locker and, although the one next-door undoubtedly contained my things and it would be easy for me to shift my work ethic over there, I realised that I *was* here, the door *was* open, and there a skeleton stood before me. I knew with almost one hundred percent certainty that there wouldn't be a skeleton amongst my own things.

I'll be the first person to admit that I am lazy or that I have a particular talent when it comes to shirking responsibility, but if I hadn't ended up eye-to-socket with that skeleton, then chances are I would've closed the locker and gotten on with things.

The skeleton, as it turned out, was only able to stand up due to the assistance it had been given. The metallic rod that had been inserted alongside its spine, had a castor-wheeled base and kept the thing erect and suitably mobile. However, none of this had prevented the various forms of abuse this learning prop had endured over the years. There was a crack that ran down the side of its skull, terminating in a sizeable hole; a few glaring gaps amongst the top row of teeth; and the bottom row was missing completely due to the lower jaw being absent. As one progressed downwards, the occasional divots in various bones could be seen and, although a few ribs had been snapped off, the general idea of ribcaginess was still there. A number of finger bones were missing and one of the hands seemed to have been attached backwards and, although the right foot was only short a few toes, the left leg was short an entire foot.

"You've seen better days."

I took my phone out and, somehow able to resign myself to exploring this locker, turned on the flashlight and started shining it here and there.

The skeleton had tipped me off to a certain degree, but lighting up various other items in the locker drove the point home. I had stumbled into storage space that was most likely not owned by a private individual. This room seemed to be a catchall for an overflow of learning aids, implements, and old textbooks that a university's medical department maybe no longer had room for.

"Or didn't want to do away with just yet." I stepped forwards.

I located the light switch, pressed it, and was mildly surprised when the globe overhead flared into life without hesitation. The room was like a museum, a veritable hoard of exciting-looking medical paraphernalia. I had the distinct feeling that some of the things stored here were being stored here simply because disposing of them would prove to be somewhat tricky. It wasn't medical waste, so to speak, and destruction by incineration would most likely be feasible, but parting with these sorts of curiosities would probably prove challenging.

Specimens in jars, horrendous tools from bygone days, a selection of rather painful-looking x-rays, and boxes brim-filled with patient pictures as well as their accompanying records made up the bulk of this collection, I would soon find. Although I had considered the trespass of reading someone else's confidential medical file, I had already considered prior to this the physical trespass of entering this locker without permission. I was past the point of no return and, what with being there already, I decided I would rather have myself an exciting time instead of feeling guilty about all of it.

I put my hands behind my back and, treating the place as if it were an exhibit of sorts, began stepping here and there between the various shelves, stacks, and display cases that surrounded me. I gave myself the grand tour of all these unused goods and even mustered up the imagination to explain what purpose each specific implement served.

The jars, I realised, were the most interesting, if a little off-putting, aspect of the entire tour. The collection, which spanned multiple shelves, was an old one, with some examples dating backwards close to forty years. The formaldehyde solution each specimen had been submerged in had helped them last as long as they had, but there were signs of decay here and there. Although it was at times tough to see their contents what with all the dust, what *was* plain to see was the fact that this collection could talk.

What felt run-of-the-mill here were the bottled organs. Untoward, expected even in a collection such as this, were those healthy-looking examples of kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, viscera, etcetera, which were all neatly labelled and (judging by the numbering) catalogued safely somewhere else. What felt interesting were those jars that contained the same organs but in varied states, differenced noticeably by things like age, disease, or deformation. Amongst these jars could be seen: a smoker's lung, a fatty heart, an alcoholic's liver, and some gums that served as a terrifying example of why regular flossing is a must. What felt unsettling were those jar-based abominations that somebody had – and probably without permission, too – assembled. These horrible conglomerate pieces: what appeared to be an intestine wrapped around a spine; two rows of teeth with an eye wedged between them; a brain imprisoned by a ribcage – left me feeling sick.

My own gut told me that just because you can doesn't mean you should.

The avant-garde organ arrangement was more than enough to drive me away from the overall display. Not only were these creations unnecessary, they were, above all, unnatural. Somebody had amalgamated these things and by allowing them to be stored here I felt complicit in something horrible. I wondered what the ruling was behind this sort of thing, both medically and from a storage perspective.

To chase away these thoughts as well as the corresponding imagery which had wormed its way into my head, I made a beeline for what appeared to be the records section of this item assortment. Perhaps a little light reading into other people's problems would help me overcome my own. I lifted the lid off one of the boxes and chose, at random, a selection of pages held together by a rusty staple.

The front page of this collection had suffered through a particularly bad tear and, as such, left its identity somewhat uncertain. What was certain though was that this wasn't some individual's confidential health history. Rather it appeared to be a test of some kind, and the more I looked at it, the more I began to notice remarkable similarities between it and those personality tests you sometimes saw in magazines. I glanced at the final page and, fairly certain that I had seen a 'scoring' section, I drew my comparisons to a close. I flipped back to the first page and decided – probably due to the earlier bout of fervent form-filling – that I would complete this personality test and then see how I stacked up in terms of score.

Before closing the box from which I had taken it, I folded up the questionnaire and slipped it into my pocket. I then made my way out of the locker and, once I had switched off the light, I closed the door and resolved to figure out why it had been left unlocked – something that a look in the ledger might tell me.

To stop myself from repeating past mistakes, I relocated my car, this time placing it in front of the locker that actually housed my things. Not that I was going to move any of my possessions now, mind you. Leaving my car positioned there simply meant I wouldn't make the same mistake tomorrow.

I returned to my office, sat down behind the desk, and replied to a few e-mails, though only those that had the words 'attention' or 'urgent' in their titles. These seemed to be the most pressing amongst the lot and so I dealt with them. Any mails subjected with words like 'please respond to me', 'we're worried about you', or 'I just want to talk' were deemed personal, inappropriate for business hours and, as such, were ignored.

With my inbox looking emptier, I produced the questionnaire from my pocket and a pen from my desk drawer and went about filling this in by filling it out.

“'This questionnaire asks about experiences that you may have in your daily life',” I read aloud. “'Tick one of the boxes which relates to how often you have experiences like these… when you are *not* under the influence of alcohol or drugs.'” I tapped the period point at the end of this sentence.

Below these instructions lay the test, a grid-based affair, with phrase statements in every row down the left-hand side of it. In the columns along the top were response words ranging from 'never' to 'all the time'. The boxes formed at each and every intersection were where a person was expected to answer through ticking.

“So 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', 'very often', and 'all the time',” I read. “I guess that pretty much covers it.”

I read through some of the question statements on the left-hand side of the page. “These would benefit from text answers…” I said. “I mean, if there was a little more space to explain the *why* behind some of my frequencies I’d feel a lot better.”

I completed the questionnaire, admired my answers and then overleafed. I realised then that the 'scoring' section I had previously thought present, wasn’t, and so I was left with answers I couldn’t understand. My tallied score then could only be sensible if I found the key that matched this text. Until then it would just remain a useless number, some total.

And, because of this, I pressed the pages into the drawer, shifted this 'work' I’d done somewhere else, where maybe later, if I felt inclined, I could perhaps look at once more. I felt myself torn between finding its solution, an explanation for my responses, somewhere in that mess of records I had left behind; or otherwise moving on with my life without this knowledge.
I sighed and, on the way to making my decision, I found myself flipping through the pages again. This was how I came to the final phrase on the final page.

“'It is absolutely essential that I do some things in a certain way',” I read. “*Absolutely essential*.” I looked up from the test and saw, through the window, the sign and the ladder stood before it. Behind this, the sun, sensing the fast-approaching evening, was starting to sink. “If I don’t do things in a certain way then they won’t get done at all,” I whispered.

Today had been unproductive. My possessions were unmoved and so I continued to live nowhere; the ledger lay on my desk unopened and so I knew nobody renting these small boxes from me; and the sign remained untouched, meaning no one knew that anything at the lot had actually changed.

The more I thought about it the more I knew that I could still save some part of the day and even if said part was small, it would be worth saving still. I decided then that working on the sign was

my best bet. With everything already assembled, heaped up outside the tool shed, all I really had to do was lug these over to the sign and do what was needed. Gathering everything up, I carried these large quantities with care, making my way towards the lot's entrance. The ladder was waiting for me there and the timeworn sign still towered over me.

I climbed, paint tins in tow, a paintbrush between my teeth and a chisel (for prying off tin lids) tucked securely into one of my pockets. After laying everything out safely on the slight lip just below the sign, I opened the first colour – a 'Paint the Town' red – and dipped the paintbrush, watching as it was swallowed whole by the viscous contents. As I had decided earlier, I would simply go over those somewhat faded lines that already existed. Then I would connect those lines that had come apart over time. Finally, I would even go as far as to add those lines that were missing, those lines that had never been before, but *should* have been all along.

With the paint dripping here and there, and red running on from those lines I had already made, I worked my way across. From left to right I went, wasting all the way. Once I had what I needed from the red, I rested the brush on its tin carefully, and descended, returning to ground level so as to retrieve some turpentine with which to clean my brush. I made my way back up the ladder and, alongside the sign and the rapidly drying red paint once again, I waved the solvent-soaked brush. Whilst waiting for this to dry off, I chiselled open another paint tin – 'Little Boy' blue – in preparation for my next stretch of signage.

It was at this point in time that I heard a voice call out and it startled me fiercely, almost causing me to tumble off the ladder. I clung white-knuckled to its sides and let the paintbrush fall onto the sign's lip, blue paint spattering everywhere as the brush slopped down.

"What you doing there, mister?"

I tried to re-gather myself and then looked around. After remembering that I was up a ladder, hard at work touching up the signboard outside the storage lot, I peered down instead.

There was a rather small-looking child riding what seemed to be a tricycle. The thing looked beat-up, the trike that is; though the kid seemed scruffy too.

The description of 'beat-up' might have been an understatement though because the way in which the front wheel was bent made a ride on this tricycle seem hazardous, if not impossible. I watched as he rolled the thing back and forth whilst sitting on it. The wheel seemed to shift in shape, warping as it went. The paint, a presumably once-red, once-complete coat, had since faded and then flecked off in places to reveal something tarnished beneath. The plastic attachments that served as handlebars might have had some grip left in them still, but the sun-damage had already been done, and these had been left brittle-looking and cracked in places. Altogether this kid's ride had the hallmarks of being fit for the junk heap but, for some reason, he hung onto it still.

The kid himself couldn't have been older than six or seven, he simply didn't have the height for it. His brown hair, unruly in a way only children are able to execute, jutted out at odd angles in defiance of those good things like gravity and physics. His dress code, perhaps self-inflicted, was wildly coloured, from the top he wore all the way down to his mismatched shoes. His trousers, muddied at the knees, seemed a size too big for him, and had been folded over at the waist so as to fit him, though even this technique hadn't helped him much. Altogether, he appeared to be a small kid, the sort that maybe other children would be quick to make fun of.

I found myself wondering whether it was my height that made him seem so small.

"Mister?"

I picked the paintbrush up, sighed at the blue splashes that had appeared, and then balanced it on the side of the paint tin carefully. "I'm just putting a new coat of paint on this old sign… or trying to, at least. Probably been a number of years since anybody gave it any attention."

The little chap nodded his understanding. "Neat," he observed.

I smiled. "It will be when it's done."

I poured some turpentine onto a rag and then dabbed away at those new blue dots that had spattered the sign. When I was done I watched as those wet patches evaporated rapidly beneath the sun's rays.

I heard the child below me cough a couple of times and I could tell this was attention-seeking because of the poor execution.

"You're not supposed to actually say 'cough' when you do that," I called down. "That's what the coughing is for." I put the rag down and swivelled slightly so that I could look at the boy once again. "Well?"

"Do you got any red up there?"

I told him that I did and then pre-empted his follow-up question. "I'm guessing you'd like a new coat of paint on that thing?"

I watched as the boy clicked the pedals of this tricycle back and forth, the vehicle jarring but not actually moving. The noise was hypnotic.

"Could you?"

"I don't see why not," I replied. "You won't be able to ride it for a while though. It'll need time to dry."

He paused his pedal-bumping and seemed to give this some thought. Eventually he nodded at me and then produced a thumbs-up.

I returned my attention to the signboard, gathered up some more blue paint onto the brush's bristles, and went back to work, slowly sliding my way around each letter's outline. I was approaching the top part of the 'T' when the child spoke again.

"It scary up there?"

I looked down at him, watched as he ran his eyes slowly up the ladder's length. "Depends on what you're afraid of," I replied. "But if it's heights, then yeah, maybe."

He shrugged, bumped his feet up and down on his tricycle's pedals, and kept watching me. "You coming down?"

"Eventually, yes."

"I'll wait, then," he said.

I picked up my paintbrush once more and went back to colouring in those faded parts of the uppercase lettering. Slow-moving, meticulous, I kept my mind on staying within the lines.

"You from around here, kid?"

His reply – in the affirmative – drifted up to me.

"And you rode here on that thing?" I stole another glance at his tricycle.

He nodded.

I wondered how long this feat must have taken him or whether he had spent large portions of his ride free-wheeling down hills. "Must've been difficult."

He didn't respond.

"You live 'round here? Close by?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Down the road close."

Our conversation tapered off and I watched as the kid hoisted himself from the trike's seat and then crouched down beside it. He, like me, had started work on some 'repairs' of his own. I watched as he ran his hands along the spokes of the front wheel, bending back into place those ones that had gone astray. Following this he began peeling away those pieces of paintwork which were only *just* hanging on. I returned to my own task.

"Nice independence you've got."

He called up his query.

"What's it mean?" I thought about this. "Independence is like being allowed to do your own thing, nobody watching out for you while you do it."

"O-o-kay."

I dipped the paintbrush into the tin, watched as the liquid enveloped it.

"*I've* got a penknife."

I remembered how children sometimes had these peculiar outbursts of information. “Is that so?” I asked.

“Dad gave it to me,” the boy said. “It’s got all sorts on it.”

As he rattled off the various implements on the penknife, each one more obtuse-sounding than the last, I made my way around a further two letters.

“And even a little paintbrush too,” he concluded. “Not as good as yours though.”

I paused, regarded the paintbrush I was holding. I looked down at him, squinting to see the attachment he was talking about.

He eventually folded this back into place and then slipped the penknife into one of his pockets. “Take a lo-o-o-ong time to do my trike.” He sighed with great exaggeration. “*And* no red.”

I went back to my own painting, chuckling quietly. “So your folks just leave you to get about on that thing? Near the streets, I mean…”

I listened to the emptiness of the pause that appeared between us and considered the fact that maybe I had caught the kid in the midst of some rule-breaking. In my mind this was a fair assumption what with him being here, in the middle of nowhere; obviously unsupervised, and – I glanced sidelong at my watch – approaching dinnertime. I recalled my own childhood, glimpsed my younger self in this kid’s actions. *Everybody breaks the rules*, I thought.

“You don’t have to answer– ”

“What Mom don’t know, won’t hurt.”

The phrase sounded parroted, learnt from having been heard far too often. When said out loud, mimicked as it had been, his voice had sounded like someone else’s. I paused, brush bristles to the signboard, and watched as the paint began to run down from where I was about to start spreading it. Whilst these droplets bled I played the kid’s words over in my head, tried my best to convince myself that maybe I’d misheard them.

Eventually, the noise of the tricycle pedals bumping forwards and backwards jarred me. I shook my head. I stopped the droplets from leaving their lined enclosures and spread them elsewhere into the next letter in sequence.

Soon it would be dark.

“Is that something your old man said?”

Though there was no reply, the environment provided some background noise whilst I waited for one.

“Kid?” I called down.

I placed my brush onto the paint tin none too carefully and watched as it overbalanced and then toppled off, the start of a long fall towards the ground. Seeing this, I steadied myself on the ladder before finally looking down.

And there I saw a tricycle but no child.

I performed a fair amount of double-taking before eventually descending the ladder. The kid was nowhere to be seen. His abandoned tricycle, less so. I tried to rationalise his disappearance by writing it off completely. Obviously he hadn't 'disappeared' in the traditional sense. He had simply left after anticipating the boredom that comes with watching paint dry and, *obviously*, had left his tricycle behind because I was going to paint it for him.

That was definitely it.

Yes.

Having assured him that there'd be a lovely coat of red on his bike, I had made sure to bring the corresponding colour with me. I gripped the tricycle by one of its crumbling handlebars, glanced up and down the road once more, and then headed back into the lot.

Opting for a 'business as usual' approach, I dropped the tricycle off in my own locker where I'd be able to paint it later on without interruption. After setting it down and doing the same with the red paint, I realised that I had no means of contacting the child. Without a way to communicate my completion, it became somewhat tough for me to initiate any kind of work at all. I took a step back from the soon-to-be creative space before me and thought about contact.

I looked up from my laptop's screen, saw Walker outlined in the doorway.

"I haven't done any of the things you asked me to." I frowned, looked at my– "Where's my watch?"

She smiled, then laughed. "I haven't done anything either, *obviously*."

I was still looking at my wrist. "Doesn't matter," I said. "You've only been gone – what? – about an hour or so?" I peered over the top of my laptop screen and squinted at Walker who was currently perusing various items on my desk. "I was working on the sign outside, if you must know. Painting it."

"Yes, I noticed that when I arrived. Looks like… you've… had some fun with it."

I didn't really know what to make of this comment, so I decided to take it as a compliment.

"Thanks." I looked down at my screen once more. "What brings you back here? Is there something else you wanted?"

"Actually," she began, "I was hoping to ask a few more questions about this place. If you wouldn't mind?"

"I'm a bit in the middle of something, at the moment," I replied, nodding at my laptop. "So I might be a bit distracted, but sure, I'll answer."

"What're you busy with?"

“Graphic design. Give me a few moments here and you’ll see the fruits of my loins– of my work.” I frowned. “The fruits *of my work*. Is that the expression?” I clicked the 'print' icon, then looked up at her, watched her blushing.

“Of your *work*, yes,” she replied.

Suddenly, nothing happened.

“I was going to say 'ta-da' when the printing began but evidently something has gone wrong.”

She switched the printer on and smiled at me.

Surprisingly, the device began working immediately. I knew this because nothing could make that much noise, that much fuss without achieving some kind of objective. Over the sounds of pages being run off at a snail’s pace, I tried to engage Walker.

“So that’s why you’re here? You wanted to ask me a few questions?”

She nodded. “Just general things.”

“Sure.” I nodded. “Would you mind if we walk and talk though? Once these are done I’m going to need to put them up.”

“Why?”

I frowned. “Why? As in: 'why the lot?'” I volunteered. “That’s a fairly big question. To be honest, I can’t really tell–”

She shook her head. “I meant *why* do you need to put these up?” She stood herself beside the printer so that she could see the page crawling out of it right-side up. “What is this?”

“Well, it should be a poster.” I was rooting about in one of the desk drawers for some tape. “I was up working on the sign earlier–”

“Looks like a map to me.” She lifted the page cautiously, careful not to touch the new page the printer was pushing out. “This is the picture I took, isn’t it? There’s your hand there. You printed it?”

“I forgot about that,” I said, taking it from her. “Must’ve tried to print it earlier and then given up when nothing happened.” I had managed to remove myself from the picture nicely. There was, however, a disembodied hand pointing at one of the lockers. “Thought it would be good to have an *actual* map.”

She smiled. “Good thinking.” She watched me as a I placed this printout on the desk, then turned back to the printer.

I heard the rustle of paper as Walker whipped the freshly-printed page from the out tray. I could hear the ink smudging.

“You have to let it dry!”

“What is this supposed to be?” Walker was currently showing me the first example of the poster I had created.

The printer, loud still, kept working.

“*That’s* the poster. You see–”

“Yes, a 'found' poster.” She pressed a finger into the centre of the page. “Does that mean you’ve found *this*?”

I nodded, walked around to the other side of the desk, and stood beside her so as to admire my work. There was quite a large section of smeared ink.

“Yes. To be honest though, it wasn’t as if the thing was hidden or anything. It was just… there… I guess.” I reached for the page but Walker was quick to hold it out of arm’s reach. “I didn’t have to search for it, that’s what I’m trying to say here.”

Her fingers were still resting on the picture of the red tricycle. I could see the fresh ink filling in the furrows of her fingerprint. Above the picture in bolded uppercase, was the word ‘**FOUND**’. “You’re lucky I’m printing multiple copies – you can throw that one away,” I tried to take the page from her once more. “Why are you so interested in this, anyway?”

Walker was in no hurry to release the page and so I stopped pulling at it.

She tilted it this way and that, as if she was trying to eke something more out of the picture, some hidden detail which I’d managed to unintentionally capture.

“Where did you get this picture?”

“I took it.”

She seemed to roll these words over in her head before speaking again. “Off the net, you mean?” she asked.

I mimed using a camera. The result of this was Walker peering at me furiously.

She thumped the image with her finger. “You’re saying this is somewhere *here*?”

“Of course it is. How else do you think I got such a good picture of it?” A second copy of the poster had arrived in the printer’s out tray. I picked this up with greater care, hopeful that Walker might see me doing so. “Besides, I can’t just go putting any old picture on here, can I? No,” I answered quickly, “I can’t, because that’d be unethical… or something.”

Walker waved her hand at me, the same gesture she had used to shush me previously. “Can you take me to this?” She tapped the image.

“I can…”

Before I could tend to the remaining pages the printer was still running off, Walker had effectively ushered me towards the exit. As she herded me through the doorway I could hear the printer still churning away.

I closed the door behind the pair of us and, turning around, caught sight of Walker waiting for me rather impatiently. I sprung down the stairs and started off. Walker fell into step beside me, poster still in hand, her eyes still fixed on the image I had set centre-page.

"These are your contact details?"

I nodded.

"I thought this looked like your number…"

"Did I give you my number?" I asked.

"I took it down as a part of your statement."

I didn't remember this but she didn't need to know this. "Of course," I told her. "Still," I continued, "you were able to commit it to memory?"

"It's a regular steel trap up here." She tapped the side of her head. "Photographic memory."

"That sounds useful. Quite the blessing."

She chuckled, but didn't say anything else on the subject.

We travelled in silence for a few moments before Walker finally shook the page she was holding. The noise brought my attention back to it, to her.

"So how was this supposed to work? Somebody's meant to look at this, see that you've found their item and then – what? – contact you so they can organise a convenient time to pop over and fetch it?"

"I thought as much, yes. It's sort of like a 'lost' poster, just in reverse."

Walker didn't bother responding to this, instead returning her attention to the poster. I took this to mean that I was probably wrong in my thinking.

"I don't know," I said eventually. "I thought putting them up couldn't do any harm." I shrugged, realised Walker didn't actually see this gesture and then, for some reason, I shrugged again. "This is it."

"Why here?" She looked the locker door up and down.

"I've got some of my stuff stored in here." I unloc–

The door was unlocked so I opened it, revealing my stuff and *only* my stuff. "The tricycle is gone."

"I can see that."

I frowned, tried to wrap my head around where it could be.

"Is that blood?" Walker asked.

"It's red paint."

"You should try keeping it in the tin."

I said my laughter, narrowed my eyes. "Very funny."

“And the plastic?” She nodded towards the large, square sheet on the ground, some of which had red it.

“I was getting ready to paint it.” I tried to locate the tin. “Paint the tricycle. The plastic’s because I didn’t want to make a mess on the floor.”

“Bit late for that now.”

The tin had rolled towards the back of the locker, leaving a trail.

“Like somebody kicked it.”

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Why were you going to paint it?”

I thought about the tricycle, wondered if the picture Walker had seen really did it justice.

“It was in a bad way.”

She nodded. “Yes, sure,” she said. “I just meant that I don’t follow your thinking on the matter.”

“You don’t have to follow my thinking,” I replied. “I’ve got that handled.”

She sighed loudly. “No. I just don’t understand what part of 'finding a tricycle' prompted you to want to touch it up with some paint.”

I considered telling–

“You know what? Don’t bother answering that.”

At these words, Walker folded up the poster she was carrying and slipped it into her pocket. I watched then as she began circling the puddled red on the floor, touching it softly to see if it was close to drying. She seemed to be assessing the area, trying to determine something inherent about it that might somehow serve her investigation. When she stopped moving, she seemed tense, ready to pounce.

“So,” she started, “you found a tricycle today, brought it here with the intention of painting it, and now it’s gone missing.”

I thought this through, then nodded.

“It’s been stolen then?”

“It would appear so.”

“By who?”

I shrugged. “If I knew that–”

She waved me into silence. “I need to see it, see the tricycle.”

I watched as she removed a pair of gloves from her back pocket and proceeded to disentangle them.

“Are you always carrying those?” I asked.

Once freed from each other, she slipped her hands into the gloves, wiggling her fingers about once she had succeeded. “Comes with the territory,” she said, smirking.

“Even on your off days?”

She didn’t respond, but I did catch a brief glimpse of… something… flashing its way across her face. She turned away from me, walked towards the paint tin and crouched down to pick it up. I watched as she felt her way around the thing, and *really* felt, I mean, pausing here and there as if she had beneath her fingertips something familiar.

Occasionally, whenever her questing fingers paused, I wondered whether maybe she had found something untoward, something against the grain which warranted suspicion.

She put the paint tin down, brought her attention back to me. “You said you found it outside the lot. Outside *where*?”

I told her how I’d found it beneath the sign I was painting.

“And it wasn’t there when you went up the ladder?”

“Of course not, I would’ve seen it.”

She nodded. “Somebody must’ve–”

“I nearly tripped over it.”

She took the poster out again, unfolded it.

“Was it *placed* there?”

I thought about this. Everything gets placed somewhere. “You make it sound quite malicious. No, I think it was just left there. Harmless.”

Walker tilted her head to one side. “Left? What do you mean? As in 'abandoned' left? Is that it? By who? Who left it? Did you see them?”

She had fired a lot of questions at me in quick succession and so I pointed this out to her.

“Who left it?” She cut through my words.

“The kid riding it.”

She didn’t respond immediately, but she did eventually.

“Kid?” Her voice had dropped to a whisper. “Not possible. What kid?”

“*Very* possible,” I told her. “I saw it myself.”

Her brow furrowed and I saw a flash of anger in her eyes. “Why didn’t you just come out and tell me that?”

“You kept cutting me off when I tried.”

“Your stories always seem to meander,” she said curtly. “Just get to the point.”

“I think it’s a case of 'if you’d asked I would’ve told'.”

She removed one of her gloves and ran the hand through her hair. “You should be more forthcoming with that sort of information,” she said, frustrated. “Obviously it’s important. Remember the case I discussed with you earlier on?”

“The hit and run one?”

She nodded, tapped the poster page. “*This* is from that,” she declared.

“It is?” I couldn’t chase the uncertainty from my voice. “How’d it get here?”

Walker performed an odd gesture. Something hyperbolic, something over exaggerated. I didn’t fully understand it.

When she had calmed down somewhat she continued, saying, “That’s what I’m trying to find out.” She switched her attention back to the poster. “Seriously though… you didn’t put two and two together with this and what we discussed earlier?”

“Well, sure, I could’ve,” I told her, “but it seems quite impossible. I just thought a kid had shown up with a beat-up trike, not that he’d somehow obtained evidence from a crime scene. I’m sure there’s loads of kids out there who don’t know how to take care of a tricycle.”

She sighed loudly. “It didn’t seem – I don’t know – *odd* to you?”

I shook my head.

It seemed as if Walker was double-checking the events that had unfolded, the conversation we’d just had.

“*How*…” she murmured.

Walker kept talking to herself and, so as not to appear rude, I stopped listening.

I looked at the locker’s other contents, my possessions, waiting patiently to be placed somewhere else. I wondered if there was any hope of that happening today.

“Are you listening to me?”

I gave her my attention. “Recently, no. You seemed quite happy nattering away to yourself.”

“Sorry. Thinking aloud,” she said. “Force of habit. It’s just… serendipitous that *another* tricycle would show up like that.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t want you to tell anybody about this.” She held up a finger. “Nobody. Not even that dog of yours.” She then returned her attention to the poster and I watched as she seemed to deflate. “Are you sure?” she asked timidly.

“Sure about?”

“About how you found this?”

“Excuse me?”

She appeared to have another question poised but, for some reason, she wasn't in a big hurry to ask it.

"Never mind," she said eventually.

"Are you questioning the authenticity of my story?"

She put her hands up. "Not directly, not directly."

"Indirectly then? That's no better."

"It's just… outlandish is all," she said. "All of this, what's happened, it's–"

"None of this business was 'outlandish' before you came along." I crossed my arms and shrugged. "You made this weird by linking everything together. You haven't even *seen* the tricycle. You've been told about it. You've been *told* about a red tricycle, that's all."

An expression of uncertainty drifted across her face. "You know what?" she said. "Fine. Finefinefine." She removed a small notepad and a pen from her pocket. "Let's move along. Tell me about this kid you saw, then. Describe him."

I thought about how best to go about describing the child I had seen. Judging by Walker's appearance being as to-the-point as possible was in my best interests.

"Just a quick disclaimer. I saw the kid top-down, what with me being up the ladder and him being on the ground."

She nodded.

"He was little, maybe six or seven. Looked a bit small for his age, I thought. He was also messy. Scruffy-like," I clarified. "Had hair all over the place. Brown. Stuck out at odd angles."

"And how was he dressed?"

"Badly. He was wearing just this… mish-mash of clashing clothes. Red shirt, blue pants, and his shoes were green– dark green. Scruffy, as I said. There was mud on his knees. His pants were too big for him. I remember that clearly."

"*Had* shoes, you say?"

I nodded, watched as she wrote this down.

"Red shirt, blue pants, dark green shoes?"

I nodded. "He's probably colour-blind or–"

"Did you see this kid's face?" she asked. "Can you describe it?"

"Up a ladder, remember? Besides that, his hair did a pretty good job of hiding his face."

Judging by Walker's expression, I had done a fair job detailing the child. I watched the tip of her pen hovering uncertainly over the notepad she held.

I wondered perhaps, if I should repeat myself, slow down to allow Walker to catch my train of thought.

“He was a talkative chap too,” I said. “Asked a lot of-”

“Did he say anything odd?”

“Excuse me?”

“Anything odd,” she said. “Did it sound like he was scared or if something was wrong? What’d you two talk about?”

I shook my head. “He asked me about the sign and the painting I was doing. Then we got onto painting the trike which I said I’d do for him. Then I asked about his parents allowing him to ride about the streets.”

“And?”

“And I guess they let him.” I shrugged. “He said he lived close by, so he probably left the tricycle and just toddled back.”

“Name?”

“His name?”

She squinted at me. “Well, *yes*, I know your name.”

“He never said it. We didn’t do any kind of formal introductions.”

She regarded the notepad in her hand, tapped the pen up and down on it. “You’ve got none of his details. How, pray tell, were you planning on getting the trike back to him?”

I pointed at the poster that she held.

She sighed. “Oh, yes, *this*.”

“It’s not your missing kid, is it?”

She shook her head. “Doesn’t sound like him, no. My gut tells me *he’s* been taken though. Whoever hit him, stopped, picked him up, his trike up. Left his shoes behind.”

I frowned, tried to think of a question worth asking.

“Left behind because the collision knocked them off, *we think*.”

“That can happen?” I could feel my eyes widening.

“That’s what we *think* happened. A car large enough, going the right speed, kid’s shoes might’ve been untied.” She spent some time looking at the poster some more. “Listen to me, rambling. You don’t need all of this information.”

“How’re you able to remember all of it?” I asked. “The details, I mean.”

I watched as she shook her head. She didn’t say anything but I assumed that the answer was some variation on the theme of fixation. I wondered what sort of toll all of this was taking on her.

“I don’t know if that sort of behaviour is… healthy,” I said.

There was another flash of something in Walker’s eyes. Surprise, perhaps.

“You’re one to talk!”

"I am?" I beamed. I don't think I'd ever been considered an authority on anything before. "Thanks, I guess."

Another look of disbelief appeared on Walker's face but this was probably due to thinking about the tricycle again. I watched as she closed her notepad, affixed the pen to it, and pocketed both.

"I'm going to have to head to the station now," she said. "And I'll be taking this with me." She shook the poster.

"I can print out a new one for you – *sans* smudges."

She shook her head. "Don't trouble yourself."

"And if the kid comes back?"

She seemed to give this some thought before eventually shaking her head. "I don't know… Tell him not to play in streets, I guess. Tell him that kids get hit by cars around here." She looked at the picture again and I wondered what was going through her head. "*If* the kid comes back, call me, alright? Same goes for the tricycle, too. You have my card."

I did. I nodded.

She regarded the rest of the locker's contents and then turned her eyes on me. "So-o-o-o-o, these are your things?"

I looked at the boxes, told her.

"*All* of your things?"

"Should be." I smiled. "And whatever I choose to take there will be enough to get by on. For the time being, that is…"

"Because this isn't a permanent thing…" Walker laid a hand on one of the nearest boxes – framed photos. "Priscylla *will* return and then you'll go home."

"Eventual–" I stopped, thought. "You *know* her? How do you know her?"

Walker shrugged. "Know *of* her, more than anything else. I certainly didn't know that she was bringing someone new in to run the place."

