

HELL'S GULF

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Temple Dark Books

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Hell's Gulf

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WEDNESDAY

7:44pm

Things were quiet in Hell's Gulf.

At low tide the sand and sea were almost level, and the setting sun reflected off them in equal measure, rendering the beachfront a pane of solar glass. The inland had already been plunged into shadow, punctuated by the occasional lamp through a window. In the mixed conifer and scrub forest beyond, mole crickets piped their ceaseless trill. And if one knew how to listen out for them, one might hear the earthen rattle of black drum, occupied with the instinctive business of spawning.

The soundtrack of the night was interrupted by grating, unfamiliar noises from somewhere down the beach. An old man had been dragged from the sea by his family, all seven of whom had nearly fallen into hysterics. They set him on the sand, far from the water, their voices rising in a garble not unlike nesting seabirds.

He resembled a newborn animal, writhing in an amniotic sac of wet clothes, hands curled in geriatric claws over his chest. His family shouted tear-choked pleas at each other, kicking up wet clumps of sand in their frenzy.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Someone call an ambulance!"

"We shouldn't have let him in the water!"

"Does *anyone* have a phone down here?"

"Grandpa, it's okay! You're safe!" Eight-year-old Timothy rushed forward, attempting to lay a hand on his grandfather's wrist, but he was held back by his Aunt Lorena, who was screaming to leave him alone and give him space. Fourteen-year-old Chelsie and thirty-year-old Jack turned to scramble up to the house, tripping over themselves to find a phone and dial 911.

But the old man perceived none of this. His eyes, buggy and popping with capillaries, saw nothing except for whatever terrible vision had twisted his heart into a lethal knot. "Oh God, whyyyy...whyyyyyy? Leave him alone!" he wheezed, heaving with each word. "Let him goooo! They're eating him! Noooooo!"

As the screams around him hit a desperate pitch, his face darkened with a prunish hue, saliva frothing at his lips. His arms snapped to his side, barely missing striking Timothy in the shin. "They're eating him! Black eyes! They're eating meEEE THEY'RE EATING ME BLACK EYES OH GOD NO BLACK EYES THEY'RE EATING ME THEY'RE EATING --"

Thomas Morrison emitted one last hacking cough, then fell still.

His family silenced with a collective gasp. For a moment, they stood around his body like funeral-goers watching a casket descend.

The last molten blob of sunlight disappeared below the horizon. Then, they broke, doubling up in bitter, sobbing embraces.

The sleepy community was disrupted once more by an ambulance that came to deliver the body to the nearest mortuary, some forty miles away. The Morrisons were right behind them.

Unimpressed, the crickets and drum resumed their serenades.

Things were quiet in Hell's Gulf.

THURSDAY

2:09am

Hunkered down in his cheap apartment, blinds drawn, immersed in the light of his laptop, Rowan Vane felt nothing short of divine.

Late nights often induced such feverish impressions of grandeur. The image of a god banging away at his celestial forge crossed his mind as he typed. God, as it turned out, was a twenty-year-old, red-eyed college kid with a yet undeclared major.

Stupid, he thought with a smirk, deleting his newest line. Last-minute panic was an apt motivator for creativity, as Rowan had all but finished his story for Creative Writing mere hours before it was to be read in class. It was *technically* due the day before, but as far as Rowan was concerned, new days only began when the sun rose.

Regardless, far from feeling exhausted, Rowan was jittering in his seat as the dramatic climax unfolded before him:

"HG-117 raised the gun. The girl before him stared with baby-blue eyes. He knew she was his target, but he felt something that his robotic brain had never known: pity."

Oh boy, this is getting good, Rowan mused, typing away, relishing in the dark satisfaction of what he knew was coming next:

"His finger mechanically closed around the trigger, and a spray of red shot from where the girl's head used to be."

"Damn, that's brutal," Rowan muttered. He mulled over his last words. *It's gotta be good...gotta be a killer ending...*

"Saline tears squeezed from HG-117's viewports as his circuits fried with pity and grief."

Rowan mimed putting a gun to his head, the tip of his finger pressed into a spot above his ear.

"He felt the urge to kill again. But this time, there was no target. This time, he internalized the urge upon himself. He pulled the trigger."

"Boom," said Rowan. His fingertips hovered over the keyboard, as if just now realizing they had finished their work.

His first completed short story...it was done. Sure, there had been attempts over the years, but nothing came close to the scope and scale of the piece he had just conjured up. It sported gripping characters, a kickass setting, an emotionally gripping arc...something not just to be proud of, but something to want to share with everyone.

Rowan scanned through the document one last time, spot-checking for any typos or errors. The tiredness was finally getting to him – his eyes stung as he peered at the screen, blinking heavily. The writing appeared clean enough.

Taking a deep breath, Rowan exported the document, opened the homework website, attached the file, and, pausing for dramatic effect, jabbed the left mouse button.

Sent.

"Yes," Rowan groaned, leaning back in his seat and stretching out. There was a little red footnote in the dialog box branding his assignment "Late", but he didn't care. Lumbering to bed, Rowan deliberated on whether he should sleep in and skip his morning class. It didn't take long for him to decide: *I deserve it.*

He slipped into his pajamas and collapsed onto the mattress, letting the haze overtake him. After all, he only had one more day to enjoy himself before Friday, when he would leave for spring break to meet up with his family for vacation. The prospect was dreadful enough, but Rowan still had to stifle a laugh when he'd learned the name of the place they'd be staying.

Hell's Gulf.

3:10pm

"Rowan Vane?" Mr. Castellan, the wispy, hatchet-faced Creative Writing instructor called out when Rowan had entered the classroom. Rowan nodded in confirmation. "Need to talk to you," he said. "Come here."

Rowan approached the desk, taking an educated guess as to why.

"You're lucky I was up purging at three in the morning," said Mr. Castellan, his eyes narrowing. "Otherwise, I might not have seen your submission. Normally I would have just given an automatic zero the morning of."

"Oh," said Rowan, looking away. "Sorry about that."

"I'll let it slide, as it seems it hasn't really tripped up any of your fellow students." Mr. Castellan gazed around the room, and sure enough, it appeared that most of the class had pulled up Rowan's story on their phones, speed-reading it before the period began. "Next time I won't be so lenient."

"Alright. Thanks," Rowan said, before finding his seat. *Great start, Rowan*, he thought, regarding his classmates. Based on their own workshoped stories to date, they were a bright and talented bunch, with a flair for brutal honesty. Compared to them, Rowan felt decidedly low tier.

We'll see, he thought, feeling much more apprehensive than last night. *It can only look up from here...*

At 3:15, Mr. Castellan brought a printed copy of Rowan's story to the podium and addressed his pupils. "Alright, Day 4 of workshoping! We'll start with Rowan Vane's piece. So...who can tell me what happens in this story?"

The class was silent for a moment before a guy up front raised his hand. "It's the far future and there's this cyborg assassin or something who's completely fearless and programmed to never miss, but his next target is a little girl, and he's all like 'Oh no, that interferes with my programming', and then he shoots her, then he's all like 'Oh no, I'm a monster', and shoots himself."

A light titter rang through the class. Rowan found himself smiling along with them. *How succinct.*

"Perfect," said Mr. Castellan. "So. What did we all think of this story?"

The silence persisted several moments longer; this was typical for workshoping sessions.

Then a girl in the middle of the room raised her hand. "I mean, it was alright...but I've heard this story a million times in the past, and I knew how it was going to end...so, in all honesty, it was hard to get invested."

Rowan's face plummeted. *Oh...*

"Yeah," said another guy, invigorated by the first critique. "Plus, some things were just not developed enough. Like, why is this little girl his target? Is she some important person's daughter? Does her blood hold the cure to some disease or something like that? She's completely flat. She serves just as a means to an end."

"The setting was kinda bland, too," someone else said. "This is the third far-future sci-fi dystopian story we've gotten in this class."

"I wish I knew more about this mysterious 'Commander' that gives the cyborg orders. What's *his* deal?"

"Everything happens so fast, it was hard to let it all sink in."

"I'm confused as to why a cyborg would even have a 'saline tear' function to begin with."

As the critiques flowed, Rowan sank in his chair, his apprehension breeding gloom. It was foolish for him to assume his story might get off without a single critique...but to have every solitary aspect about it, from the fine details to its essence, scrutinized and then torn apart, as if there was nothing of value to take away...?

It was your first attempt...don't take it to heart...if you had more time, you could've fixed it up, he tried telling himself.

You were proud of it, another voice said.

It was my first attempt, he protested.

Solid first attempt. Even virgins get something right their first time...

The workshop dragged on for another twenty minutes, in which both the instructor and the class deviated from Rowan's story to discuss broader themes and writing principles. Finally, when the discussion simmered down, Mr. Castellán spoke up. "Alright then. Rowan, anything you'd like to tell us, or ask us?"

Prison searchlights could not have elicited a more paralyzing reaction from Rowan, as twenty-three pairs of eyes swiveled in his direction. Rowan rarely spoke up in class, so the sudden attention seemed unwarranted and deliberate.

Nevertheless, Rowan fought the blooming redness in his face and spoke up. "Yeah, I uh...I was working on it late last night, I ran out of time to really fine-tune it. Thank you all for your critiques."

Indifferent, the class their attention to the front, where Mr. Castellán was sorting through the stack of papers on his podium. "Alright...cool. Next we have Trent Holland's story. What happens in this one?"

A girl in the back raised her hand. "There's this priest who writes, like, an incantation on this clay statue's forehead, and it comes to life and starts..."

The remainder of the period was a meaningless buzz to Rowan, who dipped his head, his eyes losing focus on a spot on the floor. *Enjoy your first time in the spotlight?* that hateful voice drawled. *I'm sure the others enjoyed it...*

When class finally ended, Rowan lingered behind to talk to Mr. Castellán, waiting for the other students to file from the room. But the instructor followed the last of them out the door, forcing Rowan to run after him. He caught up with him in the main hallway. "Hey – Mr. Castellán."

The instructor turned, his expression one of half-surprise. "Oh...hello."

"Be honest...what did you think of my story?" said Rowan, attempting to match his pace amid an incoming flow of students.

"Your story?" Mr. Castellán repeated, as if trying to ground himself from wherever his mind was. "I mean...well, it was a *story*. Everything was there, nothing was fundamentally wrong with it."

"But..." Rowan struggled to find his voice.

"I'm not going to fail you for it being late, if that's what concerns you," said Mr. Castellán, maintaining his brisk pace.

"No..." Rowan stammered, wheeling around in front of him. "I mean...people didn't like it. I'm talking about *quality*."

Mr. Castellán stopped. The rushing students passed them like water around a rock. "Rowan...look...it certainly wasn't *awful*. I can tell you'd been paying attention and took to heart all I've taught in class, and I appreciate that. There was just nothing terribly original or exciting about it." He looked around, clearly antsy. "Look, I'm sorry, but I have a meeting in five minutes. Perhaps we can discuss this during office hours tomorrow."

"I'll be gone for spring break," Rowan shrugged.

Mr. Castellán grimaced. "Well perhaps you could send me an email and we can talk over that. Sound good?"

"I guess," said Rowan with muted finality.

"Great. Have a good evening, Rowan." Mr. Castellán gave a brief smile and weaved into the crowd, disappearing among the backpacks and bodies.

Rowan merely stood in place, anguish rising in his stomach like bile. But soon the hallway cleared of students, and he forced himself to head to the main doors.

The late afternoon sun cast a bright wash of burnt gold over campus. College kids passed Rowan, jabbering with each other or glued to their phones, taking no notice of him as he walked the mile's trek to his apartment.

After nearly three months of the spring semester, Rowan knew full well where he was going, but even as he arrived at the threshold of his front door, he still felt lost.

8:33pm

His suitcase nearly packed, Rowan Vane sat heavily at his desk, staring vacantly at his open laptop.

The repetitive motions of gathering his things and walking back and forth to his suitcase had jogged his creative juices. He'd garnered inklings of ideas to beef up his story as per his classmates' suggestions.

His synthetic skull in tatters, HG-117 staggers back to home base, where Commander scoffs at his misery, noting that emotion is a glitch that ought to be patched in newer models. HG-117 and Commander then engage in a blood-soaked battle, resulting in both their mangled corpses tangled in a lock, for the rest of the city to see. This sparks a rebellion that results in...

Rowan groaned, his arms falling to his sides. Poring through his story now felt like looking over a failed exam marked up with red pen.

He got up from his chair and paced about his dark, cramped apartment, wringing his hands with unease. The class's critiques and his instructor's parting words boiled in his head. *Nothing terribly original or exciting about it...*

He stopped, coming to a sobering realization.

HG-117...

H.G. Wells, the author...John-117, the guy from Halo.

He groaned again, slapping a hand to his forehead. The roots of his inspiration came crawling back to him in that moment. The gritty urban dystopia from some old Harrison Ford movie he'd watched years earlier with his dad. The emotion and humanity of *I, Robot*, the Will Smith flick. Some young-adult sci-fi fantasy series he'd read back in middle school, which had first sparked his passion for writing.

He looked back at the document the way one might look at a gnarled piece of roadkill.

Unoriginal.

Rowan could almost taste the charge in his mind, something sour and innutritious. It somehow stung worse than "bad writer", a phrase he had often heard tossed around in class. He had tried his hardest to make something up, something that could have affected others in the way it affected him.

It was late. I needed more time.

You were proud of it though.

There's always time to improve...always, he shot back, taking deep breaths. But all that felt so distant, so murky. In that moment, he felt branded, a walking billboard of shortcomings.