I told Walker that I wasn't brought in by her, rather that I'd stepped in. Whilst looking around the locker, tallying the boxes left behind, I mentioned that Priscylla had been gone for about three months now. I kept Walker in the corner of my eye, watched her attention deviate as she ran a finger beneath the cardboard flap of the box. She lifted it slowly, peered inside and did a relatively good job of masking her surprise.

"But, yes," I said, turning my attention back to her as she pressed the flap back into place. "She'll return… eventually."

She coughed into her hand and then seemed to rally. “And that’s 'eventually' *without* a date in sight...”

I nodded. “Right.”

“And you’re – what? – fine with this arrangement?” She seemed to have returned to her usual form, back to business once more. “Well, of course you’re fine with it,” she said, not bothering to wait for my answer. “Of course you’re fine… I mean, you’re *here*, aren’t you?”

I looked at the boxes, stacked neatly. All of them controlled, managed. “I *am* here.”

“You didn’t have much going on back there, I take it?”

She looked at me expectantly, but I had nothing further to say.

“I should be going,” she said suddenly. “I saw your car out there so I take it you’re doing the mini-move thing today?”

I shoo– nodded.

“Good for you. Very productive.” She smiled. “Is there more… to come?”

I thought about this briefly and then shook my head.

She nodded, turned to leave and I followed her. Neither of us said anything as we trooped back to where she had parked her car. She opened the door and then turned back to face me. “Isn’t it weird how you never seem to get anything done around here?”

I didn’t have an answer for her question and, as such, it became rhetorical. This didn’t seem to faze her though because, after saying a quick 'goodbye', she sat herself behind the steering wheel, shut the door, fired up her car, and then drove off.

I watched her as she left, wondering who had infiltrated my locker and how they’d managed to bypass the lock guarding my things.

Back in my office once more, the question Walker had just asked came to mind. She was right, of course. I didn’t get much, if anything, done around here. Even those things that I *did* do, tended to be done either incorrectly or, at the very best, half-heartedly.

However, there were variables that were considerably out of my control.

“It isn’t my fault things keep happening.”

Walker’s question had left me feeling self-conscious and, as a result, ready to prove her wrong when next she returned to the lot.

I immediately made my way back to the sign, determined to be done with it. I climbed the ladder and painted over what remained, not bothering to look down even once. When I was done I regarded my handiwork from the ground, happy with my work.

I packed everything up, tucked the ladder beneath my arm, and headed towards my office. I returned the tools, after cleaning them off, to the shed, careful to replace them correctly.

Leaving the tool shed, I made my way to the office to fetch my car keys because completing the rest of my 'move' was next on my agenda.

I hadn't bothered locking the door and the dog had seized this window of opportunity to make herself comfortable inside.

"I'm not having it. None of your distracting nonsense. Right now I'm making things happen and there's no way I'm allowing you to derail that."

The dog didn't do anything. She just watched me with something that might have been mild interest as I searched for my keys.

"You're more than welcome to tag along. No distractions though." I wagged my finger at the dog, though this didn't seem to have any noticeable effect.

I left the office, headed towards the locker I'd left my things in and, before embarking on any kind of heavy lifting, I ensured that the back of my car was open so I could start packing. A box of clothes, a box of kitchenware, a kettle, and a microwave later, left me feeling that I had enough to make a start of moving in. I folded the car's seats down and slotted in, with some forcing, the single mattress. Recalling the dust that Walker and I had trudged through whilst inside the room, I tossed the broom in for good measure. Also, after remembering my need to eat later on, I slipped in the box of non-perishables as well. With the mattress jutting out and me having nothing to secure it in place I drove cautiously between the 'here' and the 'there' associated with this mini-move.

On arrival, I gave the place a quick sweep, ushering out a fair amount of dust. After this I unloaded everything and, in the process, realised that I had left the linen behind. I hurried back to fetch this, returned, and, after waving the sheets, duvet, and pillow slips about, I made the bed.

I unpacked my clothing into one of the room's many cupboards, quietly congratulating myself on sealing them in plastic so as to keep them fresh.

I set the microwave and kettle up in the area that I had mentally designated as the kitchen. To really drive the point home, I emptied the box marked 'kitchenware' here as well. I made sure that everything was stored away correctly. Spoons with spoons, forks with forks, nothing touching, making contact, *neat*. I then stacked the non-perishables neatly on the countertop, leaving a can opener beside them as a signal of intent.

All throughout my moving, the dog had wandered about the space sniffing here and there interestedly. Though occasionally getting underfoot she wasn't able to distract me.

Eventually she found a space and settled there and, feeling suitably settled myself, I lay down on the mattress and reflected on the day.

"Who's she to question the way I see the world around me?"

I looked at the dog and she looked back at me.

"I *saw* that kid. I *know* I saw that kid. It was almost like she didn't believe me."

Being horizontal and having a pillow tucked beneath my head was having an obvious effect on me. Checking my watch, I realised that midnight was fast-approaching.

I side-eyed the dog from where I lay. "Do you sleep indoors?"

She looked at me.

I got up, walked over to the door and opened it, gesturing to the outside world. The dog showed no signs of moving, instead turning her head away.

I waited but nothing happened.

"I'm going to bed."

I woke up the following morning to the sounds of my phone going off. Not an alarm but a phone call. When I'd finally finished fumbling my way into answering it, I was greeted by a woman.

"Hello?"

"Walker?" I smiled.

"Who now?"

I reconsidered the conversation. "Who is this?"

"A… customer, I guess?" she said. "Look, I phoned the number on the sign. Is this the storage lot?"

"Well, I'm not the lot but I am its owner."

The caller said nothing.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm outside your lot at the moment, just… admiring… the sign, and I was wondering if I could perhaps come in."

"Be my guest," I replied.

"I would but the gate's locked." I could hear the lock and chain rattling as she, I assumed, began shaking it.

"That's because it gets locked at night," I explained. "For security."

"Well, it's morning – *quite* far into the morning. I should say – and it's still locked."

I took the phone away from my ear and realised the time. "I'll be there shortly," I told her. "I'm putting on pants as we speak."

After ending the call, I put the phone down. Standing up in a hurry so as to rush the process of getting dressed, I collapsed in a heap because my feet were tangled up in the bedspread.

"Very sorry for the delay," I called, after unlocking and opening the gate.

"It's alright," she said.

Judging by the confused expression on her face there was clearly something that was still bothering her. She was an older woman, slightly wrinkled by the years she'd had already, and I was fairly certain that if you looked inside the handbag which she clung to tightly, you'd find a few of those hard-boiled sweets one always expects a grandmother to be carrying. Though she had a bit of a hunch, it didn't seem to slow her down in the slightest.

"I can bring my car inside?" she asked. "It's just… I might want to load up a few things, I think."

I nodded. "Not a problem. Just head up here and you'll see there's a few spaces near the office. You can drive right up to the lockers too, if you need."

Once she had passed me by, I set the gate in place, open, and then ascended the road towards my office.

She clambered out of her car slowly. “You seem a bit disorganised ‘round here.”

“Well, that sign you were admiring earlier… that’s my handiwork. I painted that.”

She removed her handbag from the backseat of her car and tucked this underneath her arm.

“Besides that, I only started here recently.”

“Started?” she echoed.

“Took over, began working, that sort of thing, I mean.” I rested my hands on my hips. “It’s been a bit hectic to say the least... but I’m slowly getting the hang of things.”

I thought she might have something further to add to what I’d just said, but she didn’t. She hadn’t even bothered to repeat the word 'slowly' in a condescending fashion. Instead she introduced herself to me – Elizabeth – before reaching into her handbag and producing a quite plain-looking key from it.

“Do you know what this is for?”

Before I could answer, she cut in.

“Do you know *where* this is for, I mean,” she clarified. “As in: where I might find its corresponding lock?”

“I take it there’s nothing on the key obviously?” I tried to catch a glimpse of the key she held before me. “That would be a good place to start, I think.”

She shook her head. “Don’t you keep track of this sort of thing somewhere?”

“I have a database.” I turned on my heel and headed into my office. From the desk drawer, I removed the book that Walker and myself had found the day before.

“Is that it?”

“That’s the… uh… database, yes,” I replied. “Bit of a work-in-progress thing happening here, as you can probably see.”

“Everything’s in there?”

“I hope so,” I said, opening it. “Doesn’t look like you could get that much in here, actually, but,” I flicked towards the back of the book, “there’s a few blank pages right… here. See?”

“That’s nice. Must be very neat and concise.”

“Okay, if you wouldn’t mind giving me some details… Who am I looking for?”

“Seeker, Bill.”

I repeated this name as I flipped through the pages, pausing here and there to double-check those surnames that hadn’t been written too neatly. The untidiness of the handwriting was unnerving. Suddenly I stopped searching completely.

“Why don’t you know where his locker is?”

“Well, I’ve never been here before,” she replied. “So there’s that, plus I didn’t know the place existed before last night.”

“Why last night?”

“Because last night I found your lot listed on one of my husband’s old bank statements,” she explained. “That’s the first I knew of it. He never told me about it. After seeing the name of the place I knew I’d need a key.” She held the key up and waggled it at me. “I found *this* after a quick search through his bedside drawer.”

“So this is your husband’s locker, then?” I asked hesitantly. “I don’t know if I can let you in there, I’m afraid. It’s a matter of privacy…” I regarded the page trapped between my thumb and forefinger, the one I’d been looking for. “I mean it *is* your husband’s locker…”

“My *late* husband,” she said.

“Oh.” I gazed up from the paper and the name thereon. “Alright, then. Understood. I don’t mind waiting, if you don’t.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time.”

My brow furrowed, a question came to mind.

“He’s dead,” she declared. “My husband’s dead.”

Caught rather by surprise, I defaulted to apologising and, I think, blushing.

“It’s alright.” She sighed. “It isn’t your fault. You weren’t to know.”

To move the conversation along I showed her the page I had paused on. “Here… This is his– your– *the* locker… here.” I took note of one of the columns on the page. “Seems to be a bit behind with regards to payment.”

“I imagine so. I’m sorry about that.” She leaned forward slightly. “Is there some kind of penalty fee I have to pay?”

“After enough time the renter typically forfeits the locker and its contents.” I took note of her expression before continuing. “However, given your circumstances, plus me still being quite disorganised around here, I’m willing to overlook this. If you’d like, you’re welcome to continue renting it or, after seeing what’s inside, you can take whatever you want out and I’ll have the space back.”

“Very kind of you,” she said, smiling at me. “That sounds wonderful.”

I checked the locker’s information against the picture of the lot’s layout I now had on my phone and, after a quick scan, located it.

“There we go. This’ll be it here. See?” I showed her the phone and she squinted at its display. “Not far at all.”

“Walking distance?” she asked.

“Everything’s walking distance if you have the right attitude.”

She chose not to walk though, instead trailing behind me in her vehicle.

“Here we are,” I said. “That key of yours should do the trick here. There’s nothing else you need me for, is there?”

“Oh,” she produced. “I thought you’d stay. You’re welcome to, if you’d like.”

I shuffled my feet. “Well, I don’t know what’s in there and, I’m sure, neither do you. What if it’s of a… uh… 'personal nature' or something?”

“I doubt that should be the case. Do you have something else you should be doing?” she asked. “Fixing your database, maybe? If that’s the case, don’t let this old lady waylay you.”

I paused and recalled the previous day’s thoughts, those ones surrounding my distractedness, my inability to achieve the goals I had set for myself. I considered my procrastination and how, in this particular moment, I had some kind of agency when it came to avoiding the event before me.

“It might help you get your thoughts in order.” She smiled, shrugged, and then turned to face the locker. “Sorting out your affairs, I mean.”

After rolling her words over in my head I checked my watch, regardless of the fact that I wasn’t interested in knowing the time.

“The book can wait,” I said. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

Once the door had been unlocked, a process that took some time due to the lock’s age, the pair of us had to work together to get the door up. She dropped the lock and its key into her handbag. “Hasn’t been opened in a while, obviously…”

To my surprise, the light within the locker illuminated its contents without any kind of delay. There wasn’t much to see inside and, realistically, those four boxes, each labelled with a tightly-packed script, seemed like the sort of thing that would have been just fine gathering dust in the top of some cupboard somewhere.

“Always neat, always organised,” she said.

“Not too much in here. Any idea what it is?”

“Knowing Bill,” she began, smiling, “these boxes are chock-full of stuff I told him to throw away. Countless times, too… That man always did have a bad habit of hanging onto things.”

I couldn’t hear any anger in her voice and, judging by the tears in her eyes now, whatever should-have-been-tosseds these boxes contained had gained some sort of sentimental value.

“Photos, cassettes, drawings… and,” she paused to brush away a bit of dust on one of the boxes, “and… letters,” she murmured. “He kept all of these…”

She regarded the small collection before speaking again.

“Do I risk looking at what’s inside?” she asked. “Stirring up old memories, I mean…”

“Are they good memories?”

She nodded. “I should think so, yes.”

“Then I don’t see why not,” I said. “Just try not to get trapped in them.”

“Trapped?” she echoed.

“I mean, just don’t let them stop you from moving forward, from having a life. That’s what I’m trying to say. Feel free to think on them, and then think *past* them. Don’t get mired in them… See the future.”

She rested a hand on the box labelled 'photos' and for a moment I regarded it.

“Memories are beautiful things, but sometimes it can be a blessing to forget,” I said.

There was a pause before she spoke again.

“To forget?”

I shrugged. “In the case of bad memories, I guess.”

She turned away from the boxes and then looked at me, blinking a few times. I realised she was probably thinking this through.

“I… understand you,” she said eventually, “though I doubt there’s anything in these boxes that could be considered 'bad'. Bill wouldn’t have hung onto that sort of thing...”

I watched as she reoriented one of the boxes, blew the dust off the faded lettering on the side. What her breath couldn’t remove, her hand could. The word 'photographs' became visible. She wiped her hand down her side, dirtying her clothes. She lifted the box up and bought it into better lighting and then motioned me to come closer.

The sticky-tape keeping the box shut had all but crumbled away and, as she opened it, this flaked upwards mixing with the box’s stale-smelling air. Wincing, she blocked her nose and waved at the space in front of her.

When the dust cleared, I could see stacks upon stacks of envelopes inside. Some of these were marked, others not. She removed a batch for closer inspection.

“We changed from old-fashioned film to digital years ago. Kids made us. Insisted on it. We went to the trouble of scanning everything we’d taken already and once we’d done that I told Bill to get rid of these.” She patted the side of the box. “I think… I think we needed the space at the time.”

She placed a pile of envelopes on the floor beside her and then dipped her hands back into the box. When these reappeared they were cupping a small collection of grey canisters.

“What’re those?”

“Undeveloped pictures. There’s rolls of film in here. Pictures in potentia.” She let these fall from her hands and tumble back into the box. “Couldn’t have been terribly important if we didn’t bother having them printed out though.”

“I remember… You had to keep them away from the sun, from sunlight.”

She nodded. “Then everything eventually went digital. With film you were limited. Twenty-four pictures, I think. Nowadays though, because your camera can store hundreds of images, you spend a lot less time planning your shots. There’s no need to be precious anymore. Just take what you want.”

She picked up the pile of envelopes beside the box and replaced these, sliding them in carefully to avoid bending.

“And it’s as if, because you can *take* everything now, it’s like you’re taking nothing at all.”

“Is that a bit like oversaturation?” I asked.

“It’s… something, I guess.” She shrugged.

She did her best to close the box before pushing it to one side, but the flaps fought against her. Eventually she gave up.

As before, she blew on the label of the second box. A small cloud of dust erupted and although she tried to shield herself from this, she ended up inhaling some of it still. After turning away, she began coughing into her hand loudly.

I could read the handwriting there: neat, slanted. “It says 'cassettes'.”

A few smaller hiccoughs squeezed out between her fingers before she took her hand away from her mouth. Behind her hand there was a smile.

“Oh, I remember these!” She lifted the lid off this box and set it down beside herself. “Now *these* are old. We basically went through the same routine with these as we did with the photos. Spent forever transferring – wait, converting! – these.”

I craned forward slightly and watched as she removed one of the black rectangles from the box. She began turning this over in her hands. Eventually she slotted one of her fingers into a flap that ran the entire length of the rectangle and then lifted it upwards. Beneath was this grey, almost reflective, stretch of…

I don’t know what.

“That’s why these were also called 'tapes'.” She clamped her fingers on either side of this material and pulled it away from the cassette. “And then you had to reel it all back in.” She pressed a finger into one of the white wheels embedded in the thing, and started twisting at it.

The tape slunk back into place.

“I remember these.” I removed another cassette from the box. “Remember them from when I was a kid. They were already old back then.” I did what she’d done, opened the flap, touched the strip of tape within. “In the process of being phased out, replaced by discs, forgotten.”

“Sometimes the machine would spew the stuff out and then you’d spend forever winding it all away carefully. There used to be a tool for doing it, but most times you could do it by hand.” The manner in which her voice changed told me that this was something she’d definitely dealt with before. “You’re right. Discs came along after this – those could be scratched; then you had those weird little cartridges for a time – so small you ended up losing them constantly; and then, finally, digital storage.”

“Prone to viruses.”

“Nothing’s infallible.” She nodded at the tape. “Still, better than *these*.” She slipped this cassette back into its previous position and ran her finger along the one beside it.

“What’s on them?”

“Family videos probably… Holidays, occasions, silly things.” She was smiling as she said this. “I remember when Bill got the camcorder. He spent the next few weeks with the thing attached to his face.” She removed another cassette from the box, pressing down on the label that had begun to peel away. “Do you know how long it took to get these little stickers straight? You start sticking and it always ended up going skew. See here?”

She showed me the word 'christening' and the fact that it was slightly slanted.

“Ah…”

“Only an issue if you’re a perfectionist though.” She chuckled, and then paused for a moment. “Listen to me, nattering away. I’m just assuming you had to deal with this sort of thing growing up. You really don’t look that old.”

She slotted 'christening' back into its original position and then replaced the lid.

The next box didn’t need dusting off. The words 'kids’ stuff MISC' could be seen on the side. I listened to her as she muttered away to herself. First, something about toys, and next something about clothes. Finally, a few words about how neither of those options could be correct.

After this brief monologue she opened the box to reveal a collection of various *objets d’art*. She inhaled deeply.

“This is the kids’ school stuff.” Her voice sounded hoarse. “All their creative endeavours.”

I tried to peer into the box but, what with everything crammed in there, it was hard to understand what anything was supposed to be.

“It’s quite something when kids first try their hand at creating, isn’t it?” She removed a clay figurine from the box. It appeared to be a three-armed person in excruciating pain. “This was a dog if I remember correctly. One of the legs must’ve come off.”

The clay had become brittle with age. I watched as she ran a finger over the place where a fourth appendage must have once been, her digit coming away red. She lowered this piece back into the box and another appendage fell off along the way.

“They just create unchecked, kids do.” She shifted the contents of the box about and then removed a somewhat crumpled piece of paper. “Pre-school drawings always ended up on the fridge.” She chuckled. “No matter what the finished product was.” After rotating the page, she squinted, frowned. “Like this: no idea what it’s meant to be.”

Whatever it was, she showed me, and I saw nothing so it meant nothing. Everything drawn in abstraction – all lines jutting out in every direction. This page was the sort of thing that, whilst perfect in the mind of a child, was open to interpretation for everyone else.

“A little piece of advice: always ask your little one to tell you about their picture rather than insult them by guessing what it might be. Nine times out of ten you’ll get it wrong.”

She lifted the picture above her head, holding it directly beneath the light.

“Funny how colour never lasts,” I said.

She nodded, then lowered the page back into the box. “Never-ending art projects, that’s pre-school. As a parent, you just wind up with piles of the stuff and when your kids are young they take great offence to their works being thrown away or hidden from sight.”

I stopped her before she moved onto the next box.

“Is that macaroni?”

She nodded. “Hard to make macaroni necklaces without them.” She pressed the box aside, cutting a clear path through the dust on the floor. “Kids just seem to grow up so quickly.” She sighed and, as I watched, she seemed to shrink somewhat. “As a parent you’re just so busy watching them grow up that you don’t realise you’re growing old. You miss out on the fact that your own life is basically in the process of winding down.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You don’t have kids, do you?”

I… shook my head.

“You’re young still. It’ll happen.” She smiled, reached over and patted me on the hand. “Look, I know it’s contrived, but most people will tell you that kids can be a blessing.” She pulled the final box closer. “That’s only true some of the time. Occasionally, kids can be shits. Lovable, sure, but little shits nonetheless.”

She removed the lid from the final box without bothering to read the single word written on the side.

"These are… these are all the letters."

She didn't say anything more.

I watched as she rested her hand on one of the bundles of envelopes… and then another. She paused briefly between batches, running a finger over her name. Bill had taken the time to write this out carefully.

"Letters?"

She wiped away a tear dribbling down her cheek.

"*The* letters." She sniffed. "These are the back-and-forth messages from when Bill and I first started courting." After removing one of the bundles, she wagged it. "Two overly in-love individuals right here."

I smiled, even though she wasn't looking at me.

"They all say 'Liza' on them."

She hesitated, held one of the letters at arm's length, and then looked at me. "Liza is a nickname," she said. "Short for Elizabeth." She turned her attention back to the letter. "I'd forgotten all about these. Not that we wrote them… just where they were. I'd forgotten where we'd been keeping them."

"Where *he'd* been keeping them," I said.

She chuckled.

"He always was the sentimental one…" She dropped the bundle back into the box and then removed a stack of much smaller papers – notelets – that had been tied around with some twine. "And these," she said, carefully removing one from the selection – "are the notes we used to scribble to each other. Sweet nothings." She smiled. "Whispered words written down. Silly little 'I love you' messages we would leave for one another." She let these fall into the box.

She was embedded in her nostalgia and I felt somewhat out of my depth.

Excluded.

I wouldn't recall feeling that way about anyone. "That's sweet," I said.

"I know they're not the sort of thing you should get rid of… I *know* that. None of this stuff is." She replaced the box's lid and then rested her hand on top of it. "It's just… an issue of space. Life starts overflowing the longer you live it."

Point in case, this lot.

I gazed around the empty locker.

“You can’t keep it all,” she said.

Her voice had drifted off and when I looked back she wasn’t there. I swung about.

“Mind bringing one of the others?”

She had already lifted one of the boxes up and started slow-walking it towards her car.

As told I did, picking up the box labelled 'cassettes'. “You’re taking all of it with you?”

She nodded and I watched the cloud of dust that appeared after she clapped her hands together. “Yes, I am. If you wouldn’t mind, just dump that in the backseat with the other one.”

I pressed the box in beside the other. “All of them? Even after what you said about not being able to store it?”

I looked back at her over my shoulder and caught sight of her nodding.

“That was an old attitude. One that I held whilst I still had a walking, talking example of all these things inhabiting my house. Now Billy’s gone, I could really do with some help jarring my memory.”

I smiled. “A trigger to pull up the past.”

I met her halfway, took the box from her and then placed it in the back with the rest.

She chuckled. “Once all of this is gone you won’t have to worry about the rental anymore.” I moved aside as she squeezed the last box into her car. “I’ll still try my best to pay back whatever’s outstanding though.”

I thought about this. “You removing everything closes this all up nicely, I think. No need to worry about it.”

She thanked me, and then thanked me on her husband’s behalf. There was a hug.

“I won’t be needing these anymore.” She removed the lock and key from her bag and handed these over. “If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind disposing of them for me?”

I nodded.

She smiled at me, thanked me a second time, and decided that my kindness warranted another hug. After the closeness, she climbed into her car and drove off.

I waved as she left and then turned around to face the locker. As I went to switch off the light, I saw, somewhat dust-covered now, one of the envelopes which she had removed from the first box she’d opened. A straggler, left behind.

I picked this up, blew the dust off and then thumbed through the photos that it held.

“Unfortunate.”

The dog barked.

And the acoustics of the locker carried it well, causing it to echo

All

Around

The

Room.

My automatic reaction to this noise was to flail my arms above my head, a behaviour that resulted in the photographs being scattered.

"Don't do that."

It took a while for my heart to settle down, though watching the dog sniff here and there about the locker, nudging the photos with her nose, helped calm me. As she exhaled I watched the dust erupt in small cloudlets around her nose.

I sighed. "If these were in any kind of order, it's ruined now."

The paw prints she left in her wake ended where she sat down beside me. I knelt and gathered the photos up carefully, doing my best not to scrape those that had landed face-down. I slotted them back into their envelope.

"These," I said, shaking the envelope in the dog's direction, "belong to the lady who was just here." I peered into it, flipped the first three photos between my fingers, and tried to gauge how badly muddled they were. "Apparently, if your house is on fire, photographs are one of the first things people are most likely to take out. They'll risk the flames for a few memories." I flicked onwards, a few photos further, but still couldn't see anything resembling a pattern. "Physical photos like these though… I'm fairly certain are in short supply these days. Nowadays, people would probably find something else to take out if the house was on fire. Personally, I'd take out the fire."

Seeing these pictures reminded me of how my parents used to store their own photographs. Big, fat albums crammed with memories, each captioned with a comment. Now, what with the advent of digital cameras, data storage, the cloud, and the ability to transmit our snaps via the internet, taking photos was much easier.

"And the ease-of-use drove their value down." I thumbed through a few more pictures. "Photographs used to be these *proofs* people went out of their way to create, to catalogue. A record of things that happened. Now, not so much…"

I looked up from the photos wedged between my fingers and turned my attention towards the dog. “Sorry, I think I drifted off there… just for a moment.”

I moved out of the locker and into the light, sat down cross-legged on the ground, and removed the photos from their envelope. Laying these out on the ground, I tried to make sense of them.

The dog followed, stuck her nose in my ear, licked my face exactly once, and then lay down, her paws resting in the area immediately before me. I moved myself and the photos slightly to account for this.

“Photographs used to be story-telling aids. Single-frame triggers for things that once happened. A picture you can use to pull up the past.”

Shuffling the prints about, I tried to find a starting point.

“You’d look at the pictures and sometimes they’d tell the story for you.” I smiled. “Other times you’d have to do the talking. You’d say something like 'this was photo right before X', 'this was the photo after Y', 'we took this one right before he died'.” I paused. “That sort of thing, you know?”

And I assumed that she *did* know, just couldn’t say.

“You’d look at them and then something’d come to you… You’d remember…”

I picked up one of the photos, held the corner between thumb and forefinger

“What *I* tend to look for first in an unfamiliar scene is a… trigger… of some kind. What I try to do when making a memory is to make these little like… markers in them. I focus on specific aspects in the memories I make so as to ease the process of remembering. It’s like leaving yourself a hint.”

Something glaring.

“Though all of this with varying degrees of success, obviously. A memory’s only as sound as the person making it. If you’re no good at the process of storing something you want to remember, it’s not going to make your life any easier when you’re trying to bring it back.”

I surveyed the photos laying on the ground before me and picked out one amongst them.

“Here, for example.” I rested my finger on this first photograph. “This one here with all the people grouped together, well, I can’t remember exactly what the occasion was. Not immediately, at least.” I tapped the side of my head. “But I know I know I know that it’s in here somewhere.

“I’m just so used to seeing timestamps on pictures,” I said, sighing. “I hated them myself but – I’ll admit now – they did do a good of positioning events, helping you know *when* a thing happened…”

I tapped the photo, the corner where'd I usually see those fierce red digits, disruptive against the rest of the captured image.

"Obviously that's what ends up happening as life goes along… Sometimes, when you're older than you were, your recall becomes more… challenging. Things that once came to you in a flash," I said, tapping the group of people in the photograph before me, "now take a little bit longer for the brain to… illuminate. Instead, what happens now is that when you see something the only immediate detail that comes to you is that you *should* remember what it is.

"But you don't.

"Or you can't.

"Hopefully, that's where the triggers you've left come in. You start hunting for *them*. Now, with people specifically, what I tend to do is focus on their faces. There's nothing quite like seeing a familiar face, is there?" I smiled as I bounced my finger across every face present in this picture. "There's nobody here I'm recognizing immediately, sadly." I shrugged. "Doesn't matter though, that's just testament to how long ago this must've happened. It's… slipped away from me.

"Obviously the workaround to this is to make other markers, to embed more of these memory touchstones to assist with your recall. You can't recall everybody, that's fair. I mean, I've forgotten more people than I've met." I chuckled. "So, what I do when I can't remember a person from their face, is I instead check their expression. A good 'look'… now *that* really can bring someone back to me.

"Simply seeing a person's smile or a coy side-long glance that they're giving… that can be enough. Something particular, something distinct, something they're *always* seen to be doing. That helps. You see a smirk or scowl and that can do the trick too. It's the 'face' they're remembered for.

"Sticking your tongue out in a photo, trough-like laugh lines, showing too much teeth in your smile, that's the sort of thing that can 'belong' to a specific person." Again, I bounced my finger around the photo, from face to face. "And, although I'm seeing that sort of thing, some nice mannerisms here… nobody's familiar for it."

I frowned, tapped the photo a few times and then tried again. I paused briefly, though I wouldn't call this hesitation on my part. "After that… After that… is when I start to look at what everyone's wearing. The 'dress code', you might say. I'll remember the outfit and the trouble it took getting ready for a particular event. Finding the right shirt, matching your shoes." I scanned the picture closely. "Having to really get yourself 'tidied up' for the whole affair. Real effort… that's easy to remember."

Except I couldn't.

Not a thing.

“Not a problem. Not a problem. If that doesn’t work,” I said, tracing a finger around the people in the photograph, “you just have to look at the environment. That’s all. Environmental cues are basically fool-proof. Sure-fire.” I smiled. “Just… one… thing… you have to recognise and you’re good to go. Could be something like an ugly painting or an odd light fixture… Maybe… a bit of damage to the wall or something.”

I squinted at the picture, but nothing was leaping out at me. The place was unfamiliar.

“This is… odd.” I picked the photo up and then turned it over, looking to the back for some kind of hint or description. “I think I’d be 'getting' this much quicker if I was actually *in* the photo. I got cut off though, I’m sure. I believe I was just off to the side here.” I tapped the left side of the photo and then paused. “Or… over here, I guess.”

The longer I looked at these people the more I felt myself wanting to know them, to somehow make them mine. I wanted to see them in these photos – all of them, not just this single one I was holding – and have them feel familiar to me. I wanted them to know me.

And, I realised, if I didn’t remember them, well… chances were they didn’t remember me either. All I was to them was 'just some photographer', the one who records. Obviously I couldn’t have been huddled in-between the various people in this picture because my role, my sacrifice, as it were, was to be the one who took the picture.

That’s it.

“Someone had to make the decision that this particular moment was worth taking note of.”

This, then, was my moment. I was the scribe.

“I had to’ve been… It was me who made the decision, that this here… this right now… this was a moment important enough to freeze in time.”

I tossed the photo back into the pile lying in front of me before looking around. The sun had already started descending. The chill I could feel in the air now was testament to this. I shivered.

The dog was chewing on my shoe.

“Stop that.”

She paused with her mouth still clamped around my footwear, a wide-eyed surprise registering on her face.

I pressed my hand against her muzzle and she released her grip. She looked at my hand for a moment before turning away to stare into the middle distance.

I crammed all of the photographs back into their envelope and, after closing up the locker, I made my way back to the office.

The dog trailed behind me, pausing every now and then to sniff at things.

I tried unlocking my office with the wrong key initially, having forgotten that I'd been given the locker's old security measures to dispose of. I removed the rusty lock and the office's *actual* key from my pocket and then went inside.

The old lock and its key counterpart, I placed just beside the laptop, resolving to dispose of both later. Preferably prior to my desk contracting tetanus.

I wondered why Bill had bothered securing his things if all they were was his family's nostalgia. These were important only to him, surely? Valuable invaluable. Unnecessary, that's what the lock and key were. All they did was impress upon the person outside that something on the inside warranted the security.

Maybe these two things were instead supposed to convince Bill that he had locked away something that was *actually* special.

The dog barked.

"!" I reeled, swung about.

For no apparent reason, the dog then barked a second time.

"Stop that."

I dropped both lock and key into the bin beside my desk, then picked up the photograph envelope – my next order of business – and began wondering what exactly I should do with them.

"There's no way she *could* know that these are missing. In her mind, these were already dealt with years ago."

The dog followed up her unexpected barking with a brief roam around the room, sniffing here and there. I watched her momentarily before returning my attention to the envelope.

"These should be destroyed…"

I removed a lighter from the desk drawer and then took myself and the photographs a short distance away from the office. Outside once more and feeling chilly for it, the idea of getting a small fire going suddenly served a dual purpose. I crouched and began balling a few of the photos up, something on which to start the burn. The flames took to these fairly easy and, once I'd laid a few more pictures over this kindling, there was a decent fire going.

The dog had seated herself on the opposite side of the fire and she looked at me, her gaze piercing, fiercer even than the flames between us.

"This *was* their fate." I stared into her eyes. "Just… delayed."

I watched as the topmost pictures on the heap curled inwards as the heat reached them. Those holes that the fire burnt through caused the ink at their edges to melt, blacken. Every now and then an image would bubble briefly before bursting into a fuller flame. After enough time there were only ashes left.

"I suppose I could've called her, told her I'd found them but if you don't notice something's missing, is it really gone?"