Rowan sat back and closed his eyes, until something like hope glimmered in his subconscious. Mr. Castellan's assertion that his story wasn't "technically" bad. Rowan had certainly paid attention in class, ensuring that HG-117 had an arc and development, that the sequence of plot points was consistent and cathartic. Everything was there...it just wasn't fleshed out. Or...colored in.

Color. Rowan sucked in a deep breath. Color would have transformed his unoriginal, unexciting dystopian sci-fi into something special...a literary accent, a unique infusion that only he, Rowan, could provide. Something more abstract that ran deeper than skin, muscle and brain matter. *Essence à la Rowan.* Something that no class could have taught him...something he had to find for himself.

He hesitated. *Now the question is, how do I go about doing that...?*

A startling buzz snapped him from his trance; he looked around and saw his phone, vibrating with a call, teetering dangerously close to the edge of his desk. He snatched it and held it up to his ear. "Hello?"

The phone vibrated again in his hand. Rowan looked down at it and saw the Caller ID display still up. *Try answering it this time.* He slid the green button to the right. "Hello?"

"Yo, Rowan," a familiar voice chirped through the speaker. "We're goin' to Ballhalla tonight. Come with us."

Rowan grimaced at the assertive tone of his sort-of-friend, Todd Bentley. They had met the year prior in a Film Genres class, and Todd had taken Rowan under his wing, pushing him

to escape his comfort zone and spend long nights out on the town. Most of the time it involved shooting pool – at the aptly-named Ballhalla – and underage drinking. “Can’t tonight,” said Rowan. “I have to wake up early tomorrow.”

“So?” Todd replied. “Lots of people take late nights before early mornings. That’s just what people *do*. Come on out, dude.”

“I’ll be on the road for three hours tomorrow, Todd, I need to be rested for that,” said Rowan, nervous heat prickling the back of his neck.

“Come on, dude,” said Todd. “You’re just making excuses now. You need to get outside and live a little for a change.”

The heat simmered into aggravation. “Todd – I mean it, I don’t want to go out. Especially tonight. I’m not in the mood to chug Guinness or get my ass kicked at pool.”

“No one’s saying you have to drink – just get your ass kicked at pool. I’ll be there in twenty.”

“I’m not going,” said Rowan, his voice rising. “I mean it.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Todd shot, incensed. “Rowan, what are you going to be doing tomorrow again? Driving three hours to meet your family for spring break, who you’ve been bitching about the past month?” Rowan let his arm drop again; Todd’s voice continued to rail him at waist-level. “All the more reason to get out and do something before that happens! You need to get out of that dark-ass apartment and be with people and work on your game! This isn’t up for discussion, buddy – I’ll be there in twenty.”

Rowan sputtered, his arm shaking with the urge to throw the phone. He raised it again. “Todd, I – I swear, if you show up at my door, I’m not answering it. I’m dead serious. I’m done.”

There was a long silence on the other end. Rowan seethed, a nerve jumping in his temple. He continued holding the phone close to his face, anticipation roiling in his ear. Somehow it stung more than when Todd had been yelling ten seconds earlier.

“Fine,” said Todd. “Have a good spring break.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” said Rowan.

The call disconnected.

Rowan sighed, tossing his phone to the bed. He strode to his bathroom, flipping the light switch, splashing water over his face. *Ridiculous...I said no...no means no...I just didn't want to go out tonight...*

He stared at himself in the mirror, eyeing his features with distaste. His messy black hair. His baggy eyes. His burgeoning double chin. His weak, flabby body, pressing up against his shirt that clung uncomfortably to his nipples and belly.

The words of the last girl he had tried talking to, the last time he and Todd had gone out to shoot pool, rose eellike in his throat.

“Piss off, you look like a dead frog.”

Rowan’s lip trembled. *Can’t talk to girls, can’t get fit, can’t look good...might as well add “can’t write worth a damn” to the list...*

He yelled and slammed his fist onto the countertop, immediately regretting it as his hand exploded with bone-deep pain. Clutching it, he staggered back to his bed and fell upon it, his breathing ragged and labored.

Tears welled. They had little to do with his hand.

10:56pm

Most of Hell’s Gulf’s residents rose and set with the sun, but for some, nighttime brought a whole new regimen of duties. Empty beaches and doused lights ensured that Jerome and Sebastian Clermont could go about their work undisturbed.

They were stalking the low tide water’s edge, each toting an ultraviolet flashlight and a sifter, a metal tool resembling a rectangular strainer attached to a broomstick. With each lick of seawater that surged forth and receded, their beams snapped down to the muddied sand, sweeping in circles, looking for the telltale sign of their quarry.

It had been almost two hours and the silence between them was unusually thick. Normally this activity marked a time reserved for loose, playful banter, shouting jokes and insults to each other as they scoured the beach. Tonight, however, their lack of success had manifested in a supreme discomfort. It didn't help that their cold streak had been persisting for over four weeks.

"There!" Sebastian suddenly called, his beam fixating on a point a few yards to his right. Trudging through the surf, he brought his sifter down to the ground like an ax, scooping a heavy load of sand. He stuck its end into the water, shaking it back and forth, filtering the sediment before lifting it again.

Jerome, having caught up with him, shined his light into Sebastian's sifter. Two periwinkle-colored creatures the size and shape of grapes wriggled over each other, their segmented legs scuttling madly. They glowed whitish blue under the ultraviolet light.

"Finally," Jerome breathed, as Sebastian walked back up to their bait bucket, depositing their catch. The creatures swam to the bottom and settled with two others like them.

The brothers stared solemnly into the bucket. "Pathetic," Jerome finally commented.

"Night's still young, we got at least four hours before we due back," said Sebastian.

"Look at it this way, we can say we doubled our catch," Jerome said flippantly, gesturing to the bucket.

"Yeah, we got a two hundred percent increase."

Jerome looked at his older brother. "No, not two hundred. One hundred."

"Two hundred," said Sebastian. "We gone and doubled it. So, two hundred."

"No, it don't work like that," Jerome sighed. "With percent increase, you take the first number and add it to get the new number. It's a one hundred percent increase."

"That don't make sense."

"It sure does."

"You know what? Forget it."

"I will," Jerome grunted, rolling his eyes. Sebastian hissed something under his breath and stalked back down to the waterline.

Jerome regarded him, digesting something between frustration and sadness. It was one of those moments where Jerome felt like the older brother, having to look over Sebastian and steer him from dangerous waters.

It didn't take a psychotherapist to determine that this relationship was directly influenced by their upbringing. Young Jerome had watched from the sidelines as his older brother seemed to embark on a crusade to stir up trouble. He splattered acai berries on his neighbors' truck. He threw firecrackers at stray dogs. As he grew up, he wrangled together a group of cronies and they would stay out late, committing juvenile acts of debauchery, much to the irritation of their fellow Central Floridians.

It had all culminated on one horrible night when seventeen-year-old Sebastian called up their parents, explaining through tears that he had been thrown in jail after being busted with a gang of rum runners. Mr. and Mrs. Clermont bailed him out, but as they drove home in stony silence, it was certain from the look on their faces that it was something for which they would never forgive him.