The dog barked.

"You don't know anything. Not a thing." The dog sighed or… huffed… or just exhaled in a normal manner and then walked away. I wasn't done talking though. "Sometimes memories can be bad, you know? Sometimes… fire is good…"

I kicked at the ashes, scattering them.

I returned to the office, telling myself that now was the time for something productive. The original database book was peeking out at me from the open desk drawer so I took this as an overt hint to get to work on understanding it. I'd picked out Bill's details from the entries fairly quickly but, on closer inspection, I could see that there was much more information than just a locker's numbering.

The fairly standard name surname layout was followed by the locker number. Beneath this was a section labelled 'contents', another area referencing 'rent status', and finally the heading 'notes'. Each page followed this formula, though not all pages had the same amount of information on them.

"Contents?" I checked this entry across different pages. "Is this… what's inside? How'd you find that out? Would you just ask?"

I thought back to some of the things I'd seen during my time on the lot and realised the benefits of knowing exactly what your tenants planned on storing on *your* premises. Knowing was a form of defence. Troublesome types could be turned away. I took note of those entries that had question marks besides them. These were lockers with believability issues.

Regardless, simply having all of this information would make for a much more robust database. Everything, all in one place.

Carrying the same structuring through, I began creating a fairly straightforward table, dedicating a column to each piece of information, appending any dates I found with an additional three months. The resulting information, I knew, would be something useful as well as supplemental to the map that I already had. A massive help when it came to navigating the lot. No reason for people to think I didn't know my way around place.

The process was somewhat time-consuming, my input hindered by having to decipher the handwriting as I went along, and by the time I had an entire page completed…

note to self: don't forget to append 3 months…

Name	Surname	Locker	Contents	Rent Status	Notes
Ira	Engers	E 25	misc. house	outstanding 1 month	pays late
Thomas	Magnus	S 15	?	6 months up-front (3 left)	pleasant enough
'Samara (?)	A.	E 21	'various rubbish' (?)	Yes, debit	quite old
Brett	Inskip	W 14	medical and research items	yes, pays in advance	professor at local uni
Edward	Noels	I 5	kitchen appliances (?)	28th of every month	none
Simon	Arthurs	L 5	various household items	EFT, consistent	friendly but rude
Terrence	Traipser	L 4	house stuff (?)	outstanding (3 months)	lucky but not that lucky
Irvine	Tate	B 20	stuffed animals (treated)	bank transfer 1st of the month	man, short-tempered, balding
Francis	Enstein	E 15	racks of clothing	debit	costume designer (out of work)
Y.	Nunes	A 18	various household items	cheques bounce	none
Oliver	Ting	L 5	???	Yes, debit 25th	pays timeously, visits rarely
U-something(?)	Ingles	L 20	various props and set elements	Yes, debit 25th	theatre worker
Tina	Vendor (?)	O 21	house stuff, boxes	Yes, debit 25th	in the process of moving
Rachel	E.ndry	V 18	books, lots of books	Yes, debit 25th	"collectors' items"
Yancy	Thompson	E 15	office equipment, desks	2 months upfront (1 month out)	policeman or detective
R.	Harrow	R ??	multiple boxes (?)	Yes, debit 25th	nice-enough woman, polite

…it was dark out.

"Time really flies when you're doing mind-numbingly boring work."

I stopped looking out the window, instead trying to re-focus my eyes on the screen before me. This wouldn't take though. I checked what I'd already managed to do, ran a finger down the contents column for interest's sake.

"Inskip… That's the guy tied to the medical locker." I wondered why it had been left unlocked if he was actually up-to-date with his payments. Had he simply forgotten a turn of the key? "Doesn't matter."

I looked at those entrants whose payments had lapsed, considered why this might have happened, wondered whether they'd ever show up to discuss this with me.

"They must've signed a contract or something, right?" Where would that sort of thing be stored away? "Renting, taking up space here… that's an agreement. There *has* to be a paper trail."

Where would I have kept something like that?

Knowing me, I wouldn't have kept it, I'd have lost it.

After slipping the book back into the drawer, and shutting down my laptop, I gathered my things, map included, and left the office. I locked up before attempting to decipher the map that, in the dark, proved fruitless. I fumbled for the flashlight on my phone whilst overhead, the moon–

The dog barked.

My cell phone, the office keys, and the map were all launched skywards, my phone lighting the action with an erratic strobing effect.

"Don't do that!"

She had seated herself beside the staircase in an attempt, I believe, to hide from me. A way of heightening my heartrate even further. I ran my hand down my face and then regarded her for a moment. She wagged her tail.

After picking up both map and keys, I lifted my cell phone up off the ground. The cover had kept it safe. I looked at the dog and, to demonstrate my annoyance with her, I stormed away. After catching sight of one of the row numbers and sighting my position on the map, I began storming away in a more sensible direction. Now headed towards my new home, I swung the flashlight here and there as I travelled. I could, but only *just*, make out the sounds of her padding behind me, her paws scuffing the dirt, and though I should've been upset by her presence, I was instead somewhat reassured by it.

"It gets dark real early here some days."

I slowed down until the dog caught up and we walked on, side-by-side, with only the occasional stop here and there for me to consult the map. Travelling in silence I was left to my own

thoughts and, I don't know full well why I started thinking about ghosts but, as luck would have it, merely having thought about them was cause enough for concern.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?"

She didn't bother responding.

"Yeah, me neither."

I shone the light ahead of us and, as we rounded the next corner, I caught sight of a locker number in the corner of my eye. From the database entry I'd just been doing, I knew this was one worth looking into. Its three-fold overlap: a question mark beside its contents, the defaulting due to non-payment, and a somewhat cryptic note had interested me.

The lack of any kind of locking mechanism on the door was somewhat disheartening and gave me the impression that there wouldn't be anything inside. Perhaps this person had come to clear out their possessions already.

Stood beside me, the dog did nothing but sniff at the ground near the door.

I shook my head at her apparent boredom before lifting the door. The locker, as it turned out, wasn't empty as I could see the silhouettes of various items standing about. Beneath the beam of my cell phone, the outlines of furniture pieces could be discerned. So, whilst there *were* actually things inside this locker, they just weren't at all alarming or even interesting.

In the midst of my reaching overhead to bring the door down, the dog began to growl. Starting out low, distant-sounding almost, this noise was a good enough reason for me to freeze. Her persistent thrumming echoed around the room.

I redirected the torch, first to see her and then, hopefully, whatever it was that she was growling at, whatever she was keeping at bay. However, sat beside me, completely still, she simply stared off into the darkness. Busily sniffing the air around the two of us, I could see that she wasn't the one making noise.

"I'm terribly glad that you're here with me," I murmured.

And *then* she started growling.

Her continuous rumbling, I eventually realised, had resulted in the locker's other noisemaker going silent. The vibrations of her growl shot upwards, moving all throughout my body. The light on my cell phone couldn't do a thing against the darkness that lay before us and so, once I had summed up the courage to move, I instead used it to find the locker's light switch.

"That don't work."

For the second time that night I seized up.

The dog's growling continued and, although I was only a few steps away from her, she felt farther off.

"Fixament's broke."

I had a feeling that 'fixament' wasn't a real word, but I was in no position to correct whoever had said it. The voice – his voice – had come from somewhere towards the rear of the locker and hoped that that was where it was going to stay.

The dog's growling had dropped an octave and although she'd lowered the volume, the tension she was creating hadn't changed at all.

"Your dog bite much?"

My mind had caught up with the moment and although I felt ready to speak, my question of 'who goes there?' felt unsuitable. Having already had my fair share of surprises on the lot, I opted for something different.

"Are you bad?" I asked.

This question was met with a brief silence.

"D'you mean bad-evil?"

"That's right," I said.

His reply was in the negative and this relieved me.

"You?"

"Me?"

"Same question," he said.

"No, of course not." I shook my head. Silently stood beside the dog, I waited for something to happen. When it didn't, I made it. "What are you doing in here?"

"Could ask you the same thing." A loud shuffling sound followed this statement. "What you're doing is trespassing."

"Well, I own this place."

The dog barked, but this had no real bearing on the conversation.

"Well, I'm renting here. That makes this my space!"

I made it clear that the rent for this particular locker was three months overdue.

The shuffling stopped suddenly. "I'll give you that. I'm behind."

"Too behind, basically."

The shuffling began again in earnest and I wondered what the person on the other end of this conversation was doing. Eventually, after reaching a fever pitch, the shuffling ceased. A curse word was uttered and then a light came on.

There was a red lamp resting on the ground, casting what light it could onto the surrounding area. Beside this lamp was a sleeping bag – navy blue – the source of the earlier shuffling noises – and, enveloped in said sleeping bag, was a person. He had a beard which poured out over the edge of bag and it looked somewhat lively. Those small patches of face that had managed to survive his beard's spread were networked by a series of wrinkles with only a few laugh lines dotted here and there. His eyes were incredibly grey, a colouring that they must've caught through contact from the hair, thick and matted, that cascaded off his head. He brushed this out of his sightlines now with a hand I would hesitate to shake.

"Well?" He propped himself up against the chest of drawers located behind him.

"What were you doing just now?"

"Sleepin'."

"You're quite loud."

"I'm very good at it." He rubbed his eyes.

He demanded that I step closer to him. Quoting something about his old age and the fact that his eyes weren't what they once 'was', he unburied his other arm from the depths of his sleeping bag and urged me closer.

I made use of my light to shine a path forward and, in the midst of my approach, I took note of the various home-y things surrounding us. To my left there was a clothing rack adorned with a variety of outfits. Beside the rack was a small but well stocked bookshelf. Beyond this was one of those mini-fridges one typically saw in hotels. This one had apparently lost its way *en route* to somewhere fancier. The man, his mattress, and his sleeping bag were beside this fridge, just within arm's reach. This, I thought, was quite good thinking, especially if you were ever in need of a midnight snack. There was also one of those little side tables which, not in keeping with its namesake, was resting in the middle of the pathfinding I was doing.

After I'd collided with the side table did he order me to watch out.

"Maybe next time." I rubbed at my shin and, as I did this, the light bounced around the locker wildly, revealing further points of interest: a shower head connected to a hosepipe, a microwave, and a kettle. Their cables snaked towards a plug point in the nearby wall. There was, finally, a doormat with the words 'home sweet home' on it. The man was *clearly* living in here.

"Are you living in here?" I crouched down beside him, though I maintained a safe distance, just in case he was a 'crazy'.

"Right."

"Why?"

"Nowhere else to live."

"Oh." I nodded my head because that made sense. "And?"

"And what?"

"Comfortable?"

He frowned at me and then opened his mouth to answer, but didn't. He repeated this action and then held up a finger. "Comfort's relative."

"You living here isn't exactly… legal." I tried my best to sound friendly whilst saying this. Throwing in a smile for good measure, I just *knew* I had a winner of a sentence.

"Ain't legal, sure. *Is* cheap though."

"I imagine so, yes. Not paying for something is definitely cheap."

"In terms of legality though," he hummed and hawed for a moment before continuing, "I think this's a grey area."

I tilted my head to one side. "It isn't though. What you're doing *is* trespassing. Plus, you aren't using the property in the manner set out in the contract that you signed."

He shrugged.

It wasn't an appropriate response to my statement but it was all that was forthcoming.

"How long have you been here?"

"Three months," he replied.

"That's quite something."

He nodded, and then sighed, and then coughed a great, big, hacking cough. After apologising for this eruption, he wiped a hand across his mouth.

"Why don't you have anywhere else to live?"

His eyes widened at these words. "That's a bit of a personal question…" he eventually said.

I thought about this briefly and then shook my head. "I don't mind."

He sighed again and, although it didn't lead to coughing, it did induce some further shifting and repositioning on his part.

"What are you doing?"

"Just gettin' comfortable."

I slipped backwards into a sitting position. "For what?"

"I'm going to tell you why."

"Like a story?"

He nodded.

And as he spoke, I listened.

“Do you know what collateral is?”

I nodded. “In *what* sense though? Financially? Something pledged 'in place of'?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “That’s the way the casinos use it.”

And with that I already knew where his story was headed.

“But you should tell it still.”

He frowned at me. “What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing, nothing.” I gestured for him to continue.

“Collateral’s what you use when you aren’t good for the money right now.” He paused. “Right *then*, I mean.” He shut his eyes, rubbed his temple. “When you don’t have it on you, you put something else up. You leverage your assets. That’s collateral.”

His eyes were closed but I nodded still.

“So things like cars, jewellery and so on. Things like–”

I interrupted.

“Yes… Things like houses. *My* house.”

His had the potential to be a fairly short story, one made sadder by its brevity. The loss of something so big, a person’s *everything* most likely, compressed into a mere moment–

“A single bad decision, that’s all it took.” He shook his head. “No, that’s not right. Not right at all. *Multiple* bad decisions.” He made a gesture, rolled his hand over and over and over. “All spread out over a long enough time. That spread, that spread makes you *think* they’re disconnected. They’re not.”

They’re like dom–

“They’re like dominoes,” he said. “Each one bumping into another… and they’ve been falling over so long that you lose sight of where it started.” He shuffled about in the sleeping bag. “And because it’s gotten so out of hand, all you can do is watch the most recent events unfolding. That’s all you can see so that’s all that matters.”

“You lost your house,” I said.

He smirked, looked down at his feet. “Amongst other things. I used to have a lot. Had a wife, had friends, had a car, had a job, had a house, *had* a gambling problem.” He paused, sighed loudly, gazed around the locker he’d made his new home. “All of that went away.”

“Even the gam–”

“It’s hard to have a gambling problem when there’s nothing left to gamble. Before that though,” he said, “everything’s on the table.”

“Fair game,” I whispered so as not to interrupt him.

He stopped his wandering gaze, looked directly at me. “That’s the worst part about it. What happened to me,” he said, “happened fair and square. I wasn’t taken advantage of, wasn’t cheated. I followed a path and reached the end of it.” He gestured to the room we were in. “What I have here’s what I have left.”

It wasn’t much… but it also wasn’t nothing.

“You don’t have any family or friends?”

“As I said 'followed a path'.” He coughed. “Along the way, I borrowed money, made promises, took out loans. Along the way,” he said, “I burned a whole lotta bridges.”

I nodded.

“When it started I was sick. I gambled, kept gambling *because* I was sick. I had a problem. Then,” he paused, “back *then*, people were still sympathetic. Said things like: 'go to counselling', 'call the hotline', 'tell somebody to hide your wallet'.” He shook his head. “They still tried to help me, you know?

“And the help *didn’t*. I kept at it, kept at it. Gambled and won, gambled and lost and, all of the time, my losses were always greater.

“You spend too long being sick,” he said, “and what you’ve got worsens. You go from sick to terminal. Give it enough time and you die.”

I interrupted.

“No, not literally,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Of course not literally. I’m talking to you, aren’t I?

“People forget about you after you’ve turned down their help long enough. They leave you to your own devices regardless of the fact that they’ll likely end up destroying you. And destroy you they do.” Another look around the room, this time punctuated by a smile.

“Realistically, I should’ve lost *more* than my house. I mean, I bet more than my house,” he said. “The casinos though, they’re always happy to take you at your word. Especially if you’ve made 'good' in the past, if you’ve paid timeously before.” He chuckled but I couldn’t think of anything humorous enough to warrant it.

“In the end, it doesn’t really matter. Even if you aren’t good for your word, the casinos will find a way to *make* you good for it. If you can’t pay, they’ll help you find a way to do so. They hire people for that sort of thing. Creative thinkers.” He chuckled but it didn’t feel funny.

“How could you–”

“Bet more than my house?” He smirked. “Easy. I forged a few documents. Made it out to be something more than it was. When I lost, I ended up leaving in a big hurry, I headed home for the

last time. I 'packed'," he said, exaggerating the quotations, nodding at the things surrounding us, "and came here.

"After unloading everything, I took the car back to my place, left it there, and then made my way back here on foot.

"And that," he said, "is my story."

I shook my head. "It's not though. You've left things out."

"I've–"

"You're in hiding," I told him. "You ran away from a problem that's likely to find you. One day, your bad debts will come knocking."

"They don't know where to find me." His voice lacked conviction. "They don't…"

"Three months hidden away," I murmured. "But the moment you return to the world–"

"I won't."

I tipped my head from side to side. "Doubtful. Give it time and you'll eventually feel the need to go back. Or one of those 'creative thinkers', they'll find you."

He shook his head.

"I'm not going to argue with you."

He smil–

"And I'm not going to evict you either…"

"Thank–"

"Don't."

He didn't say anything, just sat there, still bundled up in his sleeping bag, his out-of-control beard still overflowing.

"There's more than that though. There's *worse* than that," I told him. "All the way through, you only *lost* in the material sense. People left you, your *wife* left you, and you didn't seem to pause for thought."

His mouth opened, shut. "I was sick, couldn't see."

"Couldn't *feel* is more like it." I shook my head. "There's emotionality missing from your story. There's no refl–"

"*Reflection*." He followed the word with a laugh. "I've had three months for reflection."

For a while the two of us sat in silence.

"Anyways, it's a good story… if a bit short."

"Good?"

"Okay, well, no." I scratched my head. "It's… the way you tell it… *that's* good."

He frowned at me. "Telling it good doesn't make it good. My life *isn't* good."

I looked around the locker, at all of the things he'd accumulated, at the way he tried to live neatly in this little box. "Your life's better than some."

He was about to speak–

"And, sure, it's not much, but it's something, right?" I felt like a rock rolling down a hill. Unstoppable. "Somewhere to leave from, somewhere to return to. That's important. That's the sort of safety people crave."

"And you're just skipping over my losses?"

I shook my head, waved my hands. "Of course not. They're still a part of your story… still in there. In *here*," I tapped the side of my head, "but you yourself, you did some skipping. A lot of what you lost was shared as… like… footnotes. That's… something."

He didn't speak.

"You live, you learn. If you can grow along the way, good." I regarded him in his sleeping bag. "Nobody ever said growth was going to be easy though. As you live, you shed yourself, everything you are, like a skin… It's… normal, natural… but it isn't always nice." I watched as he tilted his head to one side. "Sometimes you don't even notice it."

I think he was somewhat mesmerized by my speaking and me, well, I was too.

"It's important though," I continued. "In the moment, when it's happening, you don't realise what's being left behind. You're only interested in the outcome, the *potential* outcome, so what you end up doing is just moving forward without bothering to look back.

"What you're doing, really, is building yourself up… and it's all just based upon what you once were. In some sense all you're doing is standing on the shoulders of all those past versions of yourself." I watched as he nodded. "And the thing is… The thing is…"

I stopped. "Did you say something?"

He shook his head. "That was you."

"The thing is," I said, my train of thought re-railing, "if you forget them, if you forget the role the past plays in the present, how important it was when it came to putting you there." I patted my hand on the ground between us. "Then you run the risk of going where you've been, doing what you've done.

"Forget the past and you'll fall right back into it." My palm was cold now. "If you don't see yourself standing on the shoulders of all those past selves, there's a chance they might crumple underfoot."

His eyes were slits and I watched him watching me. When enough time had passed he shrugged at me. "I get what you're sayin', though I can't say I much like it."

I shook my head. “I never meant to imply anything. A story’s just a lens for looking at your life. What you see’s what you *choose* to see.”

“People don’t shed their skin likes snakes though. *They* do it all in one go.” He shuffled about in his sleeping bag. “People take their time. Us, we flake off, we wear away.”

“Probably why we don’t notice it,” I said, nodding. “Too gradual.”

Terry squirmed in his sleeping bag. “The snake notices, though.”

I shrugged. “Sure, but that doesn’t mean that it *knows*, doesn’t mean it understands the implications.”

“I won’t make the same mistakes again.”

I told him that, without money, he really couldn’t. After this, I stared at my feet for a time. If he wasn’t wrapped up in his sleeping bag he may have perhaps done the same.

“What’s it like being homeless?” I asked.

“Well, you know the security and comfort what comes with having somewhere to live?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, none of that.”

I nodded again.

“But that’s being *house*less. House and home are very different things. A home *needs* people.”

He gave this some thought and then told me that I was very clever, though his voice was heavy with sarcasm. He made minor readjustments to himself, his sleeping bag. “We both know what I’m talking about here though.”

I was about to spea–

“I *know* you know,” he said. “You get it. Anyways, you’ve heard my story, so you know for a fact that I can’t pay you. What happens now?” He frowned, a sorrowful gesture rather than a frustrated one, I assumed. “You heartless enough to throw me out?”

That word 'heartless', it stalled me. It seemed the sort of thing I’d never associate myself with. Our conversation had shifted gears.

“Give it a think… How well would you sleep at night knowing that I was doing the same under a bridge?”

I thought about it.

“You, with your memory-foam mattress, your comfy duvet, your decadent pillows … and me, out *there*,” he said, pointing towards the locker’s entrance, “resting my head on a rock.” There was a dramatic sniff. “Just think about that for a few seconds.”

I did so.

"And?"

"Well, you're not out *there*." I hiked a thumb at the door behind us. "You're in here, and you've got a mattress and a sleeping bag and a pillow. So it's not *all* bad." I could see his expression morphing. "Still… I *do* understand what you mean."

He gave a long, final sniff and then nodded.

"It's not too bad in here. I mean, you're comfy, aren't you?" I wanted to pat him reassuringly somewhere on the sleeping bag but decided against that. "And you've got that little fridge over there." I looked around. "And the bookshelf? That's good."

"I suppose."

"I mean, wouldn't you describe yourself as a jaunty sort?"

He frowned, tilted his head to one side.

"I bet you go on all sorts of capers…"

"Excuse me?"

I fumbled for some better words. "Uh… antics… escapades?"

His eyes narrowed. "You've either got a very warped sense of humour or you're a bit dim, friend." The sleeping bag rustled. Menacingly now, I thought. "Which is it?"

"Which is better?"

"Sense of humour." He peered at me. "Doesn't mean you're a good person though. The opposite, really."

"I meant nothing by it." I held my hands up, palms-outward. "I just don't know much… and asking questions, that's how I fill those gaps." I scratched my head. "Sometimes they're just stupid-seeming questions."

He looked at me.

"It's just… I need to know more."

I *need* to know more, that's all and, sometimes, people and their feelings they… well… they have a habit of getting in the way.

"So you'll be wanting me out of here now, won't you?"

"Sorry, what?"

He began shifting about in his sleeping bag as if making ready to leave. "Wanting me out of here," he said. The sleeping bag had moved from mattress to floor. For a moment he was face-down on the concrete and just lay there. "I'm used to this kind of treatment!" he wailed.

"Well, you definitely *can't* pay me but maybe…" An idea arrived in my head. "Maybe you could work for me?"

The sleeping bag whirled right-side up, our eyes locked. "Work for you *how*?"

“Here on the lot, I mean.”

“As what?” Even in the half-light I could see his face was tinged with suspicion. Under better lighting, I might’ve seen an arched eyebrow heading towards his hairline.

I frowned. “I hadn’t thought that far yet.”

He sat upright suddenly. “Are there any perks?”

I had to give this some thought. “Sometimes it’s quiet at night…”

He shook his head. “I meant like medical aid or a pension? That’s perks.”

“I doubt that.” I grimaced. “Those aren’t even things *I’m* getting...”

He tipped his head from side to side, a gesture that I assumed was symbolic of 'weighing up his options'. “What days would I work on?”

“What days do you live here?”

He squinted at me. “Well, all of them. Ain’t like I pop off to my summer home at the weekend. I’m going to need a day off… I’m only human.”

I offered him Sundays and he nodded, happy with the idea.

“Well, that’s settled then.” I smiled. “I’m glad we could come to some kind of arrangement. It’ll be nice having someone around here to help.”

The two of us nodded at each other, though in this regard I *was* following his lead.

“So, will there be some kind of interview?” he asked.

“I believe this might be it.”

“Oh!” He tried to sit even more upright in the sleeping bag so as to give a better impression of himself. “How’s it going?”

“Interestingly.”

He stood up, letting the sleeping bag fall around his feet. Thankfully, he was wearing clothes underneath. Not much but some.

“Enough,” I said.

“Say something?”

I shook my head.

He kicked his way out of the sleeping bag and then charged off into the darkness. I heard a cupboard opening and the noise one associates with coat hangers being shifted along a rail.

I watched as the dog tilted her head to one side, her ears unused to the noise.

“What would I do here? As in, what would my responsibilities be?”

“I was thinking maybe you could work security.”

There was a brief pause before his clothing-related rustling continued. “Have you had trespassers on the property before?”

I gave this some thought and then shook my head. “As far as I can tell, only you.”

“Well, good work.” The cupboard doors were closed abruptly. “Fairly decent track record.”

From the darkness came the sound of something heavy being dragged along the ground.

“What’re you doing?” I asked.

The noise, louder now, made me think of a spade being scraped across cement.

“Mnpff.”

Beside me the dog began to growl.

I stood up and then took a few cautious steps backwards.

She edged away from the noise as well, her hackles rising.

“Mphf. Mnph! Mphnf!”

Ahead of me, my tenant reappeared, edging forward into the light slowly. He was facing the wrong way but this didn’t seem to be of any concern to him.

“Hello?”

“Mhnfh!”

He swung about abruptly, for a moment appearing to teeter uncertainly on one leg. A large rectangular object that he white-knuckle grasped came to a halt before me.

It showed me.

It was a mirror.

I waved.

And my reflection did the same.

“What’s with the mirror?”

His head appeared, popping out from behind the thing. There was something in his mouth. I stepped forward went palm-to-palm with the mirror and supported it.

“Thanks,” he said, after removing what turned out to be a tie from his mouth. “Just lean it up against the drawers here. That’s good. Say, where’d your dog go?” He moved past me, edged me away from the mirror and then he crouched down slightly whilst slipping the tie around his neck. “Okay, wait a bit. Just tilt it a little for me, would you?”

I looked around for the dog, but she was nowhere to be found. I wondered if the mirror had anything to do with her disappearance.

“*Tilt* it.”

“Like that?” I asked, snapping back to him.

“Forward a little.” He began fiddling with the tie. “No, not that way. The other way. Okay, yes, I meant 'backwards', sorry. There we go.”

He swung about abruptly.

"That was quick."

"Clip-on." He tapped the side of his nose, but I didn't know how to link this to the tie on his neck. "Anyways, just leave the mirror there, would you? I'm sure it'll come in handy." Running his hands through his hair, he began to preen.

I rested the mirror against the set of drawers. "Well, the job's yours if you want it."

"And if I don't want it?"

"I'd probably have to set an example and have you removed." These words, in hindsight, were rather harsh. I made an effort to convince myself otherwise. "I mean, you *are* freeloading."

His hands froze mid-preen. "Who would you be setting an example for?

I didn't have a reasonable answer for this.

"Other… people?" I offered.

He swung about. "There's others?"

I had no idea and told him as much.

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I was planning on taking it anyways."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm hired!" He beamed at me. "I'll do it, I mean. I'll take the job!" He stretched out a hand – oily – and I shook it. "Name's Terry."

I told him that we'd need to make a formal arrangement eventually, something involving a contract. One that, this time, he'd be obliged to stick to.

He nodded, laughed. "D'you want me to start work tonight?"

"I shouldn't think so," I said. "This was just an interview. Tomorrow'll be fine." I nodded. "You can start then." After straightening up, I made my way back towards the locker's door.

More cautious now, I navigated the maze of knick-knacks. Along the way the dog brushed past me and fell into step. At the entrance, I rested a hand on the light switch, flicked it off and then back on again, having forgotten that doing so made no difference. I could see Terry deeper in the locker, still fussing about in his little area. He seemed to be tidying.

"'fore you go! Quick question," he called to me. "I ain't seen you around here in the past. What's happened to that old lady? Sissel?"

I flicked the light switch off again. "Who now?"

"Sissel? I'm sure that was her name… Or… Priscylla? That it? The owner of this place? Where'd *she* go?"

"Ah, *Priscylla*. Sorry. Yes, I'm with you now." I patted a hand against my forehead. "I can see how you get Sissel though. It's… sort of like a nickname."

There was a lengthy silence after I stopped speaking.

"You there?" I asked eventually.

"You didn't say where she'd gone. Where'd she go?"

"Well… I can't rightly say."

"*Rightly*." His voice was an echo and I felt the word hanging in the air between us. "Why don't you go on and tell me something incorrect, then?"

"It'd only be speculation," I told him, after giving his words some thought. "Mind you, that's not a problem. I've always been good at that sort of thing."

Happy that there was nothing worth seeing nearby, the dog settled down beside me. She scratched her head with her foot.

I explained to him that in recent times, my phone had rung. Can't say I was too talkative back then but, on a whim I'd answered it and, during the exchange, I'd been reminded of my status as a last-living relative.

"Only child," I rested a hand on my chest. "And my parents passed away some time ago."

Mom was the same as me. The only relative I had was an aunt – my dad's sister – who they always spoke of in the past tense. That meant, to little me growing up, that she was gone, dead.

"That's why I mention nicknames," I told Terry. "*If* discussed, *if* mentioned, it was always in short. Scylla *this*, Scylla *that*."

Wasn't dead though. After picking over their sparse sentences, I realised her death was only figurative. This led to me asking questions, most of which went unanswered. Ultimately, she was *somewhere* – who knew? – and simply *wasn't* worth talking about – why bother?

Anything about her was short sentences and the gist – something *I'd* pieced together – was that she had a tendency to wander off.

"My dad'd said 'she went wandering and nobody'd wandered after her'."

"Odd."

I thought about this. "Mysterious sounds better..."

Anyways, years go past, and, because I don't pursue it any further – nothing *to* pursue, really – she disappears from our conversations, disappears from our lives. Unconsciously, I write her off as absent, as out-of-touch and… I guess… I forget her.

Dead, or as good as.

"Anyway, as I said, this phone call comes through and the person on the other end… well… they explained I *have* an aunt – that's present tense – just… nobody knows *where* she is."

"So what? She was a drifter?"

"Is." The dog was sniffing at my shoes. "She *is* a drifter."

Now obviously, I explained, I never got the chance to meet her when I was younger. Even if she'd been a more regular feature in our lives, if she'd lived closer… well… even then I doubt it would've happened. The way my father spoke of her, the detachment he showed, she could've been our next-door neighbour and I'd never have known.

"Sad," Terry said.

The call, as it turned out, was to inform me that my aunt had wandered off once more.

"So who called you, then? Some friend of hers?"

I scratched my chin. "Don't know about friend… All I remember was that he was quick to tell me that she wasn't wandering off to die or anything. He explained – and I ended up agreeing with him – that she did this kind of thing and that her leaving had been because of this… *concern* of hers."

Terry echoed the word.

"A concern that she wasn't as young as she used to be. Sixty-eight this year, I think he said…"

"So what?" He harrumphed from the depths of the locker. "Never knew there was an age limit when it came to being nomadic."

Sarcasm. "There *isn't*. It's more this idea of *what if*, you know? If I don't go now, maybe I'll never go at all."

Obviously keeping tabs on her absence, the caller'd reached out to me after feeling that enough was enough. The front end of our phone conversation had felt so perfunctory that I ended up thinking I'd been cold-called. My finger was hovering over a hang-up when I'd heard the word 'aunt'.

“You said 'aunt'?” I raised the phone to my ear again. “*My* aunt?”

“Your aunt.”

“Wow.” I took the phone away from my mouth for a brief moment and exhaled excitedly. “What? Do I know where she *is*? Of course not. How would I know that?”

No response.

“I’ve only just been reminded that she exists. All these years I’d thought she was… dead.”

“Dead?” the voice asked.

“Okay… well… not *dead*-dead.” I scratched my forehead. “More 'dead to us'.” I thought about this. “Wait a second, 'estranged' is better. Estranged, yes. You see, my parents never talked to her… or talked about her.” I paused. “I mean, I never even got a chance to meet her. All I know is that she was a bit of a wanderer.”

There was no response on the other end of the phone.

So I went on, “And what with all the non-communication, the never-mentioning, well... I just sort of forgot about her.”

“Well, she didn’t forget you.”

“How is she?”

“Fine, I’m hoping,” he sighed. “I’m calling specifically *because* she’s gone wandering and, well, it’s been a few months now… and that makes me worry… and, because it’s been so long, it makes me *think* she might be missing.”

I repeated the word.

“Is that really how you talk to people?” he asked. “You sound… odd. No offence.”

I could feel my brow furrowing. “What would you have done?”

There was a short silence before he spoke again. “Listen… I’d’ve listened.”

At this point in time, somewhat frustrated with the caller, I’d queried him, who he was, what he really wanted, why he’d bothered calling me.

“I,” he told me, “represent the estate of your aunt.”

“Her executor,” Terry said.

Though he couldn’t see me, I nodded still.

“In light of your aunt’s absence… her *continuing* absence, as it were,” the executor explained, “I’ve thought it prudent to contact you.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s left something for you–”

“For me?”

“For you *to do*.”

And I repeated his final word, dragged it out.

“Thought a person had to be dead before you could start giving their things away.”

“Given’s not the word. This place hasn’t been *given* to me. I’m here to 'tend' to it whilst she’s away. Somebody has to keep the place running.” I patted the wall beside the switch. “Like a caretaker. I keep calling myself 'owner' but that’s not righ–”

“What else’d he say?”

“A few formalities,” her executor said. “Details, here and there.” I could hear a pen scratching away on paper, taking notes, writing me up by jotting me down. “Obviously, it’s understandable that you *can’t* get down here—”

“I can.”

“Or that you may not necessarily even want the job—”

“I do.”

He flubbed his lines for a moment.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“I… uh… can’t say how long you’ll be needed there.”

“How long’s it been then?” Terry asked.

“A week, I think… Less?” I couldn’t remember. “Not long at all. I’m still very new to all of this. I fixed a sign the other day…”

“So your aunt’s drifted off, left this place behind… and you… *show up* to take care of it.” I could hear a shuffling in the locker. “Sounds a bit convenient, if you ask me.”

“Convenient that she has no family who actually care about her?”

He wandered into his own private light, shook his head. “Not what I meant, no. Sorry.”

Executors, he told me, were only for dead people.

And I knew that.

“But in her case, maybe some kind of exception was made. This place,” I said, knocking on the wall beside me, “needed a caretaker… and she wanted me.”

He paused in his shuffling about and then turned to face me.

"This executor… how'd he get a hold of you? Or how'd your aunty get your details? What made *you* a good choice?"

I frowned. "Can't say I'd given that much thought actually." I wasn't a very connected person. Not now, not anymore. "I guess, what with the internet, the ability to search for information, finding another person shouldn't be too hard. The info's out there."

"And so you were found."

"Mm-hmm."

"And asked to come here, I take it?"

"That's right."

"And you just up and left your life behind?"

I tilted my head to one side. "Can't say I had much of a life *to* leave behind, really. The choice was an easy one to make."

"Ah."

"Made for me, I guess you could say."

He didn't poke or pry, which was different, which was nice.

"So does this mean there's some kind of investigation underway then?"

I shrugged.

"And you? Aren't you worried about her?"

"In a way, yes, but I still have to keep things working here." I patted the wall. "She's wandered all her life, what makes it dangerous now?"

The dog sneezed.

"And nobody missed her?"

"Well, no spouse, no kids, and I guess she largely kept to herself over the years. Reclusive... So it's not like she had anyone in her life who *would* miss her."

He then said that this was quite sad.

But I already knew this.

"It just seems… odd… that nobody noticed she was missing." He coughed. "Don't you think?"

It did seem odd but it *had* happened. "People haven't always got the time to realise that things are wrong."

"I can't say I believe that…"

"You've been living here in secret for the past few months… I don't think you're one to talk, really. Nobody noticed you, you noticed nobody."

He appeared to give this some thought. "I guess if somebody runs things well you don't really know they're running things at all."

"If somebody *was* running this place they would've come calling on you for rent."

I caught sight of a brief grimace as it passed his face.

"She'll return eventually." I looked at the dog beside me; she had just settled down. "Until then, I'm just going to try my best to keep things ticking over."

"So that makes you – what? – an interim caretaker?"

I nodded. Syclla used to maintain the place and now I did. Hopefully I would be able to do a comparable job.

"I hope she's alright."

…though it wasn't something I should be doing forever.

"I hope she's alright too," I said.

"Isn't it funny how caretakers and caregivers do the same thing?"

I thought about this but I didn't have a response for him. Really, there didn't seem to be much more to say, so I didn't bother saying it.

"It's quite strange that not much went wrong without her here." He scratched at his head. "That's – what? – three months or something?"

From my short time here I knew already knew that, once established, a place like this could self-regulate. Only when there was some kind of problem did the owner have to intervene.

"*Nothing* happened during that time?"

I gave this some thought. "Nothing catastrophic, no." Before he could speak again, I pressed on, "Some things, sure… but nothing that can't be fixed. Her executor said she'd left the place unlocked and people simply came and went as they pleased. He'd occasionally pop in to make sure the place was still standing but, other than that, the lot was just left to it. Only thing that maybe 'went wrong' was people not paying their rent."

There was silence between us. I decided to remedy this by leaving. I told him that it'd been good chatting with him, that I'd see him the following day and, once he had found me somewhere on the lot, the pair of us could discuss his responsibilities.

"Well, goodnight." I headed towards the locker entrance, lifted a hand up, and gripped the door overhead.

"One second, before you go," he called.

I paused.

"That dog of yours still in here?"

The dog was–

–beside me, sitting, licking at her paws.

"Yes. She's here."

“Good. Don’t want it closed up in here,” he said. “Please.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I nudged her with my foot and she, after glaring at me, stepped outside. “I’ll see you sometime tomorrow.” Reaching above my head, I took the door in my hand…

“Sure,” he said

…and began lowering it.

It cascaded downwards, thudded when it met the ground.

“Well, wasn’t that interesting?” I twirled the keys around my finger. “*Quite* the discovery.” I removed the map I carried with me and lit up my phone once more. I positioned myself, saw my destination, and plotted.

The dog loped off.

Considerably 'without me'.

I shrugged and bounced along in her wake. After a quick glance at the map, I gleaned that she was going in the right direction. At a steady pace she led me home, looking back at me, checking on me, I assumed.

Once back I let myself in, made straight for my bed and didn’t even bother discarding my clothing. The dog settled, making a great display of her lying down. I was asleep by the time she’d made herself comfortable…

…and when I woke up the next morning, she was gone.

And though I noticed this, I thought nothing of it. She had things to do, as did I.

I rushed getting ready and, once I felt suitably prepared to face the day, I made my way to my office.

Without incident.

Without getting lost along the way.

Without having to even bother looking at the map I’d made for myself.

The office was stuffy, a room left locked far too long. With the door ajar and the window open, a bit of a thru-breeze was able to get the place feeling better.

I settled down at my desk, removing from the drawer the book I’d been converting into a database. In that moment, a time when it seemed most likely that work *would* commence, my laptop decided to delay me, stalling when instead it should’ve been opening my file. I used this delay, paging through the book to where I’d stopped working previously.

Before I saw it I could hear it: Walker’s car pulling into the lot; the sound of her tires tossing up the gravel outside. I looked up from the book and watched as some dust she’d kicked up drifted past the window.

I sighed, heard the sound of her car door closing, and resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't be getting anything further done today. I closed the book, returned it to the drawer and resolved to work with it later on today, if possible.

"Knock, knock."

I smiled, looked at her. "Perfectly good door there. Just knock on it."

"Just being polite." She took a few steps into the office, positioned herself beside the desk, craned forwards. "I didn't want to disturb you."

I closed the database document and saw, in the background, the trike poster I'd worked on previously. "So you're back again. Is there something I can help you with?" Maintaining my casual air, I pushed away from the desk.

"Help *me* with? Nothing that I can think of." She nodded towards the laptop. "That was your database just open, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"Notice anything interesting?"

"No." I squinted at her. "Should I have?" I racked my brain as to the details I'd entered thus far, searching for any kind of clue amongst them. "Did you find something?"

She shrugged. "Yes, and no."

I thought about hints.

"What was it?"

"Most people renting here have been quite good about paying their rent."

I wondered if this was a joke.

"Very few defaults." She chuckled. "Anyways, that means I can return these to you now."

She handed over the bundled paper slips which had once been tucked away in the records book. These were now held together by a string which had been tied at the top. I set these down on the desk.

"You made copies?"

She nodded. "Copies, scans, and all of it stored away safely. It wasn't particularly interesting now but – who knows? – maybe I'll need it sometime in the future."

Like a backup.

"Like a backup," she said. "Anyways, I didn't come all this way just to return a few pieces of paper."

"You didn't?" I moved the chair, slotted it in beneath the desk. "What then?"

“Formalities,” she said. “Really, this visit’s about keeping you looped-in.” I watched as Walker lined up those stationery items I’d left lying about on my desk. “You know, with everything that’s been going on here, I just thought it’s only fair I come around and tie up loose ends.”

I nodded and then abruptly returned my attention to the pattern she was fast establishing: a pen-pencil-pen series.

“That being said… the body we picked up,” she said, holding up a pencil tentatively, “well… we still don’t know who he is.”

I frowned. “So, nothing’s happened?”

The pencil, diverted from the desk, from its potential positioning in this new series, instead made its way towards her mouth. “Nothing, no.” She began chewing on the end of it.

The pencil.

I shook my head. “Did I really need looping-in on that?”

Chewing on it.

She shrugged. “Well, maybe not that. Isn’t really progress, is it?”

I looked at the pencil, shook my head. “It isn’t.”

“Still,” she said, “it’s worth knowing if it was something bothering you.”

Bothering me.

“It… wasn’t.”

She nodded, smiled. “That’s goo–” She removed the pencil from her mouth, looked at it, and then registered surprise. “I’m sorry.” I watched as she wiped it against her top hurriedly. “Force of habit. *Bad* habit.”

Once she believed the pencil to be dry, she offered this to me.

Internally I cringed, but I took the pencil anyway, making a big show of how 'at home' I was when it came to handling it, *even* the chewed bit. “No need to apologise.”

I placed the pencil down carefully, added to the series she’d been working on.

“It’s just without any way of establishing the guy’s identity and nothing on record in terms of DNA… well… he’s going to remain a John Doe.” She tapped her fingers on the desk.

“Isn’t that worrying?”

“People drift and disappear.” I watched as she walked her fingers along the desk. “These things happen.”

My eyes roved from her wandering fingers, up to her face. “That seems a bit blasé on your part.”

“Well, then it’s somewhat myopic on yours.”

She knocked her hand on the desk and I immediately looked towards the door.

"What do you mean?"

"Disappearing people? Your aunt?" She placed a pen beside the nibbled pencil and then looked at me. "I feel like I always have to connect the dots for you."

"How did you–"

"Know?" She smirked. "I investigated, obviously. Remember, I've been here before. That's *before* you. I already knew her surname and, from your witness statement, I knew yours." She regarded the series she'd created on the desk. "The window of time – I'll admit – I *didn't* know… until now." She pointed at the laptop's screen. "Before you closed it, I saw that little note you'd written yourself about appending three months or whatever."

I was dumbfounded but not enough to render me unimpressed. "Wow."

She laughed briefly.

"I wouldn't call it a disappearance though. It's… different." I fiddled with the back of the chair. "It's in her nature. I doubt the guy we found wanted to drift, wanted to disappear. My aunt, she's… *actively* absent."

Walker shrugged. "I want to say it's much of a muchness… but… obviously it isn't." She rested her hand on her forehead. "I'm sorry, it's just… people turn up, *bodies* turn up… they do… and, well, sometimes you never find out who they are." She flicked the end of one of the pens and the knock-on effect upset the entire sequence. "I don't know. Maybe it has to do with importance. The likelihood of noticing someone's just not… there anymore."

I thought about this, about being missing and disappearing without a trace, about nobody bothering to come looking for you, looking for who you were.

And absence, I realised, *had* presence.

I was about to tell her this when I took note of the finger held up before me. She was looking at her cell phone. "I have to take this."

She stepped out and, in the spare moment I now had, I looked at the disarray on my desk, the stationery out of order.

I assured myself that it wouldn't take long and so I began, setting the sequence up quickly, making sure the chewed pencil wasn't any part of it. I regarded it, took note of the teeth marks, then tossed it into the bin.

Over the sounds of it clattering against the sides, I heard gravel giving underfoot, the sound of the stairs as she stepped them.

"I *had* to get rid of it," I said, regarding the bin, the pencil in it. I raised my arms up, palms outward, mimed surrender. "No offense to you or anything… but I just had to."

I expected something from her, anything, but there wasn't.

"That was quick," I said. "I wasn't expecting you back so–"

"Excuse me?"

I tore myself away from the pencil, faced the door and saw that the figure framed therein was decidedly *not* Walker. If the masculine voice hadn't cemented this fact, then his stature would have. The midday sun glared, made it so that I could only see his outline.

I lowered my hands slowly, tried to bring the conversation back to normalcy. "Who're you?"

"I could ask you the same thing." His reply was short, sharp.

"Okay, yes, sure," I said, squinting to try and see him better, "but someone needs to go first and, well, I'm the owner here so I think that someone is you."

"The owner?" He gesticulated, pointing first at me and then tracing a wide circle in the air before him.

"Yes, the owner of this place, this *whole* place. Now, who're you?"

He didn't reply.

"Do you rent here?"

He shook his head.

That meant…

"Do you *want* to rent here?"

He shoo- nodded. "Yes," he said, suddenly.

And with those words he stepped into the room, out of the sun's glare, and made himself seen. He was wearing a large overcoat, a peculiar choice given the heat, and because of its size I was unable to tell anything else about him. My assumption was that underneath it he was most likely just an average person. He was a bit sweaty-looking and I attributed this to his attire.

I smiled at him, hoping he'd do the same.

"Ah! A would-be tenant!" I said, trying to be as friendly as possible. "What's your deal?"

He frowned. "My deal?" His body language seemed to change then. He stooped somewhat, reached inside his coat and then checked the doorway behind him.

He was nervous, clearly. The prospect of renting, of having to pay, of confessing to needing somewhere to store some*thing*, it was obviously taking its toll.

"Sorry," I said, "just trying to make some chit-chat, you know?"

I smiled.

He caught my eye, smiled back.

"Just wanted to know why you're interested in one of these lockers. That's all." I shook my head. "As in, what's it for?" With no answer forthcoming I continued, "You don't have to tell me, obviously. That's your business."

He removed his hand from his coat, used it to scratch his head.

"But it's important that you know there's some things you *can't* store here. For most people, usually they've just got too much stuff at home," I explained. "Sort of like an overflow. Too much stuff there so you got to keep some of it here. Or are you moving, maybe?"

"That," he said.

"Which?" I opened the desk's drawer.

"Both."

His uncertainty was catching and slowed our conversation.

"Okay, sure." I nodded. "I'll just have to get some of your details down. There's a few forms you'll have to sign also." I smiled at him. "Once I find them, obviously."

He didn't respond.

I gave my attention to the drawer, its contents and he craned forwards to do the same.

After shifting its contents about I was able to get to those pieces of paper that lined the drawer's bottom. I neatened these up and placed them on the desk.

"There's enough to start with here… but I'll need to print out a couple too."

My laptop's display flashed on, showed me the tricycle's image. I considered asking whether this gentleman had seen any of the posters I'd put up, whether they'd made sense to him, but, judging by his demeanor, moving through the paperwork quickly was probably best. The printer started running off the first page loudly.

"Shouldn't take too lon–"

"Say, you ever get any weirdos here?" he asked.

I hesitated. "Weirdos?"

"You know…" He leaned closer. "Odd types. The sort of person who looks like they must've done something."

I echoed his last word, inflected it.

"Something that makes them a suspect, something illegal. Ever get any of those types?"

"All sorts of people come here," I told him. "You can't always tell. Some people do a good job of keeping their weirdness under wraps."

He nodded, didn't speak further.

"Why do you ask?"

He seemed ready to answer but, as the printer finished its first form, beeped its success, he jarred. He shook his head, pointed towards the out-tray and I grabbed the pages there, then handed them over.

“These just describe the agreement between us, the relationship, so to speak,” I told him. “All very formal.” I found a pen, gave it to him. “Nice being able to form a 'relationship' that easily, isn’t it?” I did a good-natured chuckle. “A few pen strokes on a piece of paper and we’re hitched, basically.”

He didn’t laugh, didn’t even acknowledge my attempt at building rapport.

I watched as he squinted briefly at the first page, saw his eyes scanning left to right.

“Say,” he said suddenly, looking up, “did you see a car come by here?”

I felt stupid for repeating him but, for his line of questioning, it felt necessary. “A car? I need specifics. What *kind* of car?”

“Just any kind,” he said. “Maybe one going too fast, one like it’s in a hurry, maybe?”

I racked my brain briefly. “Can’t say.” I shrugged.

His eyes flicked down to the page again but only for a moment. “Can’t say or *won’t* say?”

“I don’t follow you.”

He grunted, went back to reading, turned that first page over.

I left him to it, gave my attention back to the drawer and, once I’d reorganized everything inside, I closed it. I took stock of the stationery on the desk, made sure things were in order there, that sequence–

“Say, d’you see something here the other night?”

I thought about this. “What night?”

“Thursday last.”

“Wasn’t here.”

“Where were you?” he asked.

I told him that I was at home.

“Anyone who can corollabate that?”

It wasn’t a word but what with turn-taking there simply wasn’t time to make him aware of this fact. “Who can do *what*, sorry?”

“Anyone you were with?” he asked.

“On Thursday night? No, I was alone.”

There were a lot of questions coming. More than I was used to and I could feel my attention slipping. I tried my best to hold focus, reassured myself that these were all necessary, all part of the relationship developing between us. When his information gathering finished, I could start–

“And what were you doing?”

“On Thursday night?” I replied. “Packing.”

He nodded, one, two, three times, then shifted that first piece of paper down, placed it flat on the desk between us, and started his eyes on a fresh stream of words.

"Packing?" he asked, nonchalantly. "Packing for what?"

"To come here."

"Here: the lot?"

I nodded.

"Why?"

"Because this is what I'm doing now." I made the same circular gesture he'd made earlier. "I've taken over the running of this place now from the lady who *was* here. My aunt."

He went mm-hmm a few times and continued reading. Another turn of the page left me impressed with how fast he was able to read.

"Where'd she go?"

"Off travelling."

He didn't look up from the page. "Holidays and such?"

"I guess you could say that."

His head bobbed up and down. He returned to reading and I watched as his lips began to move. It appeared as if he was mouthing something, repeating whatever it was quietly. I wondered if perhaps he was nervous and what affect this might be having on him.

"Say," he said, looking as if he'd composed himself, "d'you see what happens around here?"

"When?"

"All the time," he replied.

I frowned, shook my head. "I'm not made of eyes."

He appeared crestfallen and so I tried to remedy this.

"I've seen some stuff though."

His eyes lit up. "Like what?"

There had been a lot of things, many of which I recalled well. I tried my best to list these.

"An Alaskan malamute, an assortment of jars with some organs in them, a homeless guy, a controlled burn, a tool shed with some tools still wrapped in plastic, a handwritten map spread out across a wall, a videotape, a dead body, a kid with a tri–"

"What was that last one?

"A videotape? Wasn't too exciting… Didn't even get to wat–"

"No, not that. *After*. The body." His eyes widened. "A *dead* body, you said?"

I nodded.

"W-who was it?"

"*Who*?" I laughed uncertainly. "No idea. As I said, I'm new here. Just happened to find him dead in one of the lockers."

"Dead how?"

I shrugged. "Can't say definitively. I think he got locked inside accidentally, then starved to death. Happened long before I got here."

He placed another page down. "And what'd you do with it?"

"Me, personally? Nothing. I had the police come for it."

"And?"

"They came for it."

"Walker?"

"Where?" I looked behind me, a quick over-the-shoulder to see if maybe she was walking behind the office.

He shook his head. "No, I mean *was it* Walker? That's her name, isn't it?" He looked up from the page briefly, saw my nodding. "She say anything?"

I queried this.

"You know, about *any*thing."

I could feel my brow furrow, tried to stop it. "I don't think so. She was rather preoccupied with the body. We talked about me being new here, taking over and all that. I told her about the dog too."

"The dog?"

"That's the Alaskan malamute I mentioned as one of the things I've seen here. It's just a dog that was on the lot when I got here. Doesn't have a collar or anything."

He opened his mouth, shut it.

"Weird how you get an *Alaskan* malamute down here. We're nowhere near the place. Funny, right?"

He didn't say anything, didn't agree, didn't think it was funny.

"Same for Labradors though. I mean, we're nowhere near Canada." I paused, waited for a response. "That's where Labrador is. Did you know that?"

He turned over the last page that he was holding. I watched his finger as it ran along the final paragraph, tapping the full stop that ended it. He inhaled and then sighed. "You're not helpful." He rubbed his forehead, frustrated. "You know that, right? Not helpful at all. You just… waste… time. All you have to do is answer the questions, stupid."

I thought about this, about the label, about the nastiness. I resolved to make the forms less frustrating so as to avoid this sort of bad temperedness. For the time being though…

"Ask better questions." I felt my eyes narrowing.

"Excuse me?" His frustration was tangible, something seeping out of him.

I didn't feel myself. "You want a direct answer then you ask a direct question." I watched as his eyes grew once more. "You're being vague," I said, and feeling harsh, uncaring, I added on, "*friend*."

Regardless of his mouth making the necessary motions, he didn't respond.

I wondered if this was one of those creative thinkers that Terry had mentioned last night. One of those individuals who'd *never* find him here.

"Who'd you say you were again?" I thought through the conversation we'd been having. "Or did you *not* say for a specific reason? And why do you know about the police here, about Walker?"

"Not important," he muttered.

"To you: no; to me: yes. Very important." I watched as he lowered the last piece of paper. "Who are you and what do you want?"

His hand twitched, the pen moving with it. He looked at this, appearing to notice it now only. After a quick shake of his head, he glanced backwards at the door, then returned to me. He dropped the pen and reached inside his coat quickly.

"And if you aren't willing to share that information with me," I said, "well then I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." I watched him fumbling with his coat, the fluster with which he did it. "If you need to take that bulky thing off, just put it on the rack there."

He paused, froze in his fumbling, and then smiled.

"Y-you're going to have to make me. I'm not going anywhere – *anywhere*! – until I have some answers. That's all I want: answers." His words rushed out ahead of him. "That's all! Just so I can *know*, you know? Something definite. That's all!"

I tried answering, couldn't.

"Where is he?" he shouted. "Where is he, where is he, where is he?" Whatever he'd found within his coat wouldn't come out, his hand jerked back and forth, made attempts to remove it, but to no avail. "Is that what you wanted?"

I wanted to ask where *who* was but felt that another question might ruin what little rapport the pair of us had developed so far.

"I don't know even know the guy."

His eyes widened but he didn't speak.

"I don't even know Terry," I added, hoping to drive the point home.

His mouth opened, shut. The name seemed unfamiliar to him, left him confused.

"And if you don't believe me, well, then I'll have you removed by force, if necessary. She's here, you know?" I registered the expression on his face. "Walker… That's right. She's here *now*, just stepped out, but she'll be back momentarily."

He cast a look behind him, checked the parking places and the cars using them.

"That's her car, yes."

He double-took and then told me I was bluffing.

I thought about this. "Are you suggesting that I own a cop car for bluffing purposes?"

He looked in turns: at the car, at me.

"Hang around. Just you wait and see," and, because I was feeling short and sharp again, I added, "*friend*," and then smiled.

His eyes narrowed, he gave me a quick up and down look before finally turning around and leaving. As his footsteps crunched on the gravel outside, I could hear the speed with which he moved. I followed, stood on the steps and watched his car door slamming shut. He backed up quickly, swung it around, and then zipped off, all in one fluid movement.

Behind me, the computer beeped and another freshly-printed form dropped into the out-tray. I went back to my desk, grabbed these pages, riffled them, and then stapled them together.

Those forms that he'd been reading over, which he'd only mimed writing onto, I set aside. I was hopeful that he'd return eventually. If not for business, then pleasure. Perhaps when he wasn't trying to locate missing–

"And back."

Walker stood in the doorway, lingered for a moment before stepping in.

"That took you a while. Everything alright?"

She nodded. "What's that?"

"Forms. I was just printing a few out. I'm done now, though."

She bobbed her head, regarded the stationery on the desk.

"Anything interesting happen whilst I was away?"

I admitted to throwing away the pencil she'd chewed on and felt my face redden as I did so. She smirked, nodded again. "*Say*, why not let's take a walk around this place." She spun about and I watched her as she went, maybe longer than I should have.

I thought about how very tactful she was, how nice she managed to be about everything, how different her approach seemed to be. I thought about how most people wouldn't let you keep the secrets you wanted to.

After locking my office, I caught up with Walker. She had already taken a few tentative steps down one of the locker lanes and showed no signs of slowing. By the time I'd caught up with her I was slightly breathless.

She didn't seem to notice this though or, if she did, didn't bother mentioning it. Instead she asked, "Where were we?"

And because *where* could've been a lot of places, I waited for her to specify further.

"In our conversation, I meant. Where were we?"

"Absence," I told her. "Before you answered your phone, before you left, we were talking about absence. I was going to say something clever but then we were interrupted… and then I forgot."

She laughed. "My loss, I guess."

What we'd spoken about had upset me, I remembered that much. "I wanted some kind of answer, I think, something like… closure." I looked at my feet as I walked. "For the body, I mean."

She echoed the word 'closure', kept quiet afterwards.

Without work worrying her, she demonstrated a relaxedness. Now at ease, something uncharacteristic for her, Walker just… strolled along. I was able to keep up with her but couldn't match my mood to her own.

"Sometimes," she said, eventually, "closure doesn't happen, *can't* happen." Her shoulders bumped up, down. "If that's what you want, I'd recommend avoiding a career in law enforcement. Look elsewhere."

"I wasn't planning on–"

"I *know* you weren't. It's a turn of phrase… I think." She touched her face almost absentmindedly and then smiled at me. "What I'm trying to say is that sometimes these things aren't solved quickly. It's not the sort of thing that just," she snapped her fingers, "happens. There's nothing about this job that's overnight."

'Things' meant the case, meant the body, meant the dead man.

"Sadly, that's just the way it goes." She ran a hand through her hair quickly. "Solutions don't present themselves immediately… and so you wait."

"How long?"

She shrugged.

"How long?"

After stopping abruptly, she looked at me. "I don't *know* how long. Nobody knows how long. If you're lucky a few months maybe."

"And if you're–"

“Years,” she replied, her voice terse. “Five, ten, fifteen, take your pick.” She started moving again, walking rather than strolling. “Sometimes you end up leaving a question unanswered so long that, eventually, somebody new has to take a look at it.”

I frowned, opened my mouth–

“And even they might not succeed where you failed.”

It was horrible and I said as much.

She smirked. “It is what it is.” She looked at me once more, must’ve seen something on my face that warranted further words. “That’s not to say that closure *isn’t* what you strive towards, isn’t what’s deserved.” Her voice dropped. “Everyone deserves closure.”

I thought about these words and agreed with them, even before coupling them with the expression on her face.

“I’ve seen families fall apart because of cases being left unsolved.” She sighed. “It doesn’t have to be a death or, or, or somebody missing, even.” An expression passed over her face that made me think certain memories were making themselves apparent. “Any time people are left without a definitive answer, without a clear '*this* is what happened', then they feel preyed upon.

“Think about a robbery, something stolen, doesn’t matter what it was. What *preys* on the person involved? Think of the questions they start asking themselves.” She shook her head. “How’d this happen? Why’d it happen?

“Questions of who did it and whether they’ll be caught,” she said. “And if they *aren’t* caught, will that person come back? Will they do it again?”

She didn’t say anything for a while and so I nodded to punctuate the conversation.

“Those’re the kinds of questions they’ll ask themselves… And me, I have to ask the same ones to figure out what’s happened.”

“And you can’t always…”

She nodded slowly. “On top of that, if you *don’t* find what’s been taken, then that person’s left with a gap in their life, something that’ll take a while to adjust to.” She looked at me sidelong. “Do you get what I mean?”

I nodded.

“*That* can keep a person awake at night.”

“That bod– that man I found here, there’s nobody losing sleep over him.”

She shrugged, didn’t respond.

The two of us walked in silence for a while. I kept up with her as she led us both and, when she reached an intersection where we might’ve deviated, could’ve gone left or right perhaps, she kept us going straight.

“Life’s like that,” she said eventually. “It doesn’t make sense. You don’t always 'get' the closure you feel you deserve. You just don’t.” Another sidelong look at me, this time her eyes assessing. “And I can understand that it bothers you, obviously, but – you know what? – you’ll find that closure in another place. Channel that feeling somewhere else, *into* something else.”

“Seal up some other part of your life.”

She frowned whilst, I assumed, thinking about this. “Ye-e-eah. That’s one way of putting it, I guess.” I watched closely as she seemed to replay my words over in her head. “If you don’t, if you *can’t*, you’ll just keep going in circles. Nothing’ll change.”

When we reached the end of the lane she turned us right, then right again, and the two of us were heading back towards where we’d come from, only in parallel now.

“Speaking of circles,” she said, smiling, “where exactly were you wanting to go?”

I reminded her that she’d suggested this walk.

She showed a brief uncertainty before recovering. “Well, sure, yes… I just thought maybe you’d like some fresh air, a change of scenery, a–”

I told her that those would’ve been wonderful things if I’d been deserving of them. “Maybe after a bit of work, I’d feel better about taking a break. Every time I feel like I’m settling into something here, an interruption happens.” I saw the expression on her face, minded my words because of it. “That’s not to say that *you’re* an interruption, you’re perfectly pleasa–” I stopped, rethought. “You – what I’m trying to say here – is you don’t interrupt me.”

She smiled.

And so I smiled.

And then she looked away.

“Just a walk then,” she said. “I don’t have any particular destination in mind.”

“Me neither.”

“Oh, *that* I know.”

Her tone, the emphatic delivery, the slight chuckle afterwards, everything about her reply, made it sound as if she was talking about something else. Her 'that' meant some other plan.

“*My* plan.”

“Your plan?” There was an inquisitive tone to her words, something I’d not heard before. The way she spoke seemed like an act, something effected to achieve an end. The two of us were playing a game now.

Usually I’d be able to excuse my mutterings, write them off as missed words that weren’t worth hearing. Walker, now, was listening closely, was asking questions for a reason.

“You’re wanting to know something,” I said. “What is it?”

Her eyes widened briefly before she brought them under control. I wondered if I'd been too direct.

"It's just… I just want…" Her mouth open, shut, open. "Never mind."

And so I didn't.

"Look, about yesterday…" she said suddenly. "*Was* it yesterday?" She rested her hand on her cheek.

She looked at me for an answer but I didn't have one.

There was a lengthy pause, the sort of time one might use to gather up their confidence.

"Well, the other day… when we were in that locker, in *your* locker…"

I nodded.

"I," she hesitated, looked away "I, *in passing*, may've… peeked inside the one box there."

There was an uncertainty in Walker that I hadn't seen before. Usually her investigations were confident, crammed with questions she had no difficulty asking.

"There were these… photographs inside."

"The box said 'framed photos'. I should hope that was what was inside." I laughed a little, tried my best to handle this moment well. I wanted to tell my–

"I know, I *know*." She laughed quickly. "I just… I assumed that you being here *alone* meant you didn't have…" Her sentence trailed off and didn't return so, for a while, we walked in silence.

"I don't think I'm following you here."

"All you needed to say was that you had… something… going on," she said. "Was that so hard? Something *else*. Why not just say that?"

"I still don't follo–"

She shook her head. "You don't seem to follow much of anything, actually."

There was a gap in our conversation and when I didn't rush forward to fill it, she became frustrated. "This whole time I've been shamelessly…" She paused, raised her arms in front of her as if surrendering, and then dropped them. "I just…"

I didn't say anything. Realistically, I couldn't. I had 38 framed photographs to my name. Snaps from the places I'd been, the things I'd done, the person I'd been. That box was the past fixed in place and when she'd peered into it, she'd seen some moment stuck in time. I wondered what had been lying on top, what had–

"I just…" She exhaled sharply, turned away from me.

"This isn't an investigation, is it?"

When she turned back her eyebrows were furrowed and, although there was still a redness fading from her cheeks, anger was the predominant emotion I saw. "What do you mean?"

I frowned. “What do *you* mean?”

“I’m not investigating anything here. I’m not 'working' now,” she said. “I’m just talking, wanting to know more. That’s all.” She crossed her arms, uncrossed them. “That’s why I’m asking–” She stopped suddenly, speaking, walking, and I’d taken a few steps before realising this and stopping myself. “Actually,” she waved a hand, “I’m done asking. Don’t worry about it.”

I had no idea what she was talking about and I told her as much. “When you opened that box, *you* saw something, not me. You have to tell me what–”

She waved me into silence. “Doesn’t matter. I feel stupid now.” Her reply was short, sharp. “If you don’t want to be forthcoming about, about, about… *anything* then – you know what? – just don’t bother.”

“Forthcoming… If you want something from me, then ask for it. I’m not going to just burden you with my–”

When she echoed the word, emphasised it the way she did, I began to wonder if I’d made the right choice by using it.

“Maybe not 'burden',” I murmured.

“Just, just… leave it.” She waved a hand, shooed my response away and then removed her cell phone from her pocket, checking it quickly. “I’m going… I have to go.”

Before I could say anything, she’d stormed past me, making long, determined strides back towards the lot’s entrance. I tried to keep up with her but she strode–

I stopped.

Stopped following, stopped chasing.

“What was I supposed to do?” I called. “When we first met was I – what? – just meant to say myself out to you? Should I have told you my name and then rattled off everything that’d ever happened to me?”

“No, no.” She called back. “I just shouldn’t have to dig for information about you. Shouldn’t have to question you like you’re some kind of criminal, some kind–”

“I’m not a criminal.”

I wasn’t a criminal. *I’m still not.*

“You’re so cryptic, so *stupidly* cryptic about, about… everything.”

“What you don’t have,” I said, “I don’t want to share.”

She… slowed, heard me, it seemed, heard what I’d said, *maybe*, and then chose to keep moving.