Sebastian likewise never forgave his parents for never forgiving him, and the day he turned eighteen he left the house, his parents' angry and disappointed expressions forever seared into his brain. From then on, neither acknowledged each other's existence. Mr. and Mrs. Clermont, as far as they were concerned, had only one son. Sebastian, as far as *he* was concerned, was a bastard child with no mother.

Back at home, Jerome recognized that stubbornness and bitterness ran in the Clermont family with more vigor than their own blood. He was determined not to let his only brother fall under that same curse.

Once he had scraped together enough funds, Jerome left to track down his older brother, and found him washing dishes in a hick town on the Georgia-Florida border, surrounded by a community that didn't take kindly to dark-skinned folks. Reunited, they trekked southwest and settled in Hell's Gulf, where their grandmother resided. She took them in, and the remainder

of Jerome's money went to buying a baitshop, which the brothers had now manned for almost fifteen years.

"Good honest work is what you need," Jerome would say the first few years. "It keeps us busy. Sets the path for us going forward."

Tonight, though, as Jerome resumed his tireless search for more sand fleas, that good, honest work seemed to be yielding only barren fruit.

"It's weird," said Jerome, attempting to stimulate conversation. "Should be full swing right now. It's breedin' season."

"I ain't worried." Sebastian kept his gaze glued to the surf, sifter poised to strike. "It's still early."

"Last year they came 'round February!" Jerome protested. "They're late! Either that, or there just none of them around!"

"Shut up! I ain't worried!" Sebastian snapped. "Season goes on 'til October. We got all year to get us a motherload."

"Do you *know* what profit margins are?"

"Do *you* know when to shut your hole?"

Jerome sighed, turning back to his sifting. Sand fleas were a popular bait for the local fishermen; they were like candy for the bay's black drum, bonnetheads, and ladyfish. The brothers ran a racket selling them for a dollar a dozen, and with sand fleas normally about as common as actual fleas, they were guaranteed to make bank throughout the whole year. Leftovers would simply be stashed in cold storage whenever they were in a pinch.

By now, however, they had run out of frozen sand fleas, and whatever fresh stock they'd dredge up at night would be sold before the store even opened the next morning. The brothers were not yet in any financial danger. But the absence of sand fleas in Hell's Gulf potentially held more dire implications for the area as a whole.

"Somethin's botherin' you," said Jerome, inching closer to his brother.

"My God, give it a rest, they'll come," said Sebastian, shining his light in Jerome's face.

"Not about that," Jerome replied, throwing up a hand to shield his eyes. "Somethin's on your mind...strangely enough," he added.

Sebastian either ignored or didn't register his attempt at humor. "Somethin's gonna happen. I can feel it. Things ain't right."

"Yeah, the sand fleas ain't here!"

"No!" At this Sebastian threw his sifter into the water, directing the beam back at Jerome. "Not talkin' about the sand fleas! There's somethin' *bigger*. I'm nervous, Jerome. This place is *weird*, it's *always* been weird..."

Despite his brother's nerves Jerome had to suppress a laugh. "Sebby...you absolutely *inscrutable*. Worryin' 'bout nothing when there's problems right here and now...like..." He paused to remember something their grandmother often said. "...like worryin' 'bout ghosts in a lion's den."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "I'm a what?"

"Inscrutable...am I sayin' that right?"

"I dunno." Sebastian picked up his sifter and resumed his hunt. "But I *ain't*."

They worked in silence for another ten minutes, eyes peeled for the gleam in the sand. As Jerome approached Sebastian again, an ember of mischief lit inside him. "Hey, Sebby...who's that girl I been seein' you with?"

"Dunno what you're talkin' about," said Sebastian.

"She pretty."

"She sure is," Sebastian confirmed, straightening up and staring into the darkness. "She got pretty eyes. And pretty everythin' else, too," he added.

"Didn't know you were into that type," said Jerome, his voice straining with laughter. "She looks fresh outta school. Couldn't find comfort in an older woman?"

"Nah man, fuck off with that," Sebastian said, a smile budding on his face. "I ain't about that married life...gotta get out there and..." He stopped, as if likewise remembering something their grandmother said. "...sow my wild oats."

"More like *spill* your oats," Jerome snickered.

"Fuck off. Grow some hair on your johnson before you try and lecture me, kid," Sebastian retorted, now sporting a full grin.

"Seriously, though!" Jerome barked. "How old is she? Old enough to do her in the ass but not buy her a vodka tonic?"

They both exploded into laughter, the tension between them snapping immediately, and for a moment, the mole crickets quieted, startled by the outburst.

"And what does Mamaw think of it?" Jerome followed up.

"I've'nt told her shit," said Sebastian. He looked at Jerome with an expression of mock hurt. "You must *really* think I'm dumb!"

"Sad but true," said Jerome. He adopted a high-pitched, shrieking tone: "You messin' around with some girl? A *white* girl, no less? You just askin' for it, Sebastian! You just *askin'* for it!"

"Well, what the hell does Mamaw expect? 'Case she didn't notice, the only other black girl in this town is *herself!*"

A passerby would have mistaken the explosive chortles down on the beach for a pack of demonic coyotes. But the brothers' lackluster sand flea cache was insignificant; all that mattered was that their repertoire was back on point.

"But on another note," Jerome started, wiping a tear from his eye, "does your left hand know you're cheatin' on it?"

He laughed again, slapping his knee, then halted when he realized his gleeful expressions had gone unrequited. Looking up, he saw his brother had turned away from him, his flashlight directed somewhere down the beach.

"Yo," Jerome said, walking up to him, "I said, does your left hand know you're cheatin' on it?"

Sebastian didn't move. He was transfixed by something caught in the beam of his light. Jerome splashed over to his side, irritated. "Hey! I said, does your left hand —"

"Shh! Shut up!" Sebastian spat. Jerome opened his mouth to reprimand him, but it stayed open as he saw the thing illuminated in the light. Whatever it was, it was floating on the surface of the water, being pushed ashore by the incoming tide.

Jerome emitted a small, choked noise from his throat. The anomaly resembled a corpse, but it was soggy and flat, like a shed skin. It reflected a dazzling whitish-purple under the ultraviolet light...very much unlike human skin.

"Is...is that...a suit?" Jerome whispered.

As they cautiously approached, the thing stuck to the wet sand, completely beached. Ten feet away Jerome could see it was indeed some sort of clothing, completely white, arranged in a bodily shape as if being worn by a ghost. Three feet away, Jerome caught sight of a dark kerchief tied around the suit's collar.

"Looks like a sailor's suit..." Sebastian mumbled, stopping right beside it. The uniform had clearly been at sea for a long time; there were tears and black stains in the fabric. Its left pant leg had been severed at the knee, leaving behind frayed, jagged edges. Closer inspection revealed colonies of marine worms slithering in and out of the holes with tiny rippling legs.