I thought about my photographs, which amongst them she’d glimpsed, and what affect it’d had on her. I thought about my past, my inability to de– to tal– to co– to do *anything* with it.

"I thought about the future."

She wasn't stopping and so I tried to catch up with her, skipping those first few steps in an attempt to make up the distance between us.

I didn't want her to go and I said as much out loud, but this she definitely didn't hear.

As she, her car, everything about her, really, dwindled in size, I thought about having to watch her leave. The sun went with her. I gazed around, I felt my loneliness.

My feet called out to be looked at, my legs wanted me to move, but I stayed put. Some part of me watched the world zoom out as it withdrew from me, or I from it.

I resolved to call her, to tell–

"Ah, there you are." I heard Terry's footsteps approaching, the gravel giving him away as he came closer. "Been wondering where you were."

I didn't respond.

"What's it you're looking at? D'you lose something?"

I shook my head, stopped looking at my feet. "Walker." I pointed at the dust cloud a short distance ahead of us. "See that?"

"The dust?"

"She did that."

"Must've been going pretty fast…"

I watched as he shielded his eyes against the sun and though I could see just fine, there wasn't anything worth looking at. Her vehicle was gone and the dust now settling in the distance was the only testament to the fact that she had been here.

"What was she doing here?"

"Investigating."

Terry tensed up after I said this, noticed himself, and then effected an overly casual ease. He looked at me and then coughed. "Investigating what?"

"Missing person cases." I rubbed at my face.

"Cases – plural?"

I thought about this. "I don't understand what you're asking."

"As in, there's more than one?"

I nodded. "Yes, there's a body and there's a boy." I glanced back to my office and, realising that I had drifted too far from my current task, resigned myself to doing something else. "I'm just going to close everything up here. Be right back."

He followed me into the office and loitered as I went about switching everything off. I dropped the book back into the drawer after dog-earing the page I'd been on before Walker had arrived.

"So she's a policeman?"

"Well, police*woman*, but yes." I switched the light off and found my eyes adjusting to the last rays of sun sneaking in through the window.

He chuckled but it didn't sound as if his entire body was behind it. "You know, I've never heard of a body going missing before..."

"Well, honestly, the body's not missing, just his person." I scratched my head, but not for itching. "First day I was here I… found him."

"Found *it*."

"He's a him, dead or alive. Have some respect." I shooed him out of the office. "In the case of the boy, though, well, people know *who* he is… just not *where* he is… Or if he's alive even. Of course people assume things, kids go missing and don't come back. It's a… thing."

"Sounds quite… serious." Terry began this little routine, stretching sharply, and then stepping in place. "So what? You're helping then?"

I nodded. "As best I can, yes."

"Do you have any kind of qualifications?"

"Besides being here? None that I can think of. Nothing relevant to mystery-solving." I slipped the office keys into my pocket. "I don't think that should stop me offering to help though, should it?"

Terry shrugged.

"Not helping would most likely be frowned upon. I wouldn't want to be seen as obstructive."

Terry shrugged a second time.

"Anyways, what brings you here?"

"Well," he said, clapping his hands together in a gesture that, contrary to his intent I'm sure, oozed nervousness, "it's my first night on the job. Wanted to know if there was anything *special* you needed doing?"

"Security stuff, you mean?"

He nodded.

"I don't know… Can you patrol?"

Terry placed his hands squarely on his hips. "'Can I patrol?' he asks…Easy!" He chuckled loudly. "Where you want me to go?"

"Well… everywhere, I should think."

His brow furrowed momentarily. "Well, this's a big place. Any hotspots?"

“Not that I know of.” Besides the dead body, the lot had been relatively uneventful. “I don’t think crime is picky, actually.”

“I’ll just do a general sweep, then,” he said. “And what will you do now?”

“Well, anything I want, really.” I pressed my lips together. “It’s likely that I will just go home though.” The sun had dipped beneath the horizon now but its light was somewhat slower leaving. “I’ll accompany you as far as my place.”

He nodded.

I nodded.

Nothing happened.

“Well?”

“*Well*, I only know how to get back to *my* locker from here,” he replied. “Without any kind of guidance I’m just going to be wandering about aimlessly.”

“Isn’t that what patrolling is?”

He frowned at me. “No.”

“Okay, that’s fine.” I took out the map, unfolded it. “I’ll do this first bit, then. This,” I said, shaking the paper, “works a real treat for getting around here.”

He told me it was upside-down.

And I replied that sometimes right-side up wasn’t the best way forward.

For a while I led the way, consulting the map when necessary whilst Terry, there alongside me, walked in silence.

“All patrols should have one of these, I think.” I eyed my companion, made sure he saw the map. “For reference, you know? Otherwise, it’s just meandering, and that’s asking for trouble.

“Okay, sure, maybe not 'meandering'. It’s more than that.” Terry had increased his pace and I tried to keep step with him. “Patrolling’s more purposeful than that,” I said.

He nodded, but never spoke.

“But it’s… weird, isn’t it? A bit oxymoronic when you really get down to it, right? You’re out there searching for something which you don’t really want to find. I mean, you don’t really *want* anything crossing your path.” I thought about this. “*Right*?” My voice jumped slightly.
Without any kind of response from Terry, I pressed on. “Considering that night-time’s fast approaching, darkness descending and all that… No, sir, I would want my night to be as boring as possible.”

Terry coughed.

“And, sure,” I continued, “it’s not like you don’t have the tools to deal with whatever it is you might end up facing. You’ve probably got your flashlight – see, you’ve got yours there – or you

have a gun – you… don't have one of those – or your walkie or whatever if you're patrolling as a team." I thought briefly about finding a sassy partner for my security guard. "Well, you're *equipped*, that's what I'm saying… but it's with things you don't really want to use. You're prepared but you don't want to have to actually face anything in the course of your duty."

He was walking quickly and I battled to keep step.

"Am I wrong?"

He shook his head, but never spoke.

The light had lessened enough to warrant the use of a torch. Terry produced his.

"Thanks." I took this from. "I mean, this sort of job, really… it's better when you *don't* have to do it. Time passes, the shift just… ends, and all of it without incident. Not having a story to tell afterwards, that's best."

It seemed Terry had picked up the pace yet again. After skipping a few steps forward, I caught up.

"Though I doubt it *has* to be about that. You could focus your attention elsewhere, make use of the time in other ways, I guess. Instead of heading out and looking for trouble, you could instead start looking for things in need of fixing."

Nothing.

"Right?"

He shrugged. "I suppose."

"See – like over there – hole in the wall. Glaring." I aimed the torch at it. "Now that's something in need of fixing, in need of filling. That – right there – is a threat to the overall security of this place. "Am I wrong? Tell me I'm wrong."

"It's terribly small…" He coughed. "Can't imagine anyone getting through there." He tipped his head from side to side. "Okay, a child, *maybe*."

"Exactly!" I clapped him on the back. "Someone with the right attitude and a small enough frame – a dwarf, maybe – could manage it…" We walked on, Terry keeping his focus ahead whilst I occasionally glanced back at the hole. "All eventualities have to be considered." I looked across at him, watched him shrug. "I'm just saying, it could happen…" I passed the torch between my hands. "And what about that?" I'd taken a few steps ahead of him and, in what little light I could shed on it, I discerned: "a gap in the electric fence. See? Now, I ask you, was that something that happened naturally or was it something more… malicious?"

We walked the length of the fence before eventually turning right into one of the locker-lined alleyways.

“And would you look at the rust on some of these lockers?” There was a lot of it, so I kept dancing the light between the various points as we walked past them. “Here’s some more and here… and here.” I wanted to run my hand over a section, just to feel the texture beneath my fingertips... but I didn’t. “Now,” I said, swinging about, “I know it’s not a security concern, obviously, but it does degrade the overall aesthetic of the area which, in turn, contributes to the likelihood of undesirable types moving in. This right here could potentially be a hotspot, Ter’.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

I sped up and rounded the corner with Terry trundling along behind me.

I stopped and he walked into me. “Do you see that?!” After focusing the beam, I shook it in place. “Footsteps!”

Terry corrected me.

“Foot*prints*!” I redirected the torch, pointed it into his face. “That’s exactly right. Thank you, Terry. Yes. Footprints you see, footsteps you hear. That,” I said, flicking the torch back, “is a sure sign of trespass. We should follow them.” I slowed my pace so that Terry could pass me. “Here, you lead.”

He looked behind us, back to me, and then finally shook his head. He took the torch from me, pointed out that the footprints were actually ours, and that I had been leading the two of us in a circle since wresting the flashlight from him.

“Come now,” he said. “You’re not… suited for this. There’s ways of doing these kinds of things, a knack you haven’t got.” He twisted the top of the torch, widened its beam. “There we go. Better.” He made a pass-me-that gesture towards the map I was holding and I relinquished it immediately. “All you’re doing is surface-level… stuff.

“You just… *do*. You’re seeing but you’re not looking. There’s this… intention that you’re missing. D’you get what I’m saying? Seeing just happens… but looking… looking is something you’ve got to be active in.”

I nodded, unnecessarily I could see now, for Terry had already begun striding on after a brief look at the map. As I hurried to keep up, he spoke:

“And so what you really look for… is things what don’t work well, what shouldn’t be the way they is. What you really want’s the end point of the problem.” He cast a hand into the air, signalling behind him, signalling me. “*You* focus on whatever you can see… but that’s not always what’s best. Sometimes what’s wrong, what’s broken, ain’t always explicit.” Sweeping the torches between the lockers, he surged on. “Sometimes it’s small things, silly things, what’s causing problems. At the heart of it all, there’s just some tiny cause to all the commotion.

“And the question comes: 'can you find it?'

“D’you see here? This cable. No, over here! What d’you mean? There’s just the one cable…” He led the torch along its length, stopping at a particular spot. “It’s damaged, d’you see? Probably eaten through by rats. Lean in a little bit closer and you’ll see whether it’s completely broken or just… hindered. Can I say 'hindered' here?”

I was going to suggest–

“Crippled?

“Is 'crippled' better?

“An’ sure, if it can still carry a current, that’s good, but that exposure,” he said, shaking the torch over the area, “those open wires, that’s something dangerous waiting to happen. It’s not just failure to deliver here. Maybe it can’t send through even half of what’s needed. Maybe it could short out, you know?” He shook his head. “There’s just this… threat of something 'leaking', something being out what’s not supposed to be… and then reacting for it.

“Badly.

“And if it’s completely broken then this won’t be sending nothing nowhere.” He paused. “What d’you mean sending what? Electricity, of course.” He skipped over the near-break in the wire and ran the torchlight onwards. “At one end this thing’s just firing off, doing what it’s always been doing. Ultimately it doesn’t care what’s happening at the other end, it just does what it’s supposed to and if what it does don’t complete its journey…” he shrugged, “well, no big deal.

“This will fire off but it won’t go anywhere, d’you see what I’m sayin’?

“Crippled. Impaired. Handicapped. Call it what you like.

“The whole thing… it’s like… you know… it’s like itching but never scratching, retching but never vomiting.

“Stimulus without sensation.

“Sensation without stimulus.”

He sighed. “Problem here is you sometimes can’t tell when a thing’s broke. Until you try use it, of course**.** Imagine: you try light something up and it don’t work… what d’you do first?” He paused. “No, you don’t just leave it. You try and fix it. Usually though, you start in the wrong place. You think maybe somewhere there’s a bulb broke. Ain’t always the case though. Here now, something more important’s gone wrong.” He paused. “Means you’re gonna have to work a lot harder fixin’ it.”

He walked onwards, turned a corner, the whole time with his torch fixed on the cable. “See this? Judging by the dust,” he paused, “no, the dust over *here*… whatever this leads to has been out of service for quite some time.” He tapped the cable with his foot. “Nobody’s moved this in who-

knows-how-long." He scratched at his chin, a task made challenging by the beard covering it, and his torch beam danced wildly during. "Maybe it goes to a generator or something. You never noticed nothing wrong?

"Yeah, didn't think so. Hard to notice something not working if you don't know what it's meant to be doing. I mean, maybe it's never worked before…" He paused. "I don't think that's outlandish, no. Think about it. Something like this… a smaller part of a larger whole… maybe it's been sitting idle for years. Not doing nothing. Can you imagine that?

"No, you don't *have* to… I wasn't testing you.

"Anyways, that problem… d'you see how I unravelled it? That's the kind of thing… that's what you need to look for… and the approach you take looking for it, well, it needs to be guided." He paused, listened to me. "No, you weren't really guided at all. It has to be structured, has to be formalised. Can't just go wandering about aimlessly, can't rush in.

"Nothing'll get done that way. Any kind of success you do have, that'll just be pure, dumb luck." He paused. "No, I don't care how good you are at being lucky. That don't come into it. To really help, you have to take care in what you do, how you do, when you do.

"Fail to fix something properly, do a half-job, and you might end up with false positives. Something *almost* working, but not quite, you know? Enough to fool somebody into thinking things are fine. And you don't want that. People get the wrong impression that way. And you definitely don't want that.

"There's more here though. Over here, other side… and so we follow it." He paused. "It's safe to touch the insulated parts, no danger there. If you're scared just follow it with your eyes then… or with your finger.

"So it goes.

"And we go with it. Following along. Attentive all the way.

"Until

"You

"Find

"Something

"Wro-

"This here? Now that's something missing. See the outline? The empty space? This here's where something *was*. See how the dust's thinner here? That's a part of it. Evidence of absence. Something moved.

"Contents shifted.

"Now, I don't mind the odd empty space here and there. Of course it happens but sometimes something out of place is a problem. We worry about the knock-on effect it might have. Think about how it upsets the overall workings of the place.

"You think maybe this was where the generator was? I mean, it smells here, doesn't it? Test the air. Give it a sniff. That's a fuel of some sort." He paused. "Yeah, I know you smell it. That's something used to make something else work.

"But now that's all just once upon a time.

"The problem here is that everything tends to work in series, relying heavily on the bit before and then just… gone. One thing out of whack and all the rest is affected." He shrugged. "Like dominoes, yeah. You could say that. Take something away and it all just stops. Without power, all of it… ends.

"Sometimes you get lucky – as we have here – and you find the source of the problem.

"The problem at its source.

"But most of the time you'll just see the end result and nothing else. That cable back there… that's secondary.

"Auxiliary.

"But this, *this* is primary. Fix back there," he said, hiking a thumb towards where we'd come from, "and you'll only be wasting your time." He paused. "Right? Just nod. Back there's the wrong place… but you fix it still and then end up wondering why nothing's working.

"Back to square one.

"That's where you go.

"Outright failure, all stemming from the fact something's gone missing. Can you imagine that? Everything going to pieces because of one–

"No, no, it wasn't a test. I'm sure you *can* imagine that. I don't doubt that.

"It all boils down to intention. You must *do*. Your actions, there has to has to has to be something behind them. Not just blind wandering. Everywhere you wander you leave something in your wake. You know that, right?" He paused. "Just nod. No more relying on luck to get things done, okay? I'm not angry, no. It… doesn't matter. *I'll* be doing this, not you.

"But you *can* see how I'm better suited, can't you?"

I nodded. "It's probably best if I leave the patrolling thing to you then."

"Don't be glum," he told me. "You're good at other things, I'm sure." We rounded a corner and he glanced up from the map. "This is you, I take it?"

"Me? Like an allegory?" I felt surprise. "Wandering? Sure, I guess…" I shrugged. "Just the way I am. How I've been since–"

“No, no. I meant where you’re staying. Says on the map 'I LIVE HERE'.” He tapped the torch against these words.

I looked up from my feet and we were indeed at the place I’d marked.

“That’s right.”

“Well, okay then.” He shone the torch at the door and waited for me to open it. “Thanks for tagging along with me. Made things… interesting.”

I watched him as he turned to leave. “Say, do you think you’ll be able to find that generator... thing?”

“Me?” He hesitated, then bristled. “I think my pointing out it’s missing is enough. *You’ve* got to take the next steps here.”

I nodded.

He checked the map briefly. “Be seeing you.”

I made my way towards the bed, shutting the door behind me.

“You should be given warning when you’re in a dream sequence, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “That seems… fair.”

“You should *be given warning.”*

It was dark here, but I looked around regardless.

“This, then, is one of those dreams where you end up backed into a corner, eventually. Do you understand?”

“Well, sure, that’s easy enough to follow,” I said. “I like that this is so very… orderly.”

“That’s what you need.”

Structure.

and

Shape.

“It is?” I asked.

“Without patterns,

without predictability,

things… fall apart.

You *fall apart.”*

I nodded.

“You end up feeling cornered because of it. Well here, at least.”

“Are you preparing me for something?” I asked.

Silence.

"You go on this whole big…

mission. Do you know?

You pursue…

Whatever it is you started chasing,

you started going after, it'll fade away

It all becomes background noise.

"What you think's important, it… blurs."

"It does?"

"It does."

"You talk, talk, talk yourself into a corner and then you're there and everybody expects something from you. Something sensible, something resembling… closure. You've started something and the people won't be happy until you bring it to a close."

"What?" I rubbed at my eyes.

"Asked if you were asleep."

I looked around the room, tried to blink back the torch Terry was shining into my eyes. "Until very recently, yes."

"Sorry about that."

"I was having a dream too and everything. No idea what was going on but I rarely dream…" I rubbed at my eyes and then considered rolling over and going back to sleep. "Did something happen?"

After apologising profusely, blinding me with the torch once again, and then stumbling into the desk as he returned to the door, Terry began explaining himself. I watched him through slits.

"Whilst I was patrolling…" The light overhead came on and I tried to shield myself against it. "I discovered… Well, no, I heard… I heard odd… noises coming from one of the lockers…" I ducked beneath the blankets briefly, tried to give my eyes time to adjust. "A moaning noise."

"Moaning? Like somebody in pain? Like somebody dying?" I tried to urge more out of him.

"What?"

Clearly my gesturing, having been performed whilst horizontal and partially obscured by the duvet, had been misinterpreted.

"What happened then?" I asked. "After the moaning… What was inside? What'd you find?"

He shrugged.

"You didn't go *inside*? After hearing the noises?" I rolled out of bed quickly, untangled myself from the covers and rushed towards the box I was keeping my clothes in. "How could you *not*?" With one leg already trousered, I thrust the other one in whilst simultaneously hopping towards my desk. I fell over.

Rolling about on the floor, I attempted to untangle my legs. "What incredible willpower you must have!" I turned over onto my back, got my other leg into the pants and then stood up. After a brief search, my watch became apparent. "I would've gone right in there," I said, fiddling with the strap, "with… uh… caution, of course."

"Well, you *could* go in because you've got keys for it." Terry shrugged. "Besides, even if I could've gone in, I'd've still come back here to ask your permission."

I was already rushing out of the room, past him, whilst he was still trying to gather himself. "Permissions," I murmured, whilst returning to fetch my set of keys from the desk drawer. "Come on, then." I took him by his collared shirt and pulled.

"This is it?"

He nodded.

"Doesn't *seem* interesting," I said.

I looked the thing before us up and down. Terry shone the light towards the base of the door, showed us the handle and then the little lock situated just above it.

"That's nice. None of that rusty-lock rubbish here."

"What?"

I shook my head. "Did you try opening it?"

"Well, no. I didn't want to. Not without you, obviously…" He rubbed at his cheek. "Plus, there's the whole key business."

"Ah… very considerate of you. I doubt mine would work here though. I've got a skeleton key, sure, but it only unlocks *that.*" I pointed to the lower lock on the door. "Renters are encouraged to use their own security measures. Hence, *that*."

He deflated. "Okay, sure. Well, maybe now that we're both here I could bash on it a bit?" He mimed hitting the door and then smiled at me hopefully.

"Why?"

"As a kind of… uh… deterrent, I guess?" Terry shrugged.

For a while, the two of us simply stood in front of the locker door, listening, waiting for something to happen.

"Well?" I nudged him. "Go on then."

"What?"

"*Try* the door."

He handed me the torch and then wedged his fingers beneath the locker door. As he lifted, ever so slowly, I watched it roll up into the darkness overhead. Though the process was oddly quiet, there was an expression on Terry's face that told me catastrophic noise might only be moments away.

When there was an adequate distance through which the two of us could crouch, the two of us crouched through.

What light there was in the locker came from farther in. This light, enough for the pair of us to move towards, gave Terry a good reason to switch off his torch. We moved slowly in the half-dark, making our way towards the beacon before us. Our shuffling, none too quiet, was punctuated by a whispered conversation.

"Do you smell that?" Terry said, sniffing loudly.

"Of course I can smell it, I'm not-" My thinking slew my sentence. I stopped in place and the distance between myself and Terry grew. "What's the word I'm looking for?"

Ahead of me he paused and then swivelled his head around. "What?"

"You know, it's 'blind' for the eyes, 'deaf' for the ears, and – what? – for the nose?"

Terry shrugged, involving his hands and arms in the gesture for added effect.

"There's no word for it, is there?" I pressed hard, dug deeper, and really *searched* myself for something to say. "There's a gap in my language. That's a word just waiting to happen."

Shaking his head, Terry gave a quiet huff and then continued his shuffling forwards.

"Well, it doesn't matter now." I followed him. "Of course I can smell it. The room *is* the smell and vice-versa."

"It's strong, don't you think?" Terry seemed to be urging something more from me.

"It's… a smell." I considered shrugging but realised how wasteful it would be what with him facing the other way. "It doesn't *stink*, isn't a stench. Whether you like it or not is subjective."

We had reached the outskirts of the light source and could now see that a lamp was responsible for it. Terry readied his torch, turning it on against the palm of his hand, outlining the networking veins therein.

"Obviously," I whispered, "there's a lot more going on here. The environment, the time… that's what's driving your attitude here, I think."

Just then, Terry stopped quite abruptly and I shuffled into the back of him. He pressed a finger to his lips before pointing toward the lit area before us.

At the light's edge, there stood one of those faux wall screens which are good for getting undressed behind; an armoire filled with clothing but without any doors to prevent its garments overflowing onto the floor; and a bed in the shape of a heart.

There was also somebody trying to put on a pair of pants in a hurry.

We watched the frantic hopping about as an attempt was made to slip into one of the legs. It was during this that Terry shouted.

The reaction – an acceptable one considering the surprise – was to screech loudly and topple backwards onto the bed, a knock to the noggin against the headboard occurring en route. The pants came off, flicked upwards. These flopped down beside the bed.

"Now you've done it," I said.

Terry waved the flashlight, dancing its beam over the after-hours visitor.

"Killed them. Dead." I craned past Terry, trying to get a better view of what had happened. "Don't think I can handle another incident like this."

"Incident?"

Just then, the figure Terry had his torch beam on came to with a start and began screeching once more. The resulting chain-reaction fright arced through all three of us and it was only after Terry had picked his torch up off the ground that we could discuss what had happened.

"Who the hell are you? What're you doing in here?" I watched as she employed the bed's duvet as a coverall. "I'll call the police! This is private property."

Emboldened by having Terry with me as a human shield, I rallied, "Yes, but it's *my* private property."

"Which *I* help keep private." Terry patted his chest and then nodded. "And you're here after hours. That's definitely not on."

"Irrelevant. Preposterous." A quick rub to the head, a glance at the hand used, a check for blood. "You can't just come barging in here."

I watched the gathering of bedsheets, the hiding of bare skin.

"Well, he didn't." I sidled up to Terry. "He came to me for guidance first and *then* we came barging in."

"I heard noises," Terry declared. "*Distressing* noises."

"Groaning!" I volunteered. "Somebody clearly in need of help, obviously."

"Exactly," Terry– he turned to face me suddenly, his brow furrowed. "Wait, what'd you say?"

"Groaning!" I repeated with what I hoped was the same emphasis. "Somebody in need of help, obviously."

Terry looked taken aback. “I said 'moaning'. Nobody was in need of help.” He kept the torch focused on the bed, its occupant, the mounded duvet. “Quite the opposite, in fact. That smell I was talking about when we came in here…”

I nodded.

“Well?” He seemed to be urging me on.

“That wasn’t a metaphor?” I shrugged. “You know? For crime or something? The 'stench of crime' and all that?”

Terry shook his head. “No, no, no. That’s not what I meant-”

“Like 'something’s fishy'?”

Terry’s brow unfurrowed. “So you *do* understand what I’m talking about?”

I nodded uncertainly.

Terry took his attention elsewhere. “You,” he said, jerking the torch’s beam, “how’d you get in here?”

“I have the key.” A hand extended from beneath the duvet, fumbled for a key on the nightstand. “I have the key right here! See?” This was shaken at us. “See?”

“It’s night-time though.”

“I’m sure it still works at night, Terry.”

He shot a look at me before returning to his culprit. “Shouldn’t *be here* at night. That’s what I’m getting at. It’s not right, frankly.”

The flashlight, catching the key at just the right angle, splintered.

I thought about what I’d just heard. “Frankie? How do you know he–”

Terry proceeded with his investigation. “You shouldn’t be here *now*, that’s what I’m saying. What time’d you get here?” He shone the torch at his wristwatch quickly and the reflection blinded us both. “Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter.” He rubbed at his eyes briefly. “It must’ve been before the sun went down, right?”

“Are you suggesting she snuck in?” I asked, looking in turns at them. “*Did* you sneak in?”

The key was placed on the nightstand’s edge.

“Snuck in or not,” Terry began, “this *is* trespassing.” He pointed at the bed. “*You’re* trespassing.”

“Where’s your car?” I asked.

“Out front, outside.”

I thought about this. “So you bypassed the gate?”

“It wasn’t–”

“No excuses!” Terry shouted.

The duvet was pulled up further.

"Just as I thought. So you started with breaking and entering, some light trespassing and, perhaps along the way, a bit of mild vandalism?"

Terry began shining the torch around the locker, exposing, albeit briefly, the various other items we had seen scattered about the place. The beam returned to the bed and a hand was held up to guard against the glare.

"How long's this been going on?" Terry asked.

The answer was a quiet one. "Around twenty minutes."

"Well," I said. "That's not too bad then…"

"Not *tonight*." Terry pointed the torch downwards, made a circling gesture. "How long have you been doing *this* for?"

There was movement taking place beneath the duvet though neither myself nor Terry, I assumed, had the faintest idea what it could have been.

"Can't remember, can you?" Terry smirked. "Well, frankly, I'm disgusted."

I nodded, crossed my arms. "Yeah, *Frankie*. Disgusted."

"Where's your partner-in-crime, anyways?"

I stopped nodding and started thinking about what Terry had just said. I pieced the past few moments together.

"Partner-in–" Something clicked. "You were… *meeting* with someone here?"

"Well, it was more than-"

"I know that." I glared at Terry. "I know that *now*, I mean."

I was being waited on, I was being watched.

"Well? What are we going to do about this?"

I hadn't given this any thought. Terry left the flashlight focused on the bed but oriented himself towards me. He placed a hand on my shoulder – which I didn't shy away from – and leaned closer. "*Well*?"

"I don't know. I've never been in this situation–" I frowned. "Well, no, I mean I've been in this situation… but only once before."

"And?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Well, it turned out differently. Had a few other variables worth considering."

"Fair enough… Anyways, *this*," he said, flicking the flashlight up and down the figure in bed, "is quite the problem. Can't continue."

I agreed.

"Good." He nodded, removed his hand from my shoulder. "You hear that?" He swung about suddenly, fiercely, "you… you… you… *deviant*." He thrust the torch forwards as he spoke. "I mean, you're married."

I tried to rein Terry in a bit. "We don't know tha–"

"Look at that face. I mean, just look at it." Terry gripped the front end of the flashlight and twisted it, intensifying the beam, focusing it until it went from spread to spot. "D'you see that?"

I nodded.

"That's the face of a married person."

"Am I supposed to be seeing something in the eyes?"

"The opposite, actually." Terry chuckled after saying this.

I chuckled uncertainly.

"There's a wedding ring on the nightstand there though." I pointed to the piece of jewellery located beside the key. "That's better evidence."

Terry alighted on this ring and I watched as a smirk began to develop on his face. "Despicable." He tutted loudly. "What were you thinking?"

"What were you thinking, Frankie?" I wondered aloud.

Terry turned towards me again, lowered his voice. "Good work. That repetition, the emphasis, that's good thinking."

I nodded.

"On a side note, how'd you know her name?" he asked. "You got everyone in here memorised or something?"

I frowned. "I thought you knew–"

"Whatever it is, it's incredible." Suddenly, Terry swung his attention back. "You *weren't* thinking! That's what happened here." He clapped me on the shoulder and I bumped into the standing screen. I steadied myself under his watchful eye.

I didn't say anything but I did rub at my shoulder.

Terry understood this as some kind of communication. "*Exactly*," he said. "Despicable."

"Well, hold on now… maybe there's a bit more to this than meets the eye." Terry turned his torch on me and I shaded my eyes, squinting. "There could be a good reason–"

He echoed my words before adding his own. "Whose side are you on here?"

"Nobody's yet." I pressed the flashlight down, deferred it. "I'm still information-gathering. When I know enough I'll decide."

Terry's expression flickered, faltered. "What more do you need?"

I shrugged. “Nothing, really. Even if I knew more, I doubt I’d be a harsher judge. There’s reasons for everything.”

“But this is misusing the place!”

“*You* were misusing the place.” I shrugged. “I do understand though… A line has to be drawn somewhere.”

Terry hesitated momentarily, then pulled me to one side. “I wasn’t *grossly* misusing the place.”

“Gross as in large?”

He tilted his head to one side then shook it. “*This*,” he said, pointing again, “was wild misuse of the premises.” He lowered his voice before continuing, "whereas me, well, I’m just sleeping here. I don’t… entertain.” Circling his hand, he tried to ensnare everything surrounding us that he considered a transgression. “There’s no sleeping going on here.”

“Never mind.” I shook my head. “There’ll be a reason. It may not be a good one, but at least it’ll be… something.” I took the flashlight from Terry. “What’s your-”

Out from underneath the duvet, pants were, once more, being wrestled with. On realising that our attention had come back, hands were frozen fast on the crotch area, fastened to the zipper. We were greeted with wide eyes.

“Well, what’s your reason then?” I asked.

Terry tried to snatch the torch back from me and a small scuffle ensued. “We don’t need a reason. Just look! That’s 'fleeing the scene of the crime' right there.”

“That’s putting on pants, Terry–”

“Exactly! So that she can–”

The sound of zippering stopped him.

“Frankie here’s just getting decent,” I said, letting go of the torch. “Can’t get involved in an argument without being dressed for it. You can’t take a person seriously in their underwear.”

Both Terry and I watched, waited for an answer. What eventually came, after discomfort had perhaps set in, was a shrug.

“Put your shirt on.” Terry said, shining the torch at the button-up buried in the bedsheets.

“I believe it’s called a b–”

“Doesn’t matter what it’s called,” he said, the torchlight moving about. “She must put it on.” For a moment I watched before, out of respect, averting my eyes. “That’s inside-out,” I said.

There was a huff and the shirt was removed, corrected, and the redressing began.

“Once decent, you just give me the order,” Terry said, returning his attention to me. “Then I’ll see this *filth* off the property myself. All the way to the bloody street.”

I frowned. “Filth? That’s a bit strong, isn’t it?”

Terry’s eyebrows arched towards his nose. “What’s happened here isn’t… isn’t right. It’s shameful.”

I echoed the word. “Well, if she keeps doing it then clearly there’s no shame at all.” I watched fingers fiddling with buttons. “You aren’t, are you?”

On the final button there came a pause in the proceedings.

“*Ashamed*, I mean, miss.” I pointed at the bed, at the wedding ring on the side table. “You aren’t ashamed, are you?”

What started out as uncertainty turned into a slow nodding.

“Well, you *should* be.” Terry shone the flashlight at eye level, blinding. “Disgusting,” he hissed. “I’ll have you know that if I wasn’t in the company of my employer here,” he said, tipping his head towards me, “I would spit.”

I regarded Terry. “Please don’t do that.”

Now fully buttoned, I waited for something to be said. She started to clear her throat–

“I wasn’t actually going to spit,” Terry said. "I was just saying I *would* have.”

“If I wasn’t around, you mean?”

Terry lowered his flashlight. “It’s just a turn of phrase. Like: 'I’m so angry I could spit'. Yes?”

“I don’t know about angry.” I looked at this intruder we ourselves had intruded on. “Upset, maybe; angry, no. This is… an indiscretion, I’d say.”

“*Indiscretion*?” Terry swung the torch onto me. “This is adultery!”

“As I said, there could be a g–” I hesitated. “*A* reason for doing this.”

Terry didn’t respond but the face he wore demanded an answer from me.

“Okay, yes. You want a reason. I can see that.” I placed my hands together, wrung them. “Maybe there’s a recent divorce here that we don’t know about. Or-or-or maybe,” I said, my voice dropping to a whisper, “there was a death. Did you think about that?” The room went quiet. *Nobody thinks about that*. “Maybe her husband’s… you know… All I’m saying is we don’t know the whole story...”

“Do you want to?” The torch’s beam left me, gave my eyes a moment to readjust to the semi-darkness. The torchlight forced another freeze. I could see a fingertip resting on the wedding ring. “Hear it, I mean. This… this… *story* you’re wanting.” He shook the light on his target. “Well, then? Let’s hear it.”

Eyes wide now, I watched as her hand retracted slowly. What I assumed to be a courage-gathering gulp seemed to be the start of a sentence. “–”

“It’s none of our business,” I said. “Just leave it. We don’t need to know.”

“Fine.” Terry lowered the torch. “Obviously, it’s your call. I just think we need to do some chasing here. Off the property, I mean.” Terry waved his free hand. “Please can we at least agree on that?”

“Well, yes, *obviously*… because of the… misuse.” I scratched my head. “Still, there’s other factors to consider. You’re paying rent here, aren’t you?” The response was a head bobbing up and down. “See? She’s paying rent, Terry. It’s just a case of using the place as outlined in the contract.” Our eyes met. “You signed a contract here, didn’t you?”

I watched her face as she tried to recall a particular moment in time. Confusion eventually turned into nodding.

“Well, then? That means she knows the rules. And don’t you say anything about not *actually* reading the terms and conditions because that means very little ‘round here.”

“It does?” I asked.

“It does.” He nodded. “Just because you don’t know the rules doesn’t mean they don’t apply.”

I worked my way through the negatives in Terry’s sentence. “Yeah,” I said eventually. “Exactly…”

“You have to leave... *now*. Lock up and get out.” He made a shooing gesture, used the torch to draw a line between the bed and the locker’s entrance. “You come back tomorrow during savoury daylight hours and close up your account here, you see?”

“I have a good rea-”

“Yeah, I’ll *bet* you have a good reason.” Terry laughed menacingly and began shaking the light, a gesture that I assumed was meant to herd us all out of the locker. “Get your shit together, Frankie, you’re leaving.”

“Why do you keep–”

“No excuses now,” Terry said.

I followed them out, slow behind the pair as Terry frogmarched his 'captive'. We all three crouched beneath the locker door and then, once out, I slammed it shut.

“Got your key?” I asked.

Following a nod, this was handed over.

“Good.”

I locked the door with this, then pocketed it.

“Got your wedding ring?”

Shake, shake.

“*Most* good. You’ve got a good reason to come back tomorrow, then.”

Employing the torch in the same way one might use a gun, Terry took control, prodding her in the lower back to get her moving. We walked in silence towards the front gate.

There was a car parked a short distance away from the entrance, just off the road. Keys were removed from the depths of a back pocket, flicked through and, once the correct one had been found, the car was unlocked. Terry and myself watched the performance that followed. The seatback being adjusted, the rear-view mirror being glanced into, the window being rolled down just a smidge.

The car pulled off. She didn't say goodbye.

"Be seeing you!" Terry called.

"That sounds very threatening," I said. "Don't… don't do that."

I'd left Terry to the rest of his rounds and made my way back home without incident. Having left the door open, I wasn't surprised to see the paw marks that had been paced around the room. The majority of these were in the kitchen area and, feeling guilty, projecting my hunger on to what I assumed was hers, I removed a bowl from the cupboard. This I filled with something taken from a tin and, although the label said 'viennas', I wasn't entirely convinced.

I gagged at the smell, reminded myself that dogs weren't overly picky about food, and then made my way back to bed.

For the remainder of that night, I did not dream.

When I awoke the following morning, the bowl was empty. Whilst staring at it, I thought about the events of the previous night and then, afterwards, resolved to give the rental contract a read-thru. Perhaps there was something in there that could be misconstrued. Unclear language that resulted in the sort of loophole misuse I'd been seeing recently.

I made myself ready, dressed for the day, and left home hopeful that I'd get something done. In an effort to prevent further trespasses, I made my way to the front gate where, as Frankie had intimated, was a lock that could be bypassed with ease.

It *didn't* appear to be something that could be slipped past. Even now, as we'd left it last night, the bolt was fastened securely. I shook it and though there was some rattling the gate didn't actually move. Looking past it, through the fence's mesh, I saw the street, saw the sign, saw nothing else. I tried to imagine where Walker's investigation had started, where it was most likely the tire tracks on the road would be. If the car *hadn't* slowed down fast enough these would be quite–

Just then, a car appeared on the horizon, grew larger as it came closer. When it neared the gate, it slowed before turning in. The person behind the wheel waved at me, smiled.

A window was rolled down and I was greeted cheerfully.

"Can I help you?" I called.

"I was… uh… here yesterday." She scratched her head.

I nodded, told her that the same was true for me and watched her smile flicker.

"I was in the locker…"

"Was it *your* locker?"

"My locker?" For a moment she looked confused. "Oh, yes, yes, of course!"

I unlocked the gate, pulled it open. "Well, okay then," I said, clapping my hands together, "you're allowed to be in there. Anything else I can help you with?"

She took her hands off the wheel and waved them at me. "No, that's not what I meant. I was *in* the locker last night."

"Oh, at *night*… well, that's… that's different." I started walking up the drive towards my office. She brought the car up slowly. "Can't say we look on that too favourably here. It's against the rules. Let me tell you, we had a lady here last night in *her* locker. And she," I paused, recollected, realised, "was you."

The car parked, its occupant exited. "You didn't recognize me?"

I shook my head. "Frankie, was it?"

She tilted her head to one side, regarded me with some suspicion. "Frankie? No."

"Francis, then?"

"*Hell*, no." She chuckled, shook her head. "Rheese. I'm Rheese." She extended a hand towards me and, duty-bound, I shook it.

Whilst doing so I definitely *didn't* think about any antics from the night before.

"Where'd you get Frankie from?"

I shrugged. "Must've misheard… something." She relinquished her grip on my hand. "How can I help you?"

"First and foremost," she said, inhaling, "I want to apologise for what happened here last night. It was a serious transgression on my part."

"Transgression as in violation?"

"Of my contract, yes."

"*Of the contract*." I nodded. "Okay, yes. Definitely violated. Not using the place correctly and all that. Okay, and second?"

"Second?" She frowned.

"What's the next thing you're apologising for?" I unlocked my office and made my way inside. "Sounded like you were starting up a list."

I switched my laptop on and then opened the window to let the outside in.

With notable hesitation she followed me into the office. "Uh… I'd also like to apologise for... I guess… using the locker incorrectly… *for* my... indiscretions, as it were." She dropped her head, took an interest in the floor for some reason.

"Similar to the first one, but alright." I tipped my head from side to side. "It doesn't matter, I forgive you."

Head still down, she nodded.

"However," I said, "My forgiveness shouldn't mean a thing to you. You apologising to me's like saying sorry to somebody who witnessed a car crash." I pressed multiple buttons on the laptop's keyboard, hoped to elicit some kind of response from it. "Somewhere there's another car, another person… Someone who matters more."

When she didn't answer, I prompted her.

Her response was mumbled.

"Talk up here, please. You don't have to make eye contact, but don't waste your time talking to the ground."

She lifted her head, looked me in the eye. "I have… good reasons… for doing what I did."

I considered this. "Doubtful," I replied, adding a shrug. "You have reasons. Good or bad is a subjective thing. I don't think your husband would think they're 'good' reasons, would he?"

I was fast losing interest in my laptop. Stuck looping on its loading screen, all it did was frustrate me.

"You don't know the whole story."

"I could though," and before she was able to respond, I continued, "I *could* know the whole story, I mean. If you're willing to tell it, I'm willing to hear it."

Her eyes narrowed, her mouth opened.

"Sometimes that sort of thing helps," I interjected, making myself comfortable in my chair. "Talking, I mean. What you did though, your 'antics', I doubt you'll be able to truly justify them. Whatever you come up with will work for you, sure, but for me it'll probably sound hollow."

She frowned but, eventually, spoke. "Have you ever held onto something that wasn't there?"

I thought about this.

"Well?" she asked. "My question wasn't rhetorical."

"Or literal, either." I sighed. "Figuratively, yes. I've held onto something that wasn't there. Something in–"

"*Intangible*." She nodded. "Intangible, right. You'll… you'll understand where I'm coming from better then."

Out the corner of my eye I saw my laptop successfully reach its start-up screen. After a few failed attempts I was eventually able to login.

"My husband left me." She paused for a time, enough to warrant me looking away from the screen. There was an expectancy in the way she regarded me. "I said–"

"I heard what you said. And – what? – you'd like some sympathy from me?" I shook my head. "With the way you conduct yourself it's easy to understand why."

"He left *before* I started… all of this, all of *that*." She cast a hand to the side.

I hesitated, felt multiple questions forming themselves, each vying for pole position in their asking. My need for information overwhelmed me.

When I couldn't find a place to start, I simply asked to be told more.

She grimaced. As her facial muscles railed against her, I could see the way this recall affected her. "I don't really want to go into the details. He left, I hurt–"

"And you wear the wedding ring still."

Both of us looked at her finger, where a pale band of skin could be seen.

"That reminds me," she said, her expression faltering briefly once more. "Could we–"

I nodded, gave up on whatever I'd hoped to do on the laptop, and made way out of the office. She followed.

"Where was I?" she asked.

I watched as she rubbed at her naked finger, felt the absence of the ring usually worn there. "Have you ever held onto something that wasn't there…" I murmured.

I looked at my own–

"Right!" She nodded. "*Right*."

I frowned. "The way you said it, the way you started the story," I said, letting her take the lead as we walked, "it's like you *know* what you're doing isn't sensible, isn't–"

"I *do* know."

She told me the details, the *how* of his leaving her. She made what must've hurt her hugely, small; a conversational transfer that we could skip past before heading into the story proper. What had happened for a long time, months – "a year, maybe," she said – became a single sentence she spoke. His leaving, a departure that hurt – "which hollowed me out" – was handled quickly, the verbal equivalent of pulling off a plaster and averting the eyes.

"He'd cheated on me… *was* cheating on me."

She was quick to provide what she believed were the reasons behind his actions. Hers was a list so long that some of it had to be exaggerated, had to be projected. Sensible reasons stacked together with ones that sounded imagined, that seemed tinged with self-blame.

I wanted to point this out, wanted to say that people changed. Wanted to tell her how, in some situations, you simply weren't the one at fault. How, on a long enough timeline, someone you knew could become a stranger.

"With enough time, anything is possible," I said.

"Pardon?"

I shook my head, urged her to continue.

"Of course I confronted him about it. I *had* to. Had to, had to, had to." Her head shook with the emphasis.

Armed with evidence: first- and second-hand, she brought into the light this issue, *their* issue with good intentions – "only the best", she said. Hopeful, she had tried to air out what they were going through as a way of fixing it… somehow.

"What *we* were going through, not what *I* was experiencing. I didn't want to come off as combative."

She'd wanted things to work.

She paused, sighed loudly, pressed her hands into her pockets.

We were standing in front of her locker.

“Things… devolved. What I’d tried to do with tact he undid, and it all morphed into something horrible. It became this- this- this *horrendous* fight between us.”

The actual departure – “without pomp, without ceremony,” she said – happened overnight. His was the kind of disappearance one might associate with darkness and the cover thereof. He removed himself from her life and severed any kind of connection between the two of them, hadn’t even bothered coming back for his things.

“I couldn’t reach him…. or he couldn’t *be* reached. Take your pick.”

She waited for me to unlock the door and then lifted it up.

“So why do you hang on?” I nodded towards her finger.

She frowned, seemed ready to make a gesture but then threw it away.

“It isn’t hope,” I said. “The way you’ve explained things to me, it definitely *isn’t* hope.”

“Sometimes things happen,” she said, switching on the locker’s light, “*unexpected* things and they just… throw you. They just throw you so terribly that there’s no real way of moving forward.”

Time spent in a daze – “the way you see people suffering from shellshock” – that was her for a while. People notice that sort of thing, that behaviour, and they do their best to help you, I guess, but they can’t always.

“It’s like losing a limb. You take it for granted whilst it’s there, but when it’s gone…” She sighed. “It’s always been with you, as long as you can remember it was there, and then it… it… just… *isn’t*.”

She stepped into the locker and I followed.

“A… numbness… that’s what dulled the hurt, that’s what helped me get on with life. This,” she said, gesturing towards the bed, “was a part of that.”

I looked at the bed and hurt. Gaudy wasn’t the right word. “Why here though? You have a home.”

She nodded, told me that living there now was like inhabiting a memory, a place that *was*. She used the word 'haunted' and meant it.

“It’s tacky I know, but home is where the heart is. That- that… place… where I live, after what happened, that’s just a house now.”

When I murmured 'the heart' she took it to mean the bed before us.

“It’s actually really comfortable.” She smirked, scratched the back of her head, and then shrugged. “The shape was an afterthought.” There was a blush coming through but she did a fair job of hiding it.

I looked away, gave her the moment she needed. I saw the bed and, unmade as it was, heard it crying out for my attention. Even though it disgusted me greatly, it deserved to be made.

“How often do you sleep on it?”

She hadn’t. Couldn’t. Wouldn’t. It was comfortable still, she assured me.

“Comfort*ing*. Last night, then: who was he?”

She corrected me – “he *is*,” she said – somebody new, somebody better for her.

“Somebody who understands why you can’t take him home yet?” I asked. “Why you can’t bear to bring him back to where you *actually* live?”

She nodded, explained that the two of them worked together and that, before they’d started making use of the lot, before they’d *transgressed*, he’d been a close friend, somebody who helped her through the worst of it. He wanted her better – “which made one of us, I guess” – but, after enough time, enough of his optimism, she’d been convinced.

“It was a start. He helped me piece together what’d happened, where I was then, where I am *now*… where I could be.”

“Helped with your 'getting there'.” I effected the quotation marks. “Good friend.”

Slowly but surely, yes, she told me. The relationship they had now was instinctive, a natural next step and, because of his understanding of what had happened, the *where* of their meeting made some kind of sense. With a guilty look on her face she admitted to the general seediness of the love nest she’d created.

I nodded.

She nodded.

“It should stop though,” I said. “For health reasons, I mean. Naturalise the relationship.”

She bandied her words, said things like 'unprepared' and 'inappropriate', mentioned how there was a fear and an uncertainty to doing that. She told me how where she lived *was* the memories she’d made there, *was* in one way or another that past relationship.

“How could I–”

“How could you *indeed*.”

“That house, that place–”

“*Isn’t* what I’m talking about. What you’re doing here,” I said, pointing at the bed, its ruffled sheets, its scattered pillows, “is only good for you. For him: it’s bad. Unhealthy. He’s helping you and you’re so- so- so trapped, that you can’t bring him into your world *beyond* what you do here.”

She started stuttering, began stammering something that I interrupted.

“The only thing haunting your house is you.”

I thought about exorcisms, about the casting out of bad spirits. I thought in a literal, then figurative sense. I thought about how memory tinged experience, how, sometimes, it tainted it, made it never worth going back to. I thought about guilt–

“You’re right. Of course you’re right.” She shook her head. “After last night that’s even clearer.”

I watched as she picked up her abandoned wedding ring from the side table.

“Even before last night, you knew,” I said. “Probably wasn’t explicit but you knew.”

She turned the ring over in her fingers, held it up and looked through it.

“Give things enough time and maybe you’ll use this place properly. Form a new relationship, do all the things associated with it, and then you’ll have a real reason to rent.”

I wanted to make the bed, *desperately* wanted to make the bed.

But fought myself.

“One of those silly couple reasons, you know?” I said, starting a conversation to distract myself, “something like him not letting you keep your model car collection at home. Maybe it takes up too much space.” I smiled, made my voice ready for mimicry. “'This is meant to be an office not a showroom.'”

When I repeated the words my voice cracked.

“Model *cars*?” She smiled, chuckled. “Sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

“I’m talking… too much.” I reached down, clutched a section of the bed’s duvet, lifted it, let it go.

She looked at me, again expectant-seeming, but I had nothing further to say.

“You’ve helped immensely,” she said, smiling. “More than you know… and I wanted to thank you.” She held out her hand once more and, obliged to, I shook it. She clasped my wrist with her other hand and, when the shaking finished, she ran this into my open palm, leaving something there. “I want you to have this.”

When she lifted her hand away from mine, I saw the ring resting in my palm. It was a special moment but it wasn’t like a magic trick.

I looked at her and said 'thanks'.

She nodded.

I said 'thanks' because it’s polite, because it’s the right thing to do.

“Look, I have to get going. I’ll- I’ll be back… sometime.” She surveyed the locker’s contents again. “There’s things in here that *definitely* have to go. Right now though,” she said, practically bounding towards the locker’s door, “right now though, I’ve got to go talk to him, I *need* to talk to him.” She paused in the doorway, looked back.

Give thanks.

She smiled at me again, then turned on her heel and left, and left me, ring in hand.

“I *really* don’t want this,” I said.

Before leaving the locker, I secured it, then slipped my keys and Rheese's wedding ring into my pocket. I began walking back to my office and, whilst I walked, I thought about baggage. I thought about carrying it with you wherever you went. I thought big and small, and how, sometimes, size had no bearing on weight.

The dog was in the office when I returned, had made herself comfortable on the bed I'd set up for myself on my first night here. She opened her eyes as I entered, watched me and then closed them once I'd sat myself down in front of the laptop. I removed the ring from my pocket and placed it on the desk.

"I *could* give it back… It wouldn't be polite but it could be done."

The laptop was ready, responded quickly to my requests, and so I opened up the database.

"She wouldn't take it though. Wouldn't ever. Like her home it's haunt–"

My phone rang.

The dog barked.

I leapt up from my chair, shouting. When my heart had settled, I picked up the phone, and though I didn't recognize the number, I answered still. Once the call connected, I didn't recognise the voice either.

"I just wanted to say thanks again."

I frowned. "Walker?"

"Who? No, this is Rheese," the voice said. "I was just there? I'm call—— to say thanks." Her voice over the line sounded tinny. "Talking —— helps. Really helps, *helped*… so, yeah, thank you."

I agreed. "Usually doesn't matter *how* you do it either. Some people talk to themselves, others write. Also, I've spok– seen other people talk to their dogs before."

I held my hand over the phone's microphone and looked at the dog.

"I guess it all boils down to succ—— communication, really."

I nodded, then remembered I was in a phone call.

"Wait, what'd you say?"

"It all boils down to successful communication?" she said.

"Oh, yes, yeah. No, definitely. What you said."

When the call wasn't cutting out, I could make out some background sounds.

"Where are you calling from?"

"I'm —— car, en route to–"

"You shouldn't be calling me whilst you're driving." I took the phone away from my ear, looked at the number, the call's length, the current time. "You *definitely* shouldn't."

I ended the call, put the phone down the desk, I placed my head in my hands and thought, was forced to think, was forced to re–

But I wanted to stop thinking so I started working on the database.

Name	Surname	Locker	Contents	Rent Status	Notes
Dustin	Triste	I 18	Move-in-progress	Debit, monthly	Due to clear out before end of year
Emile	Evans	N 5	Wood carvings	6 months in advance	Someone to 'treat' these for int. travel
Siobhan	Lapin	G 1	Art installation, 'empty'	Unpaid, forfeited	Maintenance req. painting.
Peter	Yeo	T 3	Beds	Debit, monthly	Forgotten?
Earnest	Haynes	O 8	Move-in-progress	Unpaid, 2 months	Query
Roger	Orville	? 25	Refrigeration equipment (EMPTY)	3 months in adv. then a payment plan	Tenant to contact
Arthur	Pepper	F 1–			

"I've been wandering around this place looking for somebody to talk to. A manager, maybe."

I'd heard a car pulling prior to him entering my office but, because of the work I was doing, I hadn't bothered to find out who was responsible for it.

"That sort of thing tends to happen around here." I looked up from my desk. "You get used to it."

For a while he regarded me without expression, then his brow furrowed.

"Sorry, don't mind me." I stood up from my desk quickly. "Anyways, you've found him… found me."

"You work here?" Before I could answer, he spoke on, "pretty much been walking around talking to myself. Place was starting to feel a bit of a ghost town."

"It can get lonely here."

"Weren't lonely, just lost. In need of help and no one around to dish it out." He looked at me and then around the office, a short circuit. "Anyways, enough of that…. You the manager here then?"

I took stock of the individual who had stepped into my office, wondering, first of all, why he hadn't bothered to take his sunglasses off. Or his peak, for that matter. He was coated head to foot in tight-fitting camouflage clothing and had upon his feet some fairly serious-looking boots. There was a utility belt encircling his waist and on this there were a number of attachments. The straps that wrapped themselves over his shoulders and off to either side of his belly gave away the backpack he had on him.

"Hello?"

"Hello again." I replied, nodding. "I am the manager here, yes."

His brow furrowed. "I remember… someone else… a woman." He put his hands on his hips.

"Priscylla, yes. My aunt. I'm managing the place whilst she's away."

He nodded. "Fair enough! No further questions. Name's Pepper." He thrust his hand towards me… and I shook it, "and I'd like to lodge a complaint."

"A complaint?"

"Well?"

I frowned at him.

"Aren't you going to take notes or something?"

"Yes, of course," I declared. "I have a pad for that." After scrambling to find something to write on, I readied my pen on the paper. I nodded at him.

"I'm here to report a theft." He said this and then watched me closely. "A *theft*. Did you get that?"

The pen wasn't working. "Yes." I scratched away at the pad.

"Good. Now it's only a handful of things. Smallish items. I can list 'em, if you'd like?"
I nodded.

"I'm just afraid it's the sort of thing that could snowball, you know?"

I scratched away. "Snow---ball, got it. Absolutely."

"And that's locker F-15."

"Can you tell me what else was taken?"

"Couple tins."

I queried this.

"*Tins*, yes. You know, for food? Food tins. I keep a stockpile of them here."

"Stockpile?" I looked up from the notes I wasn't making.

"You know, stockpiling?" Clearly my vacant expression didn't work for him. "Stockpiling? It's basically storing except there's a clear function for the things I'm keeping. You know, like a purpose? What I'm stockpiling is important."

I nodded.

He queried whether there was any difference between storing and stockpiling.

“I don’t think so, no. Though I’m sure most people will tell you that they’re keeping things here for good reason. What they’re tucking away in these lockers… it’s important.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Anyways, I’m not breaking any rules, am I?”

I didn’t know.

I shook my head.

“Is that the entire list?” I read out loud what wasn’t there. “Tins?”

“That’s all, yes. Did you get that?”

I laid the pen flat on the pad and slipped both of these into the drawer in what I hoped he’d interpret as a definitive 'yes'.

“Well, good,” he said, nodding decisively. “Come on, then.” He hiked a thumb over his shoulder. “You’ll need to see what I’m talking about.”

“Are you going to show me something that isn’t there?”

Of course I had to let him lead the way there and so, as I walked beside him, I did my best to be a good travel partner by striking up a casual conversation.

“When you said stockpiling, what exactly did you mean?”

“It’s just storing things away, really.”

I wondered how this differed in any way from the countless other people that rented the lockers here.

“You haven’t run out of space at home, have you?”

His eyes narrowed. “No-o-o.”

“So then you’re just storing it for... like… a rainy day?”

“The rainiest, friend.”

I had a feeling that our rainy days differed greatly, as if my goal was to brighten up something bad whereas his was to make something terrible… just… less terrible.

“My dad always used to say be prepared,” he said suddenly.

“It’s not bad advice… Prepared for *what* exactly?”

“For everything. *Any*thing, really.” He smirked and then shrugged – a movement that rippled across his entire body. The contents of his backpack made a noise, made a clang. “He’s probably the reason why I am the way I am.”

“*How* are you?”

He paused, frowned. “I’m… fine, thanks. Anyways,” he said, shaking his head, “that’s just the one part of it. You only need look at the news these days to understand my reasons for doing it. Don’t have to watch that long even. Five minutes, ten, I’m sure that’ll be more than enough.”

“Enough for?”

“Convincing.”

I was uncertain as to what I needed convincing about, less so about using television as the means for doing so.

“D’you ever think about the future?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “Tomorrow, the day after that, then… uh… Saturday.”

“Friday,” he corrected. “But, yeah, I can see you get me.” He hiked the backpack up, bringing its straps closer to his neck. “Me, however, I like to think in terms of months, of years, of decades. Times hopefully far away, you know?” He sighed loudly. “*If* we’re lucky, I mean.”

“Lucky?” I asked. “What has to happen for us to be lucky?”

“Nothing, actually.”

I gave some thought to the concept of luck. How it worked, should work, could work. “That sounds… easy enough.”

He laughed. “Sure, sure.” He nodded towards a turn we had to take. “People these days though…”

I’d heard this line delivered before. Somewhere else, someone else. I searched myself for a response. “People these days, yeah. You are… ab-so-lute-lee one hundred percent correct there.”

He patted me on the back. “Be lucky if nothing happened. Awful lucky. I think it’s impossible though. There’s just too much going on, too many people.” He shot me a conspiratorial look. “All living on top of each other everywhere. This planet’s a powder keg. You know how it is, don’t you?”

I didn’t.

I nodded.

“Friction, friction, friction,” he said, squeezing the words together. “Too much of that, and then fighting, fighting, fighting.” He exhaled. “It starts small, you know, and then grows. Gets bigger, gains traction, gathers steam. Things just get out of control.”

I shook my head. “*People these days*.”

He sighed loudly. “You said it, friend.”

Our conversation tapered off and the next time Pepper spoke was to count loudly the lockers’ numbers as we passed them.

“This is it here.” He squinted up at the plaque above the door’s frame. “Yeah.”

He grabbed the door’s handle and lifted it upwards.

He stepped inside, switched the light on and it brightened the locker up without hesitation.

"That's fancy," I said.

He put his hands on his hips and regarded the ceiling though neither of us were able to look directly at the light source.

"Installed it myself." For a moment he seemed quite chuffed about this but it faded soon thereafter. "Hope it's no trouble." He turned to face me. "Never thought about consulting anyone about it. Sorry there."

I shook my head. "Doesn't bother me." I regarded the collection of replacement bulbs that rested beneath the light switch. The dozen or so spares gave me the impression that he was fairly invested in the light above us, so hopefully the same was true for the locker as a whole.

His possessions jam-packed the space and the variety of items appeared to have been set out with a rather particular neatness. Somewhere, I felt fairly certain, there was a well-maintained list of exactly *what* this locker contained. Everything was incredibly well lit.

"It looks like you're banking on a lot of rainy days to come."

"I did say prepared for *any* eventuality, didn't I?" He placed his hands on his hips. "All of this *just about* covers it."

I nodded, took another look around the room and wondered where to begin my investigation. Luckily, Pepper was quick to start showing off his stockpile.

"I mean, the future, you know? That's what all this is about." We surveyed the room but only one of us felt the importance of the things here. "This is all forward-thinking, survival stuff. What about you? What are you preparing for?"

I shrugged but he had already started walking away from me.

"See this mask?" He picked it up and mimed putting over his face regardless of the fact that I already knew how masks worked. "This is in case of a nuclear future. See here? This little bit?" He tapped it. "That's the filter. Takes in the bad air, cleans it up for you just a little, makes it breathable. Not one hundred percent breathable, mind you, but better. That's what you want. Nice, clean-*ish* air whilst you're out foraging in the wilds. Scavenging. Surviving.

"That's if the air goes bad, of course. That's just an assumption on my part. All of this," he said, swinging his arms about, "all of this is based on assumption… because who knows what might happen, what *could* happen. This is about preparation, obviously.

"Obviously when things are bad, you'll have to be willing to do whatever it takes to survive. Do you get what I'm saying? Be adventurous with your eating habits. Things you find out there in the wasteland," he said, pointing into the alleyway beyond the locker's open door, "well they might not

seem like food at first, but give it enough time and whatever you're eating'll eventually start feeling second nature… like you've been eating it all along.

"If you have the right attitude, anything can be edible," he said.

Whilst I gave this some thought, Pepper surged onwards.

"You have to be open-minded. Out there," he said, gesturing towards the locker's exit once more, "anything could be on the menu."

"When the apocalypse comes, you mean?"

"Of course." He strolled over to another shelf. "These here are solar panels. Paid quite a bit for 'em but in the future they'll prove invaluable. The potential to generate power all day long, stored up in these babies." He slapped a selection of block batteries beside the panels. "That means one less thing to worry about, you know? Electricity's important. *Very* important."

"What will you do with all of it?" I asked.

"Haven't thought that far just yet, actually." He shrugged. "I'll have to cross that bridge when I come to it." He regarded the panels and batteries in silence. "But, yeah, these panels'll be important." He ran a hand across one of them and his fingertips left trails in the dust.

"Unless, of course, we accidentally blot out the sun. It's possible," he said, raising a finger, "but not highly probable. It's the sort of thing we could do by mistake... Could happen with a missile or something." He scratched his chin. "That'd basically mean winter all year 'round… or extreme cold, at the very least. Can't think what good these'd do then." He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Have to be prepared for all eventualities, as I've said."

He rested his hands on the batteries once more and then sighed. "There'll be another way to fill these things up, I'm sure. Maybe something hydroelectric. Or a pedal-bike, maybe." He stared into the middle distance regardless of the fact that it was a bare wall. "I should probably start looking into that sort of thing."

I watched him as he spoke to himself about a future that may or may not happen and the things he might or might not have to do to survive in it.

"Probably have to consider trading the solar panels then or salvaging them for parts. No idea what these're made of but possibly there's things in here that could be made into something else, you know?"

I didn't.

I nodded.

"Alternatively," he said, waggling a finger, rallying somewhat, "*alternatively*, I could just keep holding onto the panels until the clouds clear up." He looked up at the ceiling in what I assumed was an attempt to see the sun. "I mean, these *could* be useful again one day. So… keeping

'em wouldn't hurt. I mean I'm keeping 'em now, aren't I?" He laughed. "Just means hanging on a little bit longer..."

He smiled at me and so I smiled at him.

"Anyways, having power sorted's nice. One less thing to worry about, hey?" He shoved me in a way he probably thought was playful. "What about water though?" he asked suddenly. "Fresh water, I mean – I've got a bunch of the bottled stuff over there." He pointed at a repository of five-litre containers. "*Fresh water* though. You'll need a source of that. Water unending, you know? Good *and* clean. You'd be very fortunate to find something like that though. Long-term, you'll end up with a spring of some kind, hopefully." He crossed his fingers, showed me this, and then smiled. "Until then, it's all about purification, purification, purification.

"It's easy enough to do that though." He shuffled a variety of items around on a nearby shelf. "Here's pills for purifying water. All you do is take the water, pop one of these in, wait a minute or two. Clean. Same thing with these liquids." He picked up what appeared to be an unlabelled eye-dropper and shook it. "You got your dirty water, just pop in a few drops of this – no, *this*, I mean," he said, picking up another similar eye-dropper, "and pretty soon you'll have something drinkable." He put these down beside each other, hesitated, and then switched their positions. "And these're filters here. See?"

I saw.

"Big filters, small filters, short filters, tall filters."

I watched as he riffled through these like a dealer going through a pack of cards. Occasionally he would remove one, hold it up to the light, appreciate it. Once in a while he would blow the dust off of their packaging.

"You can always boil any water you find though. Just to be safe. Can't always be throwing purification pills at every patch of puddle-water you see. You'll run out quickly. Anyways, first thing's first, you have to start a fire…" He scrambled to another section of the locker and found himself a flint. "You'll need one of these and, obviously, a small amount of tinder." He struck the flint and sparks flew. "Pretty soon you'll have yourself a nice little fire. Position your water pot on the flame and, once it's boiled, *then* you can drink it."

"What if you don't want it hot?"

He eyed me up as if I'd poked a hole in some kind of grand plan. "Well, then… you can just wait till it's cool again."

I nodded.

He returned the flint to where he'd taken it from, wiped his hands on his trousers. "What else?" he murmured, looking around his future-minded collection. "Oh, yes, here's my medical

section. All my supplies for staying alive, staying healthy. Bandages for cuts and scrapes. Latex gloves for when I'm coming into contact with infection or hazardous substances. Here's some aspirin for pain and whatnot… Here's some gauze you can use on burns." He waved this in the air for my appreciation, I supposed. "That's just for minor burns though. Also got some vitamin E cream you can apply. Here's a little 'sewing kit'," he said, making air quotes, "for stitching up those deeper cuts… and I think the stitching material is soluble too which means it'll dissolve after enough time. These are tweezers for… uh… tweezing things." He passed these to me and then went back to inventorying his healthcare options. "This's a scalpel – I'm not going to take it out of its packaging though – it's sterile. The sort of thing you might need in case something has to be sliced into." He took the tweezers from me, gave me the scalpel to hold. "You just can't know what the future holds… maybe a bit of self-surgery."

I shuddered.

"And this is for athlete's foot." He regarded a tub that contained a greyish paste. "I think…" He scrutinized the tub, shrugged, then put it down. "Oh! And over here's a collection of plant seeds. You know, stuff like maize, tomatoes, potatoes… mmm… aubergines… that sort of thing, all in these airtight containers. I don't know what's what here anymore though. I got all of them muddled up after I knocked the tray over a while back." He seemed to recall the moment and then sighed. "I'll just have to put it in the ground and see what sprouts. Nothing else for it, really." He shook the tray and its contents. "However, *however*," he said, holding up a cautionary finger, "if the ground's no good then these're no good."

"You'll just have to wait and see," I said.

He nodded. "You're right. Absolutely right. Time will tell. I mean, it always does." He nodded again. "Anyways, why I've brought you here, what you actually need to see, is this way."