The brothers stared, dumbstruck. Sebastian lowered his sifter and dug it underneath the suit to lift it.

The suit rose with it — and then broke at the seams from the strain, a massive fissure ripping in its side. It flopped back to the sand, and a copious flood of red liquid oozed from the opening. The brothers yelped and jumped back as the pungent smell of iron hit their noses.

Blood leaked from its sleeves and its collar as the suit shrunk and unraveled — the worms abandoned their host and burrowed into the sand, like strands of spaghetti sucked into an earthen mouth. The suit disintegrated entirely into a moist, bloodied pile of thread, bubbling and steaming...

Then there was nothing left, apart from a deep crimson stain on the sand, which was washed away by an approaching swell.

The sifter dropped from Sebastian's grip again. They stood there in horrified silence, unaware that their bait bucket a hundred feet back had been caught by the tide and tipped

over, allowing the sand fleas to escape. But both seemed ensnared by the conclusion that there would be no place for sand fleas in their minds tonight.

“Sebby?” Jerome finally said, as the mole crickets sounded off again. “That was fuckin’ weird.”

Sebastian let out an ominous sigh. He shook his head. “Bro...this place has *always* been weird.”

FRIDAY

11:44am

Rowan grimaced against the dull pain in his hand as he sped down the I-10.

His mother had informed him there would be no need to rush, as they would be spending a full week at the rental house, with plenty of time to decompress and settle in. So, he had taken her advice and slept in past ten. Yet despite his thirteen-hour nap he still felt sore and slow as he packed his suitcase and headed out on the road.

It was coincidence that both he and his eight-year-old sister Millie's spring breaks fell on the same week, and the family had accrued enough side money to afford a vacation. Rowan figured he ought to be grateful. But spending his spring break cooped up in a third-rate beach town with his mother and sister did not strike him as something to feel grateful for.

Like you had anything going on for spring break in the first place...

Powering through his bruise, Rowan grimaced again as he thought back to the name of their destination: *Hell's Gulf*.

A quick internet search told him Hell's Gulf was an "unincorporated community" located somewhere along "Florida's Forgotten Coast". Further diving down the digital rabbit hole revealed it was in a region that was, compared to the rest of the state, decidedly rural and marshy. Too far east for Destin or Pensacola, too far northwest for St. Petersburg or Sarasota; more like a swampy extension of South Georgia than anything else. In fact, looking at it on a map, Rowan thought the coast's resemblance to an armpit was a mite uncanny.

"Florida's Forgotten Coast," he said to himself, passing the car in front of him. "Yeah – there's a *reason* it stays 'forgotten'." He chuckled at his own dumb joke. "God – this trip's gonna suck a salty dick," he laughed, pressing on the pedal.

A flash of blue glinted in his rearview mirror, and Rowan looked up, his amusement murdered by the sight of a black-and-white cruiser trailing him, sirens blazing. "Goddammit," Rowan spat, braking and easing his car onto the shoulder. The rumble strips groaned as he decelerated to a stop, the state trooper parking three feet behind.

Rowan sat in cringing silence. The heat inside his car seemed to spike twenty degrees. *Well, shit*. He rolled down his window, the sounds of speeding cars sifting through. He could almost feel passing eyes drawn towards him. *Move along, folks, nothing to see here*.

The officer finally stepped out of his cruiser, a thickset man in a brown uniform and sunglasses. He lumbered over to Rowan's open window.

"Mornin', son. How ya doin'?" he boomed.

Rowan shrugged, his throat having locked up. He noted the name "TATUM" engraved on the officer's silver badge.

"I clocked ya goin' eighty-six back there," Officer Tatum continued. "You know what the speed limit is 'round here?"

Isn't that your job? "No, sir," Rowan responded with an air of politeness.

"It's seventy," said Officer Tatum. "There's no reason for you to be goin' that fast 'round here. What's your hurry? Meetin' up with your friends for spring break?"

I don't have friends. "My family," said Rowan.

"Hm," Officer Tatum grunted, hunching over slightly. "Where ya goin' then? Navarre? Cape San Blas?"

"No, sir. Hell's Gulf."

The officer's face twitched, as if he had blinked hard behind his sunglasses. "Hell's Gulf?" He paused. "Seriously...? You got relatives down there or somethin'?"

"No, sir." Rowan's urge to articulate his quiet internal gall intensified.

Officer Tatum scrutinized him, as if he were trying to detect a lie. "You sure you heard right, son? I mean...why would anyone want to go down *there*...there's *nothin'*. It's one of those places you take a vacation *from*, not *to*. My Gawd, why in the *hell* would ever you want to –"

"I don't know, why don't you ask my mother?" Rowan blurted.

Officer Tatum's face hardened, and Rowan froze up with regret. He didn't dare break from the officer's gaze, however. He could see two of him reflected in his dark sunglasses.

"If there were many others on the road, I'd have written you up," Officer Tatum growled. "Slow it down, son. I'm sure your family can afford to wait for you."

Thanks, asshole. "Thank you, Officer."

Officer Tatum strode back to his cruiser. He lingered for a minute behind Rowan's car, then pulled forward and sped down the interstate. Rowan waited for him to disappear entirely, then shifted into drive and followed suit.

Unbelievable, Rowan mused, accelerating to a reasonable speed. *Apparently, Hell's Gulf isn't even worth ruining with a two-hundred-dollar ticket.*

He sighed, his heart still hammering from his dumb luck. *This trip's gonna suck a million salty dicks.*

His phone informed him that his next exit was coming up in a half mile. He merged into the right lane and soon pulled off onto an overpass heading southwest.

In a few minutes he found himself on a one-lane road, cutting through pastures and groves of fruiting trees. An occasional wooden barn or white church punctuated the serenity, but otherwise it couldn't have been a more stark contrast from the open, developed interstate. A sign informed him the speed limit was fifty-five, and Rowan slowed down to match. Somehow he doubted that small-town cops would be as forgiving as highway patrol officers.

The sun hung directly overhead as he drove. His phone predicted an arrival time of a little over an hour. Rowan looked around, barely taking in the scenery, still feeling as though he'd just woken up.

He passed the seventieth white church, which bore a sign displaying in bold marquee letters: "WHO IS MISSING FROM CH__CH? UR!"

Lord save me.

1:05pm

With an abrupt right turn in the road, Rowan could finally see the ocean.

The gaps between a line of houses and stores on his left revealed brief glimpses of a glittering, silvery bar. Rowan snuck peaks whenever he could manage it, as the road was twisty and marred with potholes.

His heart gave a weak leap of excitement. It had been almost fifteen years since they had last been to the ocean. *The Emerald Coast...* Rowan recalled choice sights and sensations. The smell of sunscreen and baking white sand. Candy-colored beach toys bobbing in the breeze. Cool, clear water the hue of lime sherbert. Cloudless, impossibly blue skies with crying seagulls gliding past.