He ventured a bit deeper into the locker and as I fell into step behind hi–

"Are those guns?"

"Guns?"

I pointed at an overcrowded weapons' rack affixed to a section of wall.

"Well, yes," he said matter-of-factly. "'Guns' is a bit of a catch-all though. What we've got here is assault rifles, semi-automatic pistols… this here's a revolver. Six-shot cylinder, see?" He picked this up, sighted down its barrel. "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang."

"Bang," I added.

"You can look at 'em, if you'd like."

"I'm looking at them now, thanks." I tucked my arms behind my back.

"I mean, look at 'em with your hands." He chuckled. "Go on, friend, it's not like they're loaded or anything." He opened one of the drawers beneath the rack. "See? Bullets're tucked away all nice and neat in their boxes."

I shook my head. "I'm alright, thanks."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "But if you change your mind, just go for it. There's a machete and a couple combat knives over here if guns aren't your thing." He took one of these off the rack and tipped it left and right, admiring it.

"Is the future going to be a dangerous place?"

"Could be, could be." He used his off-hand to scratch at his chin. "Really, it's uncertain… That's why preparing for anything is important. Think about this: what happens if there's a bear?"

"A *bear*?" I asked. "Do we even get those here?"

"In the future, maybe. Things could change very drastically." He rubbed his cheek with his hand. "Then we'll need these sorts of things, I guess." He appeared to be admiring his arsenal. "Also, even if there's no bears chances are there'll be squabbling between the survivors."

"Squabbling doesn't sound like the sort of thing you'd need armaments for." I passed my eyes over some of the things that rested on the rack. "Just some rational debate, maybe a bit of levelheadedness. That would be the best course of action."

He nodded, replaced the weapon. "You're probably right… but this stuff… it's for just in case. You never know how the other guy's going to be acting."

"*That* looks like a flamethrower."

"It is."

He stepped away from the rack and, as I followed him, I did my best to estimate the sheer amount of disastrous situations he was preparing for. Mentally, I tried to bookmark this locker in case the apocalypse came earlier than expected and he was unable to make it here in time.

"At least this will all be put to good use," I murmured.

"Over here's the food."

I followed his pointing and saw the food of which he spoke. All of it, spread across a lengthy four-stack shelf. The bottommost of these was packed with boxes of various sizes, apparently organised by colour, all of which contained freeze-dried food and whose names held unappealing words like 'dehydrated', 'reconstituted', or 'occluded'. Above this display was a shelf dedicated to food squeezed into tubes. Thin things, shiny and reflective, all of them crammed with meals the eater needn't necessarily have teeth to get through.

"And this little section here is for the powder-based meals. See? Steak and kidney pie. Macaroni and cheese. Hmmm… What else do we have?"

What with the way all this food looked, the future was bound to be a very inorganic place.

At eye height, the shelves before us were stacked with tins. They spanned from left to right, some leaning precariously over the shelf's lips were backed by others reaching towards the wall. Eventually, once space had run out, the new tins had been clustered into towers of various heights besides the shelves. This food-based diaspora hadn't bothered Pepper in the slightest.

"Don't these ever expire?"

He nodded. "I have a system though," he replied. "Helps me keep track of what's going to expire and when. Obviously, anything that expires I'd replace. But nothing expires." He smiled at me. "Go on, ask me why."

I asked him why.

He tapped the side of his nose. "Because I eat it all."

I wondered what his nose had to do with any of this.

"I stock up on a monthly basis, cycling out those cans close to expiry. I take those home."

I asked how many of his meals involved food served out of a tin.

"Well, most of them." There was a look on his face that made it seem as if I'd burst this bubble he'd been existing quite happily in.

"Very good practice for the eventual apocalypse," I said.

He brightened up somewhat. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Good thinking there."

He thanked me and then shuffled sideways, shining his flashlight at a scattering of tins. "Anyways, see over here? These ones all over the place?"

I saw.

"Well, I didn't do that… obviously."

"And there's tins missing from there?"

"A couple, yeah," he replied. "Ten, maybe twelve gone. Something like that. Not a huge loss... but a loss nonetheless, right?"

I nodded.

"Well? What are you going to do?"

"My best."

Before he could answ–

"To get the missing ones back, I mean." I picked up one of the tins. "I'm going to do my best to get them back for you. Were they all like this one? Tuna?"

He shrugged.

"You might have to come to terms with the fact that the stolen goods may already have been eaten," I said. "Obviously, that'll make it somewhat harder to get them back. In that case, I'm sure I could replace them, if you'd like."

But he appeared not to be listening, instead he hiked his backpack up and down, causing its contents to clank together. After fighting with the zip for a brief moment, he was able to open the bag. "I'll have to take a couple of tins with me today. You know, the older ones." He motioned towards one of the closer towers. "I think these're all set to expire at the end of next month. Can't let them go to waste."

He rested the backpack carefully on the ground at the tower's base, reached into its depths, and began removing tins from it. These he stacked on top of each other and I watched this new construction as it grew beside its twin. When the two were of a similar height he gave the backpack a quick shake, a little rummage and then, satisfied with its emptiness, held it near to the tower he was about to collapse into it. One or two tins missed their marks noisily, but this and the subsequent denting didn't seem to bother him.

"Well, that's me." He zipped his bag up and swung it onto his back once more. "Thanks for checking this out." He waved an arm at the tins strewn about on the locker's floor. "You find out anything, feel free to get a hold of me, okay? Probably not much of a mystery or anything… but, yeah."

I nodded. "As I said, I'll see what I come up with… but what if I don't find anything?"

My question hung in the air for a few moments.

He frowned. "Hadn't considered that."

"Oh."

"I'm very optimistic like that."

Outside the locker once more, I watched as he brought the door down, clapping his hands together afterwards. There was some dust.

"You don't lock it?"

He shook his head. "Can't really, if you think about it. Imagine the rush I'll be in when things start going wrong. I'll probably have just enough time to grab my survival bag before rushing out the front door. If I got here and had to fumble around for a set of keys I'd be screwed."

I conceded to his point.

"What if there was a missile launch?" he asked.

"*Missile* launch?"

“Where?!” He froze, then checked the skies, relaxing a moment later. “Ah, just a question.” He blushed and then looked up and down the alley we were standing in. “As long as nobody knows it’s unlocked I’m sure it’ll be alright.”

He checked that the door was flush with the ground and then about-turned and began walking back the way we’d come, retracing our steps towards the lot’s entrance.

“So when the apocalypse happens,” I thought aloud, “the first thing you’re going to do is hop in your car and drive down *here*?”

“The way you say it sounds… demeaning.”

I shook my head. “That wasn’t my intention. Sorry. I’m just working the whole idea over in my head. For preparation and all that.”

He didn’t say anything but, then again, he didn’t have to.

“Obviously I’ll have to keep the lot unlocked in the event of an apocalypse too.” I frowned. “I’ll do my best to remember that. Probably for the best that I make a memo somewhere.”

Back inside the office I removed the notepad I hadn’t actually used earlier, took out the same pen with which I’d failed to write, and then didn’t record the memo I’d by now forgotten to make. I looked at Pepper expectantly but for what, I did not know.

He reacted by removing his backpack and, from a separate section of it, producing a rather pregnant-looking envelope. This he held out to me.

Though he didn’t say 'here', I took it still.

“That’s for the year,” he said, zipping up his backpack.

I opened the envelope and its contents came close to spilling out.

“*Next* year, that is. I should be squared up for this one still.” He appeared to be doing some kind of arithmetic. “Right?”

I didn’t know.

I nodded.

“Let me just write this down here.” I licked my fingers and turned to a new page, careful to hide the previous blank from him. I took a great deal of time not writing anything down.

“I’ll give it a count later on…” I slipped the pad and the envelope in the desk drawer. “Just as a formality, I mean.”

He nodded. “I fully understand that. That’s just prudent.”

“Any reason you couldn’t have just done a bank transfer? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“Easy, sure, I guess.” He shrugged exaggeratedly. “Safe? No, no, no.” He patted his backpack and though I’m sure his intentions were different all I could hear were the soon-to-expire tins that

he'd taken out of his locker. "I carry my money with me. Anything I don't carry I keep at home, tucked away under–

"Under?"

"Under the nothing," he said abruptly. "You can't even trust digital *these* days, just think about the future. Obviously the apocalypse doesn't have to be a physical one. Digital destruction, that's something that could happen quite easily. Databases corrupting, everyone's funding just – poof! – disappearing without a trace, AI overtaking us! That's the sort of thing I'm talking about here."

"So keeping your cash out of the bank is the way to go?"

"Ah, so you *do* get what I'm saying?"

I didn't.

I nodded.

"Where'd you say Priscylla was again? Off holidaying?"

"Something like that, I guess."

He nodded slowly. "Always got the impression that she didn't like me, didn't like what I was doing. She always used to say I was too 'doom 'n' gloom' for her liking." He chuckled. "I remember the two of us having a big fight the first time I tried to pay. Didn't like the idea of me paying with actual cash. Nobody else here does it apparently." He leaned in closer, whispered his next words. "Everyone else sticking with digital." He shook his head. "*Silly*."

We stood in silence for a while.

"Still, she did let me rent the place."

I smiled at him, uncertain as to what I was supposed to say in this situation.

"What about the man before her. What was his name?" he asked. "D'you know him?"

I shook my head. "Just how long *have* you been renting here?"

"Years," he replied quickly. "Nine, maybe ten. Long time. Before your aunt there was another guy. Bit of a weird one. Very *particular*."

I asked him why he said it like that.

"Particular-*bad*, like obsessive, that's what I'm trying to say. He was a bit of a weirdo, if you get my drift?"

I didn't.

I nodded.

"Anyways, been here a while, I have."

I asked if he planned to keep renting indefinitely.

He nodded. “Well, until the apocalypse befalls us, *obviously*. Probably won’t have much use for money then though, will we? Doubt you’ll still be renting these places out then.”

“I couldn’t say.”

“You might not be alive even!” He chuckled. “Just think about that.”

I did.

I nodded.

“Anyways, at that time, currency’ll be useless to us, I’m sure. We’ll be trading in food or… or… or… services, or something. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I got what he was saying. “I’d still take the money though. I’ll probably just put it away until it’s useful again. In a drawer or something.”

“Good thinking. Good thinking.” He put the backpack on again and then smiled at me winningly. “See? You’re a natural-born prepper. The end times are *your* times, friend.”

I smiled.

After shaking my hand, Pepper left the office, climbed into his car and drove off.

As I watched him leave I felt my unpreparedness for him having arrived.

When I was certain that Pepper was gone, I locked the office once more and made my way back to the locker I’d just been shown. Once there, I let myself in, switched the light on, and looked for the paw prints I had seen in my earlier visit.

I’d known, even before seeing these, that the dog was to blame for the missing food. I was also well aware of the fact that blaming a dog for anything would prove fruitless.

Her marks on the floor were where she’d left them and, from the dust which had fallen into these impressions, I had a feeling she’d be due another visit soon. I was somewhat certain that it’d be worthless just waiting around for her return.

In a fret of activity, I decided I would instead track her down... though this was something I hadn’t had to do before.

“She’s always found me,” I murmured. “With her, it’s been the other way around since the very beginning.”

The best course of action, I knew, was to start looking about. That’s how a good search began regardless of what was being searched for. Blindly. I made my way through the current row of lockers and then the two on either side of it, hopeful I might stumble across a trail that could be followed. When I could find no trace of her tracks I gave up and resigned myself to another unsolved mystery.

Sensing the early evening coming to an end, I decided to call the day done and so began making my way home. This, at least, was something I *could* achieve.

I rounded the corner and–

"Hi, Boss."

"Terry!"

"That's right," he said. "Just patrolling."

"There's really no need to salute." I stopped clutching at my chest and exhaled. "Anything to report?"

He shook his head and, I could see, fought against the urge to salute again.

"Very good." I looked past him, over his shoulder. "Say, you haven't see the dog at all, have you?"

Terry swung about quickly, following my gaze. "The dog?"

"Remember?" I considered miming doggy actions but realised this probably wouldn't aid in his recall. "The dog?"

"The dog from the other night when you were in my locker?"

I nodded. "The very same."

"Nope." He shrugged. "Sorry."

I told him it didn't matter – *though it did* – and then left him to carry on with his routine.

The situation being what it was and, myself being in it, I considered what someone else might do in a similar position. Being who I was meant I was of no use to me.

Walker, though, now there was someone who'd know how to deal with this sort of thing. Level-headed and logical, she'd know exactly what was needed to handle a dilemma like this.

"Though it wouldn't be a dilemma to her, obviously."

She would assess the situation from every angle and then decide what the best course of action would be. She'd consider all the variables involved, the goal she wanted to achieve and then she'd suggest–

"A stakeout!"

A brilliant idea. I realised now that lying in wait for the dog to return to the locker was the perfect plan. Besides requiring minimum effort to execute, I'd also be able to get some reading done in the process**.**

I hurried back to my home, dressed myself in warmer clothing, muted for the occasion, and grabbed a few other things I thought might be necessary. Once folded, I slipped the map into my pocket, locked up and left.

On my return, the surroundings were considerably darker and though I'd usually be upset about the fact that the lights here weren't working, it was a blessing in the current situation. I found a suitable spot and hunched down, trying to get a feel for my overall stealthiness. Would I be able to see myself from a distance?

If so, from how far?

Did I look shadowy enough?

Was I well camouflaged?

Not wanting to take any chances, I removed the black plastic bag I'd brought with me, tore this open, and used it as another layer of concealment.

I made sure my headlamp was on its lowest setting beneath this black covering and then fumbled for my cell phone and the time it'd help me keep track of. I propped this up against the wall nearest me and snuck a glance back at the locker, ensuring I was in that sweet spot: close-but-not-too-close. I waited an entire minute before fumbling around in the dark for my book which I just then realised I hadn't brought with me.

I hoped the dog would show up and, presently, she did. I heard her steps as she made her way closer to the locker and, inadvertently, my hiding spot. The pads of her paws scuffed against the ground as she went, a soft scraping that grew louder as she approached. It sounded as if she was moving along at a slow lope and, when she finally came into view, I found myself straining to see her greyness against the night's. I could better make out her shape when she sat down in front of the locker's door directly beneath the bulb overhead.

I whispered 'got you' as quietly as possible just because I felt like the moment called for it.

Before I could conjure up the thought of how she'd go about doing it, she simply leant downwards, grasped the handle in her mouth carefully, and then raised herself upwards. The door lifted.

She disappeared inside, crouching slightly to clear the door, and I lost sight of her. I watched the darkness intently, listened as she moved about inside and realised her actions when she began moving through the pile of cans which still lay on the ground.

For a few moments I could hear her rootling about as if, there in the dark, she was making some kind of intentioned selection. As if everything lying there wasn't all tuna.

Finally, with a tin tucked between her teeth, she exited the locker, turned around carefully and jumped up against the door, pawing it downwards. In the process though she fumbled the tin, dropped it, and then proceeded to chase it around in the alleyway, a game almost – a brief break

from her usual seriousness – before eventually gathering both it and herself and padding off into the darkness.

I had confirmed my suspect in this case and, deciding to pursue her, I tried my best to shift out from underneath the black plastic with as little noise as possible. This would prove to be an impossible task and my original silence was saved by the fact that she had already travelled quite some ways. I left behind what wasn't needed – some would call this littering – and did my best to follow her, trailing the sounds she made. Wary of my footfalls, I walked cautiously, exaggerating my steps so as to prevent the scrapes of my soles. Occasionally I could hear her losing her grip on the tin and its subsequent drop. This was followed by the roll of her having to chase it and eventually the sound of her snapping it up once more.

The path she took made little sense to me. A combination of the time of day and the speed with which she moved left me feeling disoriented and, now, nervous for it. Not that I could've made use of the map for fear of discovery. Eventually, I lost track of myself, of where I'd come from.

The lot felt eerily unfamiliar at night, especially so when trying to travel through stealthily. I found myself rounding corners into ever-darker alleyways and jumping at any new sounds I heard. This pursuit scared me and brought to mind my feelings from the first night spent here.

Though I *was* better prepared now.

I had the headlamp – which I couldn't light; a map that helped give me a general idea of where I was – *somewhere* in the lot; my cell phone with its guidance – which I wasn't using presently; and some sense of what I was doing – following a dog that was unaware of my doing so.

And could, for that reason, react rather dangerously.

I reached towards the headlamp, switched it across to its brightest setting, and rested my finger on the button. Ready.

"Just to be–"

A low growl slipped out of the shadows before me.

"!"

I froze, felt the darkness closing in around me, and, even though I knew that light was just a soft press away, I failed to turn it on immediately.

She stepped towards me, stopped and then, I assumed, sat down. I managed to switch the headlamp on, careful not to shine its light directly at her. She sat before me, the tin still tucked between her teeth. She was close enough now that I could see tears in the label where her teeth hadn't quite found their purchase. Her tongue lolled out the left side of her mouth and at certain places along her lips, saliva strung itself off, outwards, and onto the ground, forming droplets near her front paws.

"H-h-hello there."

She rested the tin on the ground, sniffed my feet, and then went back to watching me intently.

"I should be honest with you here, I think." She watched me as I shuffled uncertainly. "I was… uh… following you."

She tilted her head.

"Not that you'd know, of course, what with me being so cunning about it." I picked the tin up and felt the grooves that ran beneath its label. "You've got some explaining to do. Sneaking about like that… *Stealing*. What were you possibly planning on doing with this?"

She sniffed the air.

"Why have you turned to this life of crime?" I passed the tin between my hands, felt the weight of it. "Don't I give you enough food?"

Those places where the label had been torn also bore scratch marks, cut into the tin itself. I wondered about the sort of damage she'd done to herself as a result.

"You'll ruin your teeth on something like this."

I set the tin down and grabbed her by the muzzle, soft but sure. I ran my index finger along the length of her mouth eventually gaining entry just beside her snout. Past the sticky saliva lining her lips, I could feel her front teeth, the lengthy canine, sharp, solid-feeling, and then the empty space between that and the incisors at the very front of her mouth. I ran my fingers along these teeth and then realised that I had absolutely no idea what I was feeling for.

Following this came the realisation that I had my hand in the dog's mouth.

Her eyes were focused on mine, their blueness bright in the near-darkness. Her pupils were pinpoints and, as I watched my hand in her mouth, I could feel her lips curling up, pulling away from it. In this moment, I removed it.

Very slowly.

She gave a quiet huff, took the tin in her mouth once more, and stood up. Turning away from me, she cast a brief look back before padding off into the darkness.

For a time, I considered leaving off my tail, abandoning it, for fear that following might upset her.

I was certain that I'd crossed a line, but crossed and come back without incident somehow. With my hand wedged between her teeth, she, I think, had been as dumbfounded as me. *Not* biting me showed incredible restraint.

"I would've bitten me."

Following her now might aggravate her, might make her dangerous.

But I followed still.

And pretended I wasn't, assured myself that I was only heading back home and the two paths just happened to overlap occasionally along the way. Doubling down on this ruse, I took out my cell phone, employing it as a flashlight. If I was merely making my way back to the office and, *by chance*, came across wherever it was she was headed, well, that was serendipitous.

When first I'd seen her, she'd been carrying a similar tin between her teeth. I was sure that wherever she went back then, was where she'd be going now. The reason *why* she had the tin eluded me still. My working theory, which I developed whilst trying to follow her, was that her time spent in the lot had changed her. From the people who frequented this place, the things that they did, she'd acquired a bad habit. Somewhere, I theorised, she was stockpiling things, putting together a collection of some kind.

"That makes sense."

This line of thinking had distracted me somewhat and, having been on auto-pilot throughout, I'd lost sight of the dog.

I cast the light from my cell phone around me, tried to get a better sense of where I was. When nothing seemed familiar, I ended up getting the map out, unfolding it and scrutinizing it. I found Pepper's locker and, assuming a proximity to it, began looking around for a landmark that might locate me. My sense of direction was more of a hunch and I recalled how quick, how confident Pepper had seemed when leading the way to locker. He'd navigated twists and turns without trouble and when he'd seen the plaques–

I looked up at the locker, at the plaque located above it, and it made me *somewhere*.

"G1."

I was about to consult the map again when I noticed that this particular locker had but a single lock on it. That made it the lot's, made it *mine*. I looked around once more for the dog and, seeing nothing, considered whether a brief look into this locker might be a more productive use of my time. If I had to pass the time until serendipity showed its face again, then I'd be better off inside a locker as opposed to waiting around in the dark.

I had nothing to go on, felt unfamiliar where I was. Out here, where nothing seemed familiar, I felt lost… but in there–

"In *there*… those are my things. They belong to me, they're… familiar."

I unlocked the door and, as I lifted it upwards, I felt relief at having located myself like this, felt better now that I knew where I was. I'd stabilised myself.

Once the door no longer obstructed my view, I shone my cell phone's light into the locker's depths and saw…

"Something..."

Once I'd switched the light on, a dining suite became apparent to me. A lengthy table, some chairs, and a few folded-up tablecloths dotted here and there across its surface, were the only things being stored in this locker.

Disuse had resulted in dust. Lots of it.

I pulled one of the chairs out and sat myself in it, exhaled loudly, and then rested my hands on the table before me. I placed my head on my hands and for a while I just waited there. I thought about being somewhere, about being nowhere, about just being.

Time passed – though I can't tell how much – and, once I felt better, felt more in control of myself, my situation, I got up and left.

I shut the door behind myself, re-locked it, and then rested against it. That spare moment, its quietness, had helped. I inhaled, filled my lungs with–

Urine.

"The *smell* of urine," I muttered.

Pungent in this vacant alleyway, this scent was an easy one to follow. I went with it, hopeful that it'd last the length I needed it to, hopeful that it'd lead me to the dog.

The map helped, made the alleyways navigable, and as the smell came and went I adjusted my course accordingly. The source, when I found it, was fresh, strong. Near it I located paw prints that I was quick to follow.

Attentive now, I watched where I went, and, after enough time I came to an open locker. There was a dim light that reached just outside of its door and, though I couldn't see inside, I was able to hear somebody speaking. The locker played tricks though, differenced the voice, morphed it into something sinister-sounding.

The dog's paw prints disappeared into this pooled light, located her inside the locker *with* whoever was in there. Another after-hours user, *another* failure to understand contractual agreements. I resolved to check the fine print people signed themselves over to, to see whether there was some sort of vagueness that made it seem like nighttime visitation *was* allowed.

For the time being though, I snuck closer. With my back pressed up against wall beside the open door, I listened.

"Tuna? *Again*? Is that all there is?"

I tried to peer around the corner, a slow movement, something I hoped wouldn't be noticed.

"I don't mind tuna. I *like* tuna." There was a clattering noise as the tin dropped to the ground. "No, no, bring it over here, I'm sorry. I said I don't mind it. Just thought a change might be nice, you know?"

There was silence. I surveyed the locker, saw the light but, because of its brightness, not the room's occupants.

What was in the locker was straightforward. These possessions were most likely a move-in-progress. Similar to what'd be unloaded in my move the other day, this was a locker that could be lived in after making a few minor adjustments. A proxy place. I craned my neck, tried to see the locker's occupants but, what with the upright furniture – a wardrobe, a set of drawers, a fridge – obstinately in the way, I simply couldn't. All I had to go on was a voice.

And if this was another homeless person I'd probably have to consider turning the place into a motel and charging accordingly. And, if that didn't work, calling Walker and asking her to–

The sound was horrendous, would've made nails on a chalkboard sound pleasant by comparison. What reached my ears was torturous, a tin being opened by non-traditional means. Something, a blade of some sort, I assumed, was being used, slowly, surely, stridently.

Between scratches and scrapes, the voice spoke. "You know. I'm *sure* you know. Instead of tuna, maybe something else." I heard the lid of the tin being forced open. "Maybe like salmons." There was a pause. "That's also fish." I could hear the sound of metal against metal, the tin's contents coming out, being scraped at none too carefully.

The eating went on for some time and I tried my best to gauge how far into the locker this person was. If I went in slowly, slipping inside and standing in the shadows–

"There's some left, and the juice, too. Want it?" There was much shuffling about, followed by the sound of something being dragged along the ground before the utensil went to work on the tin once more. "See? And there's even tuna for you. Yum!"

The dog slurped noisily at the food she'd been given. Before long I could tell the contents were gone though she shifted the bowl around on the floor still.

"It's finished." I heard a frustration in the voice. "We both know it's finished. Stop. *Stop* it. No, don't sniff mine. That's finished too. See? Yes. You get it."

I imagined the dog being shown an empty tin and, after that, her disappointment.

"That's right. Nothing," the voice declared. "Well, not nothing. There's bits what you can't get with a spoon."

There was a minor grunt, exertion, I assumed, and then the empty tin hit the ground, clattering. I could hear it as it rolled closer, eventually coming to a stop nearby. I held a hand across my mouth to stifle my breathing. Already I could hear the dog moving, *scrambling*, in my direction. Her shadow stretched closer.

"No!" the voice called. "Don't chase it. That wasn't a fetch."

I held my breath, waited there in the darkness. I listened and heard everything. The sounds of her feet as she padded about, her sniffing as she tried to find the tin in the near-dark, her teeth eventually taking hold it. All of this unfolding terribly close to me.

I watched as she took turns, first sniffing the air around her, then the ground at her feet. Eventually she trotted off. I only exhaled once I was certain she was nowhere near me.

"Okay, well, you fetched it. Good dog." There was a loud sigh. "Don't count though. Fetching is for balls and stuff."

My heartrate settled.

"And sticks."

Their dinner was done and I decided this would be an appropriate time to reveal myself. Without much in the way of ceremony, I stepped into the locker, cautious but confident as I made my way towards the lit area.

When the dog started growling, I had something to move towards, and I homed in on the sound.

"Who's there?"

I rested my hands against the furniture that stood before me, proceeded slowly using it as a means of guidance. If I fell–

"Show yourself! I got a gun."

The dog's growl grew louder.

"Okay, well, not a gun, but I got a knife and there's a dog here. A very angry dog," the voice said. "Just wait till you see it. Looks hungry too. It's prob'ly killed somebody before." There was a pause. "*Look angrier*," the voice ordered.

The dog's growl lowered, tapering off as I approached. This softening eventually led to silence and all I could make out during this time were the sounds of my own footsteps.

"She's only gone quiet now because she's preparing herself for the kill–"

I stepped into the light.

"Oh, hey! It's you."

I nodded. "Of course it's me." Faced with a rule-breaker, what some might consider a criminal, I tried to affect a casual air. "I own the place, remember? I'm here all of the time." I took note of the definite reordering that had occurred here, possessions shifted to serve new purposes. "You've got quite the nest here…"

A furniture border had been assembled around the open circle I now found myself in.

"And you?" I regarded the dog and, when I pointed at her, her ears drooped, flattening against her head. "What were you thinking? Taking tins like that…"

She made a point of not looking at me.

I picked up the empty tin lying on the ground. “How’ve you been opening these?”

“Pen knife.” I was shown this. “There’s a can opener.”

“*That*,” I said, “is a bottle opener but you definitely made it work.”

“Also there’s a little saw, a bottle opener, *and* a tweezers.” He demonstrated each of these in turn, fiddling out each function as he made his way around the pen knife. “Even a torch, see?”

I saw.

“Even a compass!”

I told him that those were all very good things and he nodded.

“Couldn’t have opened the tins without it.”

“And the tins?”

He told me that they were all tuna, sadly, and also that there were none left, terribly sorry, otherwise I could’ve had some.

“I mean, do you know where they came from?”

He nodded towards the dog and she immediately became fascinated with something that wasn’t him, me, or the situation we were discussing.

“And you didn’t wonder at all where *she* was getting them from?”

He shook his head. “Was too hungry to think about that.”

“Well, she’s been stealing them.”

“Dogs can’t steal. People steal.”

“Well, fine, no, but she took them without permission.”

“Dogs can’t ask permission.”

I told him that that was a discussion for another day.

“Still,” I said, directing my attention back to the dog, “you shouldn’t be doing it. *I* got into trouble for that. There was a man here about it and, well, he was… uh… mildly upset about it, I guess you could say.”

“Oh.”

“Anyways, we’ll deal with that later. It stops now. It’s been going on for too long.”

No response.

“How long *has* it been going on?”

He considered the pile of tins beside him, calculated something, applied fingers to the problem, and then told me four days or thereabouts.

“That’s twelve meals, give or take.”

“Give or take what?”

"Shush," I said.

"That's almost a week, you know?" He sounded somewhat proud of this fact. "Just a couple more days…"

I looked around, saw the way he'd organised the space in the short time he'd inhabited it.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just eating some tuna."

"Not like that." I ran a hand down my face. "You're squatting here, basically. You *know* this is my property."

He shrugged. "What's squatting?"

"Staying somewhere you shouldn't be, basically. How would you like it if I just moved in at your house?"

"My house is very small. It would be uncomfortable."

"Exactly!"

He looked down at his feet. "But you didn't even know I was here till just now."

I conceded this point.

"So you're uncomfortable?"

I shook my head. "This isn't about being cramped. You just shouldn't be here."

"Is this about asking for permission?"

I told him it was, but it also wasn't, and, after processing this, he asked if he could be here for just a little while longer.

"No."

"Even if I've run away?"

"Especially if you've run away," I replied.

My assumption was that he was giving thought to his having been found and so I left him to his silence. I watched the dog as she sniffed her way around the locker, licking various objects as she went until eventually, what I assumed might be boredom, kicked in.

She found a suitable spot to settle down, and did.

"Where's your wheels?" I asked eventually.

He looked at me but didn't say anything.

"Your trike. Where's it?"

He pointed deeper into the locker, into the darkness. It took the light from my cell phone to see it but it was there, still worse for wear.

I played the torch over it. "We never did get 'round to painting that."

He shook his head.

"I *was* going to… Though I'm sure you knew that. Had it all ready and everything."

"I knocked the red over," he blurted out, his voice pitching with the words.

"I know, it's alright. Accidents happen."

He didn't say anything.

I thought back to my locker. "How'd you get in there, anyway? I was sure I locked it."

He showed me the pen knife again, explained that how, if you took the tweezers out and poked it into the keyhole along with the knife blade, you could wiggle it about. When it clicked a little, you could lift the door up and you were in.

I nodded. "Interesting." My light was still on the tricycle. "You know, I could still give that a fresh coat for you… I don't think it'll help too much though." I watched his eyes follow the beam as I moved it about. "Be a bit like using a plaster instead of stitches."

He sniffed.

"You wanted something more, something else I think… And I doubt I could've undone the damage. I saw the wheel the other day. Didn't think it was anything serious at first. I can't even remember when last I saw a tricycle. Not up close, anyways." I sifted through my memories. "It just didn't strike me that anything was wrong. I couldn't see past the paintwork."

He didn't say anything.

"There's tools here, things that can help *maybe*. But it'll never be as good as new, never be perfect."

I'd focused the beam on the front wheel, the warped one, and the pair of us regarded it.

"Want to tell me what happened?" I asked.

"There was a car."

"I know that much, yes." I nodded. "Did it hit you?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Hit the trike good though."

I looked at the wheel once more and agreed.

He slammed his one hand into the other, made a noise that, I assumed, was meant to be a simulation of what had happened.

"Did you jump off or something?"

"Wasn't on it," he replied. "I'd stopped on the side of the road–"

I interrupted to ask him what time this had all happened.

"It was late. It was dark."

"Late like you-should've-been-home late?"

He shoo- nodded and then grimaced as if I'd reprimanded him.

"Carry on."

When he told me he had gotten off the trike, my follow-up was knowing why.

"For a wee," he said. "I needed a wee, so I got off and left it–"

"Close to the road, I'm guessing."

He shrugg- nodded. "And then I went off a bit, down the hill because I saw there was a bush."

"And your shoes?"

"I took them off. Don't ask why." These words were followed by a blush.

I told him that I probably already knew why. "So what?" I continued. "You left them by the tricycle?"

He nodded.

"And when you came back?"

"Didn't go back. The tricycle came to me, sort of." He paused. "I was just doing my business and then there was screeching and then BANG!" He made the same gesture from before, his hands colliding. "I got a fright and shook a lot. Made a mess, you kno–"

I nodded, I knew.

"And then, and then, the tricycle came *flying* down the hill, landed close to me. *Almost* hit me." His breathing had sped up, the retelling was taking its toll. "And that made me even scareder, so I made even more mess. I'm sure you know."

I knew, I nodded.

"And I saw the wheel was busted up, so I guessed what happened."

"After that?"

"I was scared about the car what hit it. Somebody would be angry about that. So I zipped up, grabbed the tricycle and then hid in the bush with it… *Another* bush, I mean. A different bush, not the wee bush," he added quickly.

"Did the car stop?"

"I don't know. Don't think so. My heart was beating so fast. Like in my ears. I was hiding there in the bush, being quiet, not doing nothing, just waiting. When I came out it was later, it was darker."

"And no car?"

He shook his head.

"And the road?"

"That was there still."

I frowned. "Was anything on it?"

He shrugged. “I never looked.”