Millie hadn't been born yet...he remembered making sandcastles with his mother, who was kneeling in front of him, studding his drizzled towers with gem-colored clams...*coquinas?*...and standing in knee-deep water, his black windswept hair standing out, his father was...

"In one mile – slight left onto Bullhead Lane," his phone declared.

Rowan adjusted his grip on the wheel and gazed down the road for his turn. To his right was an expanse of twisted forest, camo brown punctuated by the lime green of new growth. The unlikely combination of woodland and beach suggested to Rowan an air of primitivism, the unrefined shores of some long-lost prehistoric ecosystem. Ambivalence brewed as he drove onward – he couldn't tell if the chewing in his stomach was indigestion, or foreboding.

A weathered sign displaying Bullhead Lane appeared ahead, and Rowan turned down the road. The asphalt was cracked and dusted with sand; the houses were faded pastel-colored and suspended on stilts. The space between them was dominated by black stone and patches of drab olive grass. A line of dunes obscured the ocean beyond.

Within a few minutes, Rowan caught sight of a familiar gold Toyota. Sighing, he pulled into the driveway and parked behind it.

"You have arrived – 12 Bullhead Lane."

"Thanks, bitch," said Rowan before exiting the app.

As he stepped out, a gust of cold wind drew a shudder. The sky overhead was marbled gray with clouds. Leaning on his car, Rowan looked around, breathing in a concoction of brine, seaweed, and dead fish.

So far, it looks like I'm definitely going to forget this coast.

From atop the steps the front door opened. "Rowan!" his mother called out, descending the steps. He met her at the bottom, and she wrapped him in a hug. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, honey...did you have a safe trip?"

"Yeah," said Rowan, patting her back. "Nothing to report." He saw no need to inform her of his brief run-in with Officer Tatum.

Bridget Vane let go of him, peering around. "Isn't this place something else?"

Rowan nodded. "Yeah, it uh...certainly has an untouched vibe to it."

His mother smiled, though her brow creased with a trace of worry. "I know, I know this isn't exactly the Emerald Coast...but we're together, at a place we can all have fun, for the first time in...gosh, how long's it been?"

Up close, Rowan noticed the flecks of white in her hair. He too was aware of their less-than-stellar financial situation. "It's good to be here, Mom." He returned the hug in what he assumed to be a conciliatory gesture. "Let me get my bag."

He lugged his suitcase up the stairs, his mother right behind him. "Millie's excited to see you, be sure to say hi," she said.

Yeah, I'm sure. He opened the front door and stepped inside, blinking to adjust to the low light. *Oh, joy.* The interior was bedecked with garish floral wallpaper and framed paintings of cutesy cartoon animals on the beach. The kitchen was cramped, the living room was furnished with a cheap pleather sofa, and the two bedrooms appeared to host – to Rowan's horror – a jack-and-jill bathroom setup, just like his freshman dorm.

Buy a sub-rate beach house and charge other people to live in it, Rowan observed. I'll give them credit, that's good economics.

Millie, his eight-year-old sister, was sprawled upon one of the couches, her face lit by the glow of her phone. "Hey," she said, not tearing her gaze from the screen. Rowan rolled his eyes. *Knew it.*

"Bedrooms are there and there – I have the right one." His mother pointed out the respective doors, walking over and entering her own.

"I called the couch!" Millie declared, patting the cushion underneath her.

"Darn," Rowan commented, heading for the left door. The bedroom wasn't much better, furnished with the same floral wallpaper and smelling of old lady. The bed was made up with stiff sandy-yellow sheets and a single rock-like pillow.

Rowan threw his suitcase upon the mattress and sat upon it, his momentum springing him up and down. The inside air felt cold and alien in his lungs. In fact, looking around, a deeper sense of unbelonging settled upon him, a strange, cheap fakeness, as if the gaudy room were nothing more than a façade.

He supposed there was a word for being holed up in some strange place he didn't want to be, but he deliberately avoided it at the risk of sounding dramatic.

Leaving his suitcase unpacked, Rowan slipped out of his bedroom and opened the sliding back door behind Millie's couch. The back deck was constructed of weathered tan wood with green algal smears. The littoral odor of the outside air was pungent and refreshing compared to his stuffy bedroom.

And lying beyond the beach was the expanse of the sea. Rowan stood at the railing, drinking in a sight he hadn't seen in over a decade. This patch of ocean was churning and steely, as if harboring a bad mood. A distant mist blurred the horizon, reminiscent of unfinished maritime charts.

A shriek broke Rowan's gaze, and he glanced down to see a group of seagulls tearing away at something washed up on the shore, their wings flexing excitedly. The sand was a bizarre shade of skeletal brown, striated with black clumps of seaweed. Looking up and around the beach, Rowan could make out the other rental houses, and what appeared to be a linear

pile of rocks, jutting out into the water on the far left. On his right, about a mile down, the beach merged smoothly with encroaching forest.

Rowan sighed. This place seemed like a beach the way turfgrass science was technically a college major. Despite being years ago, the Emerald Coast felt to him paradisaical, more present and true, what a beach should be. Something massive that would spill over the reservoir of his imagination, unable to be fully contained. Perhaps his fragmented memory was clouding his judgment. But surveying Hell's Gulf – laid before him in full, barren and unrefined – only compounded his confidence that it would never even compare.

The sliding glass door opened again, and his mother emerged onto the deck, joining him in his silent vigil. They both stared out at the ocean, now marked with whitecaps. "You're going to unpack, right?" Bridget finally said.

"Yeah," Rowan replied, his voice rather small.

"Alright...do it soon though. That old suitcase tends to stink up whatever you put in it. Like someone let clothes dry in the wash."

They observed the seagulls down below squabbling over a strip of dead meat. A cold gust blew up the beach, causing their hair to jump.

Bridget sighed. "Alright, Rowan...tell me what's wrong."

Rowan pursed his lips. "I just...this doesn't feel right, Mom."

His mother shrugged. "I mean, you just got here, honey...it might take a day or two to adjust."

"No, that's not what I mean," said Rowan, an edge to his tone. "I've been on vacations before. The Emerald Coast. That time we tried going camping and it rained us out. I felt something, like...good there, despite everything. This place though...this just doesn't feel like I...like we should be here."

"But why?" his mother pressed. "That camping trip was years ago and this was the perfect opportunity to gather us together for another vacation. I thought you'd be happy to get out and take a break from life."

"I know, I know," Rowan pleaded. "But...I just..." he stuttered, the words squirming in his mouth like nightcrawlers. "I guess...I just feel that, maybe..." He looked away, realizing there was no nicer way to say what was on his mind. "Someone told me that there's nothing here, in Hell's Gulf. He was really confused as to why anyone would want to come here. So...I find myself thinking that maybe we could have waited longer...that...we should have saved up for...something *better*."

He closed his eyes, his tongue burning from shame. One of the seagulls gave a piercing cry, and Rowan imagined it flying down the coastline, screaming his confession for all to hear. The image of his mother in his head regarded him with immense disappointment, shouting him down, calling him spoiled and ungrateful, declaring he had ruined the trip for the whole family.