“Okay, carry on then, so you’re up by the road…”

He nodded. “Yes, by the road. Couldn’t find my shoes though. And then I got muddled up with my directions and couldn’t find where I was. Also, it was dark. I said it was dark, hey?”

“You had your little torch though. The one on the pen knife?”

“I forgotted. I was really scared,” he said by way of explanation. “Just wanted to get away.”

“And getting away from there brought you *here*, then?”

He nodded. “I dragged the trike up the bank, looked a bit for my shoes because I knew I’d be in big trouble for losing those. I get in *big* trouble when I lose my shoes,” he said. “It’s happened before.”

I didn’t tell him he needn’t worry about his shoes anymore, that these had been found. That, because of their discovery, grim conclusions had been reached.

“When I couldn’t find them I gave up. I did find a little whistle though.” He scrambled around, looking for, I assumed, the whistle he’d found. “It’s around here somewhere…”

“Keep going with the story.”

“Sorry. So, no shoes. Gone.” He made a gesture that, I take it, was meant to signify 'gone'. “I walked up the street a bit, not long.”

“And no cars came past?”

He shook his head.

“What then?”

“And *then* I came into here. The sign was all bright and there was nowhere else…”

I nodded. “How though? How’d you get in?” I asked. “It was the hole in the fence, wasn’t it? I saw a little hole the other night.” I looked him over quickly, estimated. “You could’ve made it through.” I flashed the torch over the tricycle. “That might’ve made it difficult.”

“Didn’t go in through a–”

“Climbed the fence, then? I’m impressed. Stronger than I thought. Stronger than you *look*. Climbing the fence *with* the tricycle in tow.”

He shook his head. “The gate was open.”

“The gate?”

“You know, the one by the sign?”

I told him that, yes, I knew the gate.

“That one,” he said. “I went in there.”

“Usually that’s locked.”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

I shook my head. “Okay, don’t worry about that.” I urged him on. “So you came in…”

“I *rode* in,” he declared. “Had to test my trike.”

“And once inside?”

He shrugged at me.

“What? Nothing?”

“I got lost.”

And decided to stay that way, I thought.

He looked around the locker and I did my best to follow his gaze. I wondered what was going through his head.

“When you saw me up the ladder, painting the sign – when was that?”

“Saturday,” he replied.

“And what day was that for you?”

“Saturday, also.” He frowned.

I shook my head. “I meant what day was it for you *here*. Your first?”

“Fir– second.”

“And your first night? How was that?”

“Scary a bit,” he told me, “but then the dog came.”

“And?”

“And then went, and came back with some tuna.” He smiled, first at me and then at the dog.

“I saw the dog,” and, after seeing some confusion in his eyes, I corrected myself, “I saw the dog *that* night, I mean. She had the tin then, the tuna. Means she was probably on her way to you.”

He echoed my 'probably' as 'prob’ly' and then asked why I wasn’t sure. I replied saying that with dogs, sometimes it’s hard to tell.

“Even if it’s your dog?”

“She isn’t my dog though,” I told him.

He looked at the dog as if he’d been somehow betrayed. “Whose dog is it– is she?”

“Nobody’s, maybe. She didn’t have a collar on when I first found her. She’s her own.”

“She just lives here,” he said.

The dog appeared to be watching both of us, knew, somehow, that she was the present focus of our discussion.

“Could be.” I shrugged at him, at her. “She *is* helpful to have around though, it seems.”

He looked at the empty tuna tins before agreeing with me.

“And this place? How did you get in here?”

"I got bored of being lost so I decided to go inside one," he said, "I tried a few till one opened."

"And *this*," I said, gesturing to the room around us, "was the first one your pen knife got you into?"

He nodded.

"I find that hard to believe."

"That's okay," he said. "It still happened."

I shook my head, ignored this comment. "So the next thing that happened was the dog finding you? Tell me about that."

He raised his hands as if to question what I'd asked him. "The dog found me."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe I was making a lot of noise or something, then it came over?"

"I don't know about that."

"Me neither."

I told the boy that the lot was a very big place, that even I hadn't fully explored it yet. For that reason, the chances of him running into the dog was very slim. Impossible, even.

"It *happened*." There was a frustration in his voice. "A small chance is still a chance."

I scratched my chin. "So the dog found you here… then what?"

"Then it went away–"

"And came back with some tuna?"

He nodded.

There *was* a significant stack of tins nearby. These would be hard to discredit.

"Why? Why would she bring you tuna?" I looked at the dog.

"Ask her," he said.

"She wouldn't understand."

The boy shrugged. "Then, I dunno."

"I find all of this incredibly hard to believe… I mean, the dog just bringing you food." I looked at him, at the empty-tin tower, at the dog. "Did you tell her you wanted something? Did you tell her you were hungry?"

He frowned at me. "I thought you said she wouldn't understand?"

"Yes, but *you* don't know that."

He appeared to be on the verge of speaking but then didn't. He rounded out this little moment with another shrug.

This line of questioning was leading nowhere and so I changed tack.

"You know that you're missing, right?"

"Missing what?"

"Not what, *who*. You are missing."

"I am?"

I nodded.

He shrugged. "How was *I* supposed to know that?"

"Well, I guess you wouldn't," I said. "What made you stop here, stay here?"

Another shrug.

"That's not an answer. Try again."

"It was closest, I guess. I just wanted to be away from the road and here was closest."

"Why not just go home?"

His eyes widened. "No-o-o ways."

"Why not?"

I didn't expect an answer to this question but one came and quickly.

"Loads of reasons." He readied his fingers. "One: playing without telling someone; two: playing out of the garden without saying where I am; three: playing near the road; five: playing with my trike near the road."

"You skipped four."

"I didn't." He pointed to his fourth finger. "It's right here."

"But you didn't say it."

"Okay, sure. Doesn't matter. Playing near the road is very bad, counts for two." He pressed on. "Five– six: leaving a toy lying around – that's the trike; seven: almost getting hitted by a car."

"That wasn't really your fault."

He frowned at me.

"Sorry," I said.

He looked back at his fingers again, wiggled them. "Sev– eight: trike wheel *wrecked*." He thumbed the area behind us, signalled the trike, and then, after assessing his fingers again, resumed. "Nine: lost my shoes. Ten: lost my shoes *again*." He paused, refreshed his fingers, and inhaled dramatically. "Eleven: out after dark. Twelve: missing supper, prob'ly."

There were a lot of reasons, I conceded.

"Don't you think your parents would worry about you though, that they'd miss you?"

He shook his head; I frowned and asked him why not.

"They'd be too angry. There's a lotta rules I broke."

"Okay, sure, maybe at first they'd be a *little* mad," I said, squeezing my fingers together to demonstrate this size, "but after enough time, they'd worry, they'd want to know where you are. Wait a while longer and that worry turns to fear, turns to sadness."

He shrugged, looked down at his feet. "How long after that till they forget?"

"Forget what?"

"What I done," he said.

I stifled a smile, then shrugged. "Couldn't say. It's not as bad as you thi–"

"And till they forget me?"

I paused, thought. "*You*?"

He nodded.

"Never. Wouldn't happen. Parents don't just go forgetting their kids." I chuckled briefly, thought on this and then relaxed. "We don't–"

I paused.

Backtracked.

Withdrew.

"Parents don't forget their kids."

I suddenly found myself no longer wanting to be in the locker and so I made to leave. I decided that, after getting back to the place I'd made for myself, I'd call Walk– I'd charge my phone and *then* call Walker. She'd know what to do with the kid.

At the very least, she'd take him away.

"Where are you going?"

The kid had fallen into step alongside me and I noticed now the way he was dressed. In his too-big shoes, his too-big shirt, his-too big shorts, he traipsed along, pausing here and there to adjust whichever item was hindering him most.

"I'm going home and then I'm going to make some calls."

"Can I come with?"

"You already are," I told him.

He smiled, laughed, reminded me of–

"Don't walk near me," I said. "Walk just there, *behind* me."

"Why?"

I shook my head. "Because, because – I don't know – it's dangerous here sometimes."

He followed this instruction well, keeping out of sight up until the point at which we arrived. Once inside, he tore about the house excitedly, examining everything he could lay his hands on.

After setting my phone down so that it could charge, I convinced the kid to take a seat in the kitchen, a task made challenging by the fact that there wasn't anything to sit on. When I told him that the counter was fair game, excited, he leapt up onto it.

"Are all your things in boxes?"

"Some things, yes," I replied, "but it's temporary."

He told me that it must be tough, and I reminded him that it was only a few minutes earlier that he'd been 'living' in a locker eating tinned tuna.

"You need proper food," I said.

Tuna, I was eventually forced to explain, was proper food only when consumed in moderation.

When I told him that he needed to have a mixed diet, he nodded.

The microwave beeped and I removed the mac and cheese I'd elected to heat up for him. After putting this on the counter beside the kid, I warned him about the heat and then left him to eat it.

Even outside of the kitchen I could hear the sounds of his chewing and, whilst he busied himself with eating, I searched my phone for Walker's number, trying to recall whether I'd saved it.

"Were they angry?" he called.

I told him that I hadn't seen his parents, that I didn't know. "Maybe at the start… Just a little though. I think they'd worry more than anything else."

I imagined him shrugging. When he didn't respond, I carried on.

"Even if they *had* been angry, that would've diffused long ago."

I went back into the kitchen, phone in hand, still searching. Looking in turns between my phone's screen and the kid, I was able to watch the mac and cheese being delivered from plate to mouth at speed.

"What's 'diffused'?"

"Like faded, gone away."

He nodded, chewed, swallowed, then ate on in silence for a while with me watching him.

Walker's number wasn't in my phone. It'd be on a card somewhere. "What was the plan anyways?" I began searching through my wallet. "You were just going to stay here indefinitely?"

His eyes narrowed. "What's 'indefinitely'?" he asked, warily.

"Time unending… Like forever. Were you just going to stay here forever?"

He nodded, mouthed another forkful before speaking. "Isn't that what you doing?"

"Well, yes, but this is my place."

"Plus," the boy added, pointing the fork at me, "you don't have nothing to run away from."

“We’re talking about *you*,” I said. “You couldn’t sustain yourself here. A person can only live off tuna for so long.”

“How long?”

I shook my head, not looking up from my search. “I don’t rightly know.”

“You can’t say then.” His fork scraped on the plate and I saw him cringe at the sound. “You can’t say because *you don’t know*.”

I told him it didn’t matter how long.

“I like tuna though,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“It’ll stunt your growth if that’s all you eat.”

He seemed to give this some consideration and then asked what the word 'sustain' meant.

“To keep going, to keep up,” I said. “The way you were living, eating that tuna, you couldn’t keep it up for long.”

He nodded.

“Besides that, you’re away from the world here, away from people that love you, that miss you. All isolated here, that’s no good for you.”

“I have food.” He looked at what little was left on his plate. “I *had* food – not like this, but the tuna. I had tuna.”

“What I’m saying here is that things won’t get better for you.” I couldn’t find the card and felt my frustration coming on. “Your situation won’t change, won’t improve. In all likelihood, it’ll only get worse. You don’t even have any friends here.”

“I’ve got the dog.”

“Not the dog,” I said. “The dog doesn’t count.”

He seemed to droop somewhat. “It doesn’t?”

“Dogs are friends with everyone,” I told him. “That’s like their default setting.”

He gave this some thought whilst pushing a lone piece of macaroni about on his plate. “What about you?”

“We’re acquaintances at best.”

He tried to repeat the word, inflecting it so as to query it.

“Acquaintances is one away from friends, basically.”

He smiled. “Nearly there, then.”

“That’s not the point here. What I’m saying is you can’t stay here, can’t live here. You can’t live off the dog. You’re not Romulus, you’re not Remus.”

“Who?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “They were boys who lived off a dog– off a wolf.” I didn’t go into the specifics of the way they did their living off, didn’t want to have to define the word 'suckle'.

“A wolf?” the boy asked, wide-eyed. “Here?”

“Not here, not *anywhere*. It’s a just myth.”

“What’s a myth?”

I took the plate from him, placed it in the sink, left the tap to run over it briefly. “A myth is something that isn’t real, isn’t happening, that wasn’t real, that never happened.”

He seemed to be mulling over what I’d just said. “If it’s not real, what good is it?”

“It’s like a story,” I tried.

“Oh! Stories *are* good though.” He pointed his fork at me again. “Some are very good.”

“Yes, I *know* that.”

He relinquished the fork when I asked for it and I placed this in the sink too.

“So myths are just stories, then?”

“Stories with morals, I guess,” and before he could query it further, “with meaning to them, like they teach you a rule or a life lesson or something.” I dried my hands with a dish cloth. When I lifted it, I found Walker’s card beneath. “It’d work for a while, wouldn’t work forever. It has to end.”

“Those boys,” the kid said, “what happened to them to live with a wolf like that?”

I sighed. “They ended up lost in a forest and then a wolf found them.”

“And it didn’t ate them?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “I don’t believ–”

“It’s a myth. You aren’t meant to believe it. It’s symbolic… or something. Just teaches you that you can make it through difficult circumstances. For a while you could do something *but then* do something else.”

“Like the next thing?”

I nodded.

“Like after the tins of tuna, I could’ve maybe gone hunting?”

I shook my head. “No, like maybe you could’ve had a good think and then gone home.”

He looked down at the counter, espied a piece of macaroni that had fallen off his plate. I watched as he tried to pick this up his fingers and failed. After a few attempts he gave up.

“So?”

“I think I’m doing the 'good think' bit,” he replied.

“Okay, and?”

He shrugged.

“Will it take long?”

“It’ll take what it takes,” he said this and then began kicking his feet back and forth, bumping them against the cupboards.

Eventually one of his shoes fell off.

He hopped off the counter and slipped his foot back into it. “I finded a box of clothing, d’you know that?”

I nodded. “I could tell.”

“Needed shoes,” he said, by way of explanation. “They’re too big for me though.” He wandered over to the fridge, opened it and peered inside. “Bet you don’t know *where* I finded them.”

I looked at him, at him *in them*, and felt.

He shut the fridge door suddenly, the slam brought me back to the present moment. “I’m not betting though. No money. I was only teasing.”

I knew, did know, would always know– I shook my head, tried to free myself from my feelings, and dialled the number on the card Walker had given me. With the phone against my ear, I pressed on with my conversation.

“I get why you did it though, why you stayed… I understand.”

I heard ringing on the other end of the line.

“Sometimes something bad happens, something terrible, and it scares you.”

“All I wanted to do was run,” he said, “so I runned.”

I nodded. “You wanted to be as far away as possible from what had happened. As fast as you can, as far as you can. Something inside you says 'bolt', so you do… Then you end up lost.”

He nodded, listened, and so I continued. Walker’s phone was still ringing.

“And being lost,” I said, scratching my head, “well, that works for a while. Being away from everything helps… and you use that time to get yourself together, to try and understand what’s happened, *why* it’s happened.

“That’s why the first opportunity you take to escape, the first glimmer of a good getaway, you leap at it,” I said. “Point in case: the lot.

“You think about the part you played in everything… how what happened happened, and then you try come around to dealing with it. With enough time you… you sort of lose your fear because your fear… well… I guess because your fear loses its face.”

“I don’t know–”

I held up a hand, listened to the ringing, then continued. “If you stay away too long though, that’s bad. The longer you stay lost, the harder it is to find your way back...” I looked at the boy, at myself. “…And you *have* to find your way back.”

I ended the call, resigned myself to the fact that I might only be able to talk to Walker in the morning.

"I imagine it becomes near impossible to find your way home if you stay too long."

"I know where my home is," the boy said. "Even from here." He took the pen knife out of his pocket, tapped the compass, and mimed using it.

"You get a bit of distance from what's happened though and the distance is good, the distance helps because it lets you start coping with the event. You get some space from the problem, you do your grieving and then you can start–"

"What's grieving?"

My phone rang and Walker's details showed up on my screen. I held up a finger to him and then answered the call.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked.

"What?" I frowned. "Of course I know what time it is." I checked my wrist but my watch wasn't– "Why're you phoning me for the time? You can just look on your phone."

"I wasn't phoning you to ask the time." I could hear a yawn being stifled. "I was upset, you woke–"

"The kid's here."

I could hear shuffling in the background. I imagined Walker propping herself up in her bed.

"The one from earlier?" Before I could answer, she continued, "Christ, what sort of time is it? Why he's not at home?"

"That one and the other one."

"What? There's two of them?"

"No, no." I frowned. "Just the one." I looked at him, felt relieved he wasn't doubled. "It's one kid but it's the same kid. He wasn't hit-and-run–"

"He's *alright*?"

"Seems fine," I replied. "He's been hiding out here since Friday eating tinned tuna."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Are you still there?"

"Here, yes," she said. "I'm coming there though… shortly."

I took the phone away from my ear. "She… hung up."

The kid had been waiting politely for the call to finish. "What's grieving?" he asked, this time sounding more determined.

I put the phone down on the counter. "Grieving is being really sad about something, about something you've lost usually." I sighed.

He looked down at his feet. “Like my old shoes?”

“Not like shoes, no,” I said. “More like people.”

“What people?” he asked, concerned.

I didn’t rush to respond.

Or couldn’t.

One or the other.

“*What* people?” he asked.

“In stories, this part’s referred to as the 'denouement'. Sometimes it ends up being the last bit. Do you understand?”

Obviously, the dog didn’t say anything. It hadn’t, wouldn’t, couldn’t. I didn’t think that was about to change.

“It’s from French, from the verb *dénouer*, which basically means ‘untie’. Like a knot.” I mimed this unravelling for her but, of course, she didn’t understand. “The denouement is supposed to resolve everything that’s happened. Whatever’s unfolded, the *why* behind it should come in the denouement.”

I checked the clock on the wall, the watch on my wrist, “I haven’t been entirely truthful with you, with anyone. I’ve kept some things hidden. I’ve been… dishonest.”

Walker came for the kid, *obviously*. Showed up a few minutes after I’d called her, drove her car right up to where the two of us were. Without her lights on, quiet, she’d come in, interrupting me in the midst of my tears, my frustration, my explanation.

In the same way that she’d listened in silence the other day, she did the same now. When I was done talking, had finished pouring myself out, *she* apologised, and then said she didn’t know.

“Not that I could’ve expected that from her, of course. Knowing, in this case, could’ve only come from telling, *my* telling.”

I regarded the dog.

“My *revealing*, really. That’s the better word here.” I sighed. “Till that point, till *then*, I’d been keeping a secret.” I looked around the office. “Sometimes you hang onto a thing like that because… because you don’t want anybody getting hurt because of it. In my case, that was anybody-*me*.”

Out of his depth, I'm sure, the kid *hadn't* fully understood what I was saying. However, as I talked through my tears, instead of demanding explanations for the difficult words or to clear up what had happened, he'd simply listened. The word 'grieving', the way I'd defined it for him, that would've been fresh in his mind still. A smart kid, he would've connected the dots.

Walker though, she'd known. Before she'd seen me in tears, she'd known.

"Unconsciously, though," I murmured. "She knew… definitely knew…. but didn't know *that* she knew."

The dog was looking at me but I couldn't be certain if she was listening. Deep down, I knew it really didn't matter. I wanted it to, but it didn't.

"People are like that," I said. "When Walker opened the box the other day," I thumbed towards the open container behind me, "I saw her reaction. I didn't know what exactly she'd seen but I could guess. Anything in there would've raised questions.

"If she'd had the guts to ask me abo– to *confront* me about it, really, back when it happened, I probably would've gone to pieces there and then.

"But she hadn't." I shook my head. "There'd been blushing instead… and… awkwardness."

The dog lifted its head at these words.

"There'd been miscommunication."

After our last meeting, one which had ended in a fight, she hadn't headed home to do research on me, hadn't done the 'investigation' I thought she'd been doing. Those absent things, my never-tells, I was sure she knew already. For her, it was just a matter of piecing everything together, imposing some kind of order on it all, and then… understanding. As a police officer, tying things together, that was in her nature.

When she'd first seen the photo her emotions had gotten the best of her, had clouded her over. Once she'd settled, I was sure she'd worked backwards from that image. She could look at what I did and I didn't do, what I said and didn't say. She had a particular lens for looking at the world and, using that, she'd make her deductions.

"Deduce me, my behaviour, my reason for being at the lot, my… *everything*." I sighed. "Of course, to be completely certain she'd have to ask me. Or, or," I turned to my laptop, tapped fingers across its keyboard, "she could've searched online, I guess. There's – yes – there's news articles because," I exhaled, inhaled, "because *of course there is*."

Hits unending. Page upon page of–

“People want to know…” I looked at the dog once more. “*Need* to know with these kinds of things.” I shut the laptop, shook my head, tried to push the images I’d seen from my mind. “They fool themselves into thinking that they need to know, really.

“And when someone feels that need, they’ll go out of their way to know. That turns into prying. People peek into your lives. And when you don’t readily come forward with the information, they’ll find a way to get it themselves.”

That, I’d confessed tearfully, to her, to the kid, was part of what had fueled my decision to come to the lot. I’d needed an escape desperately but couldn’t come up with one myself. The way I felt stalled me, left me unable to make plans, to move forward, emotionally, physically. My way of coping numbed me, helped me to stick to those routines that 'managed' my day-to-day living.

When I’d received that call though, when I’d been 'summoned' by my aunt’s executor, I’d leapt at the opportunity.

Having gone from no options to *the* option – to my mind a perfect 'escape' from my present – the choice had been an easy one. 'Made for me', was how I’d felt about it.

Because I’d learnt how incredibly difficult it was to keep a secret if you stayed still.

“I left without any kind of fuss, told nobody. I just packed an overnight bag, plugged coordinates into my phone, and cleared out. The moving process was one I automated.” I looked at the box once more, smirked. “I gave them instructions to just 'empty the place out'. And they did exactly that. Everything – and I mean *everything* – was tossed into the back of that moving van.

“By that time, I was already making my way cross-country. Excited for the first time in a long time, I’d already started making my way *here*.

“The past though, those things I’d hidden from myself,” I thought about the photographs, the clothing, the toys, “in my haste to leave, they’d come back to haunt me.”

When you aren’t thinking things through fully, aren’t considering what you’re doing, what to you seems like standard behaviour, is anything but. It’s not sensible… or logical… or reasonable, it just… *is*. And it has its repercussions. You *do* without thinking.

And it’s bad.

So I’d left impulsively, an escape from bad circumstances. I’d abandoned a house that, as Rheese would’ve put it, was haunted. I couldn’t see that I was the one responsible for that. Maybe I just didn’t want to.

I'd called this out in her behaviour, felt good for having pointed it out but I'd never been able to turn that awareness on myself.

"Back then I'd thought it was all 'under control'." I remembered who I was with and stopped myself from performing the quotation gesture. "Because I'd hidden everything from myself, started the process of forgetting it all, what 'haunted' me was all in my head. My thoughts… they… intruded still, I lived too close to where the past was and I suffered because of it."

"That was enough though, enough to make me move. Walker knows how that sort of thing preys on a person. When leaving, I'd embraced it as an escape. Leaving home, I'd thought, would be like leaving my own head." I sighed. "What unfolded, obviously, was the exact opposite. My past dragged behind me like a tail."

Last night, once my story had concluded, when I'd emptied myself out for the first time in – I can't say how long – Walker had tried to console me. Once I'd settled down, she explained how she had to take the kid back, had to get him home because of how his parents would be worrying. After that though, once he'd been reunited with his parents, she would return she assured me. Tonight's paperwork could happen to somebody else.

"Of course I would've had to go through my things, eventually, would've had to face them, what they were, what they said about the past… about me." I looked at the dog. "Back home, I'd set them aside, hidden them from myself and carried on with my life as if they weren't–" I frowned. "As if they just weren't at all.

"Out of sight, out of mind. What I did was just another kind of burial. I guess I'd hoped that with things being 'gone' for so long they'd eventually start slipping my mind.

"And they did, of course. The ship's a good example of that." I looked at the desk, at my hands resting on it. "When the moving man handed that over, it was foreign beneath my fingertips.

The longer I spent with it though, the more it came back to me. I'd only supervised its building, only been the encouragement as excited, younger hands had worked on it."

I pulled the box towards me, peeked at the bottle within. "I wanted to push that out of my memory though."

When Walker returned I was exactly where she'd left me, just quieter, calmer. The kid, she'd said whilst making both of us coffee, was fine. For what had happened between the two of us the other

day, she apologised again. She explained her insensitivity as being a function of her ignorance. I told her that it was my fault for not saying something – *any*thing – sooner.

Her earlier reaction, that anger I'd seen, I'd known exactly where it had come from. Any part of the past, *my* past, could've triggered it really. The contents, those photos, they were hidden with good reason. When we got to talking about it, when eventually I'd plucked up the courage to ask what it was she'd seen, she'd replied: 'a happy family'.

And I'd felt my face wrinkle with unwanted expression as my memories fought their way back into my mind.

"We went through the pictures, the two us. They're here now because we looked at them last night. To tell my story, *that* story, I'd needed prompting. I used the photos as props and, as a way of distancing myself from it, I tried to tell the story in third person.

"As you know–" I paused, regarded the dog, thought about what I was saying. "Obviously the whole distance thing didn't work. I told Walker the story, unravelled the past, and suffered throughout."

There were timestamps on every photograph taken and I recalled how I'd always hated them, always insisted on their removal. I'd always said that sort of thing 'marked' a moment, gave it a position in time, placed it so strongly that it could never be timeless.

When these were laid out on the floor before us, these timestamps had made it easier to create a timeline.

"She insisted on those. On keeping those little dates, I mean… She–" I could feel my expression shifting as I pinpointed her in my mind, as her face swum back into focus, "she *insisted* on it."

In silence, I'd sorted through the images. Like a child putting together a puzzle I'd place the pieces and then shift them, assess where something should or shouldn't be. Through an unfamiliar haze I predicted where events I couldn't remember clearly now, had occurred. And I tried my best to see the bigger picture because I simply couldn't bear to look at its component parts.

Regardless of my attempts at avoidance, when the box was empty and the image set organised, a life lay before me still.

What lay before me was what I'd once had, but it wasn't what had happened, what'd changed things. There'd be images of that though… somewhere. Documented by those who'd had to deal with the accident, with understanding it. Putting together pieces, the fragments of events

unfolding, they'd learn that miracles aren't always positive. They'd realise that events with infinitesimally small chances of occurring are, in a horrible way, miraculous still.

A rock on the road *just* there. The sun reflecting off a passenger's phone the exact moment you crest the hill. A set of wooden struts behind a roadside barrier having rotted through. A shoe getting stuck behind an accelerator *en route* to the brakes.

"I'd tried my hardest to forget it."

The dog opened its mouth, yawned, and then settled once more.

"And I wanted to forget so maybe I could start again, start over, start anew." I sighed. "And when I said as much to Walker, tried to explain my behaviour, her response had been a cold one, cutting.

"What I wanted to forget, she told me as we looked at those pictures, were the good parts. The bits worth remembering…"

Elizabeth, I realised now, had arrived here with the right idea. Maybe her husband had left under less traumatic circumstances, sure, but she waded through their past together so sensibly. She reflected on it and remembered him through those things that'd been left behind. Rather than dive into its depths, risk drowning in everything that was, she instead felt her way through with caution, sought out those places where her feet could touch the ground so as to ensure that she wouldn't sink.

Instead of the loss, she'd focused on the having, on his being there. Her recall had served her well, brought back the best of Bill, of both of them. Me though, in my attempts to… cope – my failure to do so, really – I'd only ever associated the past with the plunge. I'd pinpointed that single moment and used it to paint over everything I'd experienced in our time together.

I'd let loss colour my past in its entirety.

"She asked me if I blamed myself for it. Wanted to know if I felt 'responsible' for what'd–" I shook my head, rubbed fingers around the outlines of my eyes. "For what'd happened."

"And I did. Of course I did." I hung my head. "Because I was the only one left, the blame was left to me." I sniffed loudly and the dog slit an eye open at the sound. "The dead are inviolable and, for that reason, they're enviable."

I repeated the tragedy to her, and as I retold I relived it. For Walker, listening became loss by proxy. When I'd finished, wrapped up my recovery and eventual return home, she'd remarked on the length of it, the time it took to 'heal'. To heal *physically*.

Emotionally however, I don't think I'd done any healing at all. I could see in her eyes that she knew this. When I'd finished telling her how some freak accident had changed my life forever, shown her the span of time between this-now and that-*then*, she knew it was something that haunted me still.

"In the same way that the kid ran, I'd run. Unable to cope, unable to process the situation, I'd chosen to flee from it instead. I'd hidden first, spent time away… from people, from the world. I'd wanted to slip away completely." I stood up from the desk, stalked over to the window and stared out of it.

"The way Terry hides now, hoping that his past never finds him, that's the same thing I wanted from this place. I wanted to disappear, just be done with my memories, with my past."
I looked over my shoulder, regarded the dog.

"And maybe I wanted to be like you, to exist without the influence of others, to just *be* without being bothered. It must be nice to not have a collar, to not have that weight around your–" I rubbed my neck. "To not have that hanging over you."

The dog stood up, then sat down, then began scratching her ear with her back leg. Occasionally she'd kick herself in the face.

Of course Walker challenged me to embrace it, to start grieving, and, this time, to do it properly. It wasn't worth it, she'd said, to disregard the whole past because of what'd changed it so drastically. Rather than focus on the fact that they were gone, it'd be better for me to realise that they'd been there at all. As a whole, the past should be dealt with, *had* to be dealt with.

And I agreed with this. Of course I did. She'd highlighted the fact that my attention was on the accident, its cause, its effects and that if I couldn't get past that, 'see' past the trauma, then I'd be unable to truly move forward.

She'd told me that closure *would* come but that it wasn't simply going to fall into my lap, she'd told me that I would have to do work.

"What came with me in the move, I had to process. What I am– what I *was* avoiding, I have to face… and face down."

"Not that that's a bad thing. Not that it's a battle to be fought. It just sounds that way." I turned my attention towards the window once more and watched a car as it approached the lot. "I

only dreaded– only *dread* doing it because it hurts to remember. It'll always hurt to remember though."

For hours the two us talked, taking turns to listen when necessary. After I'd explained everything, shared my life, *that* life, from start to finish, Walker had thanked me for doing so. Following that, she checked my feelings, then the time on her wristwatch, and finally told me that she had to go… but that tomorrow she'd be back. I'd seen her off the premises, locked the gate after she'd left and slow-walked back to where I would eventually sleep that night.

Before climbing into her car she'd said goodbye to me, held me in a hug that could never have lasted too long.

Throughout my conversation with Walker, I'd kept this eventual moment in mind: her leaving, and me subsequently being left alone. I knew that after her departure, further feelings would surface, I'd have to face them, and then *I'd* have to handle whatever happened next.

I thought about this as I'd watched her leave. Staring through the fence's mesh, I waited for her car to disappear, its lights to fade, before finally making my way back. On my return I found the dog waiting and although she was asleep, she was present. Inattentive but constant, her presence was a comfort still.

I hadn't expected to sleep that night, but I did.

"I'd stockpiled my past and my memories of it. I'd tried sectioning myself off from them. The way I'd wanted to handle things was by simply putting it off indefinitely. Those memories were my rainy day. A personal apocalypse I could never adequately prepare myself for."

Behind me, I could hear the dog shifting about. I thought at first that she was trying to make herself comfortable but instead she made to leave. She paused on the stairs, her nails clacking thereupon, and she stretched luxuriously.

"That's not coping though. It doesn't resolve the problem. And, as Walker said correctly – I can see now – if you try and put something away, something that isn't ready to be put away, then it won't stay put. If it's rotten, or, or, or bitter… if it's something haunted – *whichever*, you take your pick – that thing'll seep out."

I watched the car entering the lot, its drive up towards the office, and saw her hands turning the wheel as she found a place to park it.

"Do that with a memory, something you haven't dealt with properly, and it'll find a way back into your life. You may not have to deal with it directly but it'll bring you bad thoughts, bad behaviours."

The dog sniffed the air, regarded the car critically, and then left.

"But I can bring those things to the surface myself. I *have* to. They'll play havoc with my head otherwise.

"Walker was right– *is* right. If I don't unpack I'll end up carrying it around indefinitely. It'll only influence who I am further."

As she made her way towards the office, I thought about my time here, how goalless I'd been and how nonplussed I'd been about it.

“Feeling better today?” she asks.

I nod.

“Were you able to get *any* sleep last night?”

I confess to having overslept.

She smiles, chuckles.

“I wasn’t expecting you to come back immediately. Immediately-today, I mean.”

“It’s best to move through these things when they’re fresh in the mind, you know?”

I knew. I *know*.

She produces a folder and, from this, a form similar to the one I’d helped her fill out the other day. Another witness statement. I frown.

“For last night.” She waves the page at me before laying it down on the desk. “The lead-up to me arriving, you finding the kid, if you wouldn’t mind? I need a record of it.”

I watch as she readies the pen, as she waits for my words. I feel… uncertain, thrown somewhat, but before I can say anything she speaks.

“And *without* your additions, your flair, your storytelling, please. Just the facts.” She taps the pen on the page.

“I… uh–”

“Because the sooner we finish this, the sooner we can do something else.” She smiles at me. “*Anything* else.”

I smile back.