Instead, she gave another little sigh. "Don't let your sister hear you saying all that."

Rowan opened his eyes and turned back to his mother, who bore a softened expression. "I know," she said. "I know what you mean, Rowan. This certainly isn't a glamorous beach. And it's no Emerald Coast, I know that. Nothing could ever match that trip. Maybe if we had waited another year, we could have gone somewhere nicer. But I saw an opening and took it. We're not going to be together as a family for much longer..."

"We haven't been," said Rowan.

"I know...I know we haven't," said Bridget. "I miss your father, too...but we have to make do with what we have. ...And so do you," she added.

Rowan's brow creased. "What do you mean?"

"Well...you're not exactly a child anymore, Rowan," she explained. "You always said you wanted to experience living by yourself at college? Independence, right? Well, how is this place any different?"

"I..." Rowan stammered, his thoughts scrambling in response. "What do you mean?" he repeated.

"You have a car. And you have this entire beach," Bridget said simply. "I'll handle your sister. You, however, are free to do whatever you want. But I want you to make something out of it. Isn't that what you do with your creative writing? Making something out of nothing?"

"Apparently I make *nothing* out of nothing," Rowan retorted. "I'm a shit writer."

"Well, take this opportunity to improve your skills, then," said Bridget, clearly on a roll. "All it takes is a little thought. It isn't the beach's obligation to inspire you - you have to be the one to do whatever it takes to make something out of it. And use this as an opportunity to try and become your own man."

"Did you really just tell me to 'man up'?" Rowan snapped.

"No. I told you to *become your own man*."

"Well, I don't know *how*!" he yelled.

The quiet that followed was gravid and dark. Venom brimmed inside Rowan as he seethed with deep breaths. "I don't know *how*. In case you've forgotten, the one person who *could* isn't *here* anymore."

Bridget gazed at him, her expression indecipherable...hardened, with a trace of what could be pity. "Well...maybe you'll find that out, too."

Rowan's fingers curled angrily into his palms. He inhaled sharply, turning to issue a retort - but from the corner of his eye, he saw the sliding door shut.

He was alone, left with only the faint whisper of breaking waves.

She...that...it...that doesn't...

More than ever Rowan felt that sense of displacement, as if his soul had decided to become a permanent wanderer, set adrift on the wind, leaving behind a lukewarm shell.

One of the seagulls from the beach fluttered unsteadily on the opposite side of the deck. Rowan watched it critically. It bobbed its head, peering at him from one red-ringed, yellow eye.

"Well?" Rowan eventually jabbed. "You gonna tell me what to make of all that?"

The gull bowed its neck, giving a hunch-backed stare, almost akin to a stooped, wizened old sage. Rowan held his breath, bracing himself for the slim possibility that the bird might, somehow, defy his expectations and offer an answer.

Then it pooped on the deck and flew away.

7:47pm

Dinner was a subdued affair, as were most Vane family dinners.

Millie had provided predictable chatter, but to Rowan it was just noise. Bridget had attempted to follow along and bounce the conversation in different directions, but it was clear neither herself nor her children were too invested.

Rowan had been silent, ridden with dull nausea. It was difficult digesting the rigatoni his mother had prepared, let alone the bombshell she had dropped on him earlier. He crept away to the bathroom after dinner, fearful he might throw up. After several long retching moments, nothing materialized.

Instead, he wandered back to the deck, hoping to find a quiet place to clear his head. Millie had forgotten her earbuds, so it was either go outside or endure the sounds of some twenty-something vlogger talking about her makeup routine.

The clouds had cleared, but not soon enough to guarantee a sunset. The fresh sea air was cooling on his face, but staring out at the expanse of Hell's Gulf only made Rowan feel smaller and more uncomfortable.

No one had ever talked to him like that before, not even Todd Bentley, to whom convincing Rowan to go out on the town and underage drink had become a second language. It dug a violating knife under his skin, somehow penetrating deeper than when he'd been compared to a dead frog.

Yet the blade had unearthed a revelation. Unoriginality wasn't his issue after all; it was merely one of the tentacles of a larger problem, one for which he had finally found the right word:

Undefined.

Everything, he realized – from his writing to his social skills – could be traced back to that one, damning stamp. It was too much to try and navigate his mental map, pinpointing where and when he had gone wrong...the potential key moments in his life were innumerable, and equally suspect.

He forced himself out of it. He had to focus on the now.

The word hung over him, gluttonous and mocking, hovering just out of reach. If it was present before, then as of earlier that afternoon, its presence was nagging and insistent.

But now that he knew, it could be confronted.

Definition, he mulled. *I need to find out what I'm capable of...what I'm supposed to do...what I have to offer...*

He stared out again at the ocean, the sunset mere moments from succumbing to the night. A few stars pockmarked the indigo sky. *And all this is supposed to help me become a more capable writer? ...A more capable man, even?*

Rowan sighed, slumping upon the railing. It all seemed impossible in its simplicity. *Definition* was, ironically, undefinable.

More stars showed themselves above. Rowan watched them, trying to predict where the next one would appear.

Todd Bentley wasn't there to twist his arm. And his mother had essentially set him loose in one impassioned speech. He was alone again. But this time, he welcomed it. This was something he had to find for himself.

"Tomorrow," he declared. Somewhere in the darkness, a robust wave crashed in response, hissing along the sand as the water was dragged back into the sea. Rowan gripped the rail with resolution. "Tomorrow," he repeated.

He hesitated. *But what will I do tomorrow? And the rest of the week, for that matter?*

He suddenly felt very tired. His eyelids drooping, Rowan reentered the house – oblivious to the running showerhead and the sounds of compressed phone audio – and fell asleep on his bed almost instantly.

That night, he dreamed of glowing gossamer spiderwebs in a spacious black void.

SATURDAY

12:02am

Rule of thumb in Hell's Gulf was that the dividing line between the residential areas and the vacation homes was a run-down tiki bar called Low Tide. It had no walls and a thatched roof that, for years, appeared seconds away from collapsing. The amount of dirt rubbed into the floors from thousands of pairs of boots could have dusted a small country. Apart from its patrons, it hosted a functional ecosystem of cockroaches, ghost crabs, house geckos, and barn swallows. Naturally, it was a marquee hotspot for the locals.

For the past six years a corpulent lady by the name of Marjorie Adler (affectionately and not-so-affectionately nicknamed "Large Marge") had manned the bar (or "womanned", she preferred). She lived in a trailer home that had dropped anchor right behind the building, cleverly hidden behind the vast apothecary's shelf of alcohol she worked in front of. It was fruitful work, as booze served a thirst no man could fully quench. Despite working all night, every night, Large Marge still managed to get her requisite eight hours of sleep – four a.m. to noon – then wake up and get ready for the day.

The month of March was usually slow for her, the weather not quite warm enough to send the throngs of working men into the shade of the bar each night, craving a drink before bed. Still, she scoffed at the paltry profits she'd acquired for the day, sitting in the double-digits.

"Shitfire," she muttered, staring down at her phone.

The withered old man at the table gave a chuckle. "That thing gettin' your goat? Could never figure 'em out meself. Fingers are too big for the buttons."

"This here's a touch-screen, finger size ain't a problem," said Marge, showing him the screen.

The man didn't look towards it, but he laughed again. "Sheezus. The things they come up with these days..."

"These've been around for a while, Gerry," Marge explained, rolling her eyes. "'Course, by your standards, transportation shoulda' stopped with the horse-drawn carriage."

"Yeah, yeah, that's the stuff!" he cackled, rocking on his stool. "Dependable, them horses was. And when they dropped off a load o' road apples, you could warm your hands on 'em, I remember. Got me through plenty a winter back in those days..."

"You gonna order another drink, or you just gonna hold onto your empty glass and spout nonsense?" said Marge, flicking her wrist towards him.

Gerry rapped his shotglass, a twisted smile marring his face. "Well, now that you mention it...I think I'm gonna hold onto this empty glass and spout nonsense."

Marge gave a hefty sigh. "Go home to your wife, Gerry."

"Amazing customer service!" Gerry wheezed. "Such respect to your elders. Sheezus, what's this crazy world come to, where an old man can't even get a drink without gettin' lynched to high heaven!"

"Goodnight, Gerry."

"Well at least gimme the lot for the walk home," he said, motioning to the half-empty bottle of bourbon sitting on the table.

"No, that's against the law."

"Law schmaw. Law *this*," he spat, sticking up his middle finger. But he slid off the stool and staggered towards the front. "You haven't seen the last of – no, wait, you *have* seen the last of me, yeah, that's the one, see if you can survive without *my* business..." He continued to rant under his breath as he disappeared into the darkness.

Marge set her face in her hand, rubbing her forehead. She despised having to resort to meanness, but Gerry had been lording over the bar for three hours, and he constantly reeked of shellfish. Better to send him home early and potentially bring back customers, than humor him the whole night and deal with his formidable wife in the morning.

The tiki torches near the front flickered, as if someone had moved across them. Marge looked up, and went still at the sight of him.

The man striding towards the bar was stiff and pot-bellied, with a hard, unmoving face. He wore a full sheriff's outfit with a conspicuous badge on his front. Sheriff Hank Crowley was another regular at Low Tide, but the level to which he got under Marge's skin was something decidedly more unsettling than an old stinkpot like Gerry.

"Good morning, Marjorie Adler," he said in a flat voice, seating himself in front of her. "The usual. It's been a rough couple days."

Marge scowled in confusion, then checked the time and realized with a silent groan that it was technically the morning. She lugged a refrigerated cooler from underneath the table and took out a ripe coconut. She banged a spike into one of the fruit's dimples with a rubber mallet, drilling a hole. Then she drew a bottle of pineapple rum topped with a pourer, dispensing a few shots through the opening. Crowley monitored her progress with unblinking eyes. His hat remained on at the table, another point of vexation for Marge.

Finally, she inserted a metal straw and pushed it over to Crowley, who stirred it and imbibed deeply from it in one long drag. Marge watched him drink, her brow creasing with disgust as he completely drained the fruit.

"That hit the spot," he remarked in the same tone, setting it down with a clatter. "You have a knack for brewin' spirits, Marjorie Adler." He observed her for an uncomfortable moment. "I would like another," he finally said.

Marge jerked herself out of her trance and prepared another coconut. Crowley continued to eye her, taking in a rattling breath. Marge served the second drink, which he sucked down with equal vigor. "That hit the spot. You have a knack for brewin' spirits, Marjorie Adler." His gaze flickered, as if someone had hit the "refresh" button in his brain. "Tell me, where did you ever learn to mix like that?"

"My brother used to run this place," Marge replied, her face darkening. "Remember? Remember him, Sheriff?"

"He was a good man, he was," said Crowley. "Shame he had to go like that."

"That was over a year ago," said Marge, leaning over the table to him. "How's the case comin', hmm? Had any leads? Any clues? Any of that shit?"

"That was over a year ago," Crowley parroted. "Shame he had to go like that."

Marge groaned again, slumping on the tabletop. *A rare species of stupid, he is.* Sheriff Crowley may have single-handedly upheld the law in their little town, but the simple deed of interacting with him was always a disconcerting endeavor. Marge felt the need to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Why's it been a rough couple days, Sheriff?"

"Dealin' with that Knoxville family," said Crowley, his eyes brightening a little. "They've been a blubbering mess through and through. Not good for our image."

"I was hopin' they'd stay the whole week," said Marge, pouring herself a vodka tonic. "They loved this place. They were comin' here every night at the hour of eight..."

"I mean, I'd leave too if *my* daddy up and keeled over like that," said Crowley, watching her again. "I'd like another."

Marge winced, but she procured another coconut and hastily prepared it. Crowley took it and drained it once more. "Typical, I guess. People die. That's life."

"Yeah...that's life, I guess," said Marge, staring coldly at him. With no sign of a response, Marge took a deep breath and tried again. "The one time somethin' happens in this town and we have to call in an ambulance-man all the way from Tallahassee."

"Well, what the ever-livin' heck did ya expect me to do?" Crowley protested. "Dump him in my car and *drive* him up there myself? Hell! It ain't even a hatchback!"

"You know what Shantelle said? Shantelle, she told me it's 'completely ridiculous' that the 911 had to call 911."

"Well Shantelle's on a first-name basis with the prophet Abraham, so she's got that goin' for her," said Crowley, fiddling with his third metal straw. "I'd like another."

"Sheriff – honest to God – don't you think you've had enough?"

"I'd like another."

Marge spluttered, as if bursting to reprimand him, but she obliged and served him his fourth coconut drink. Crowley took it but hesitated. "Besides...no chance in God's good Earth I'd desecrate a war hero like that."

He noticed Marge's expression and gave a dark grin. "Oh yeah...did some diggin' around last night. Turns out Thomas Morrison was one of them boys on the *Indianapolis*. Terrible thing that was. Got torpedoed back in '45 by the Japs. Eight hundred men went in the water, spent three days suckin' seawater and gettin' picked off by –"

"You've put a lot of effort into researchin' that old man," Marge said tensely.

"Well, it's interestin' stuff," said Crowley, going for his drink.

Marge slammed her hands on the tabletop and looked him straight in the eye. She breathed in the stink of fertilizer and unwashed clothes, but she retained her angry composure. "I'll tell you what's interestin', Sheriff. Fourteen months ago, one Florence Adler goes out on the town with his buddies. Night wears on, they go their own ways, but when they come back together, he's missin'. Didn't take long to find him, stuffed in the back door of some dirty alleyway, pale as a ghost, blood oozin' from his..."

She fought back a sob and curled her meaty hands into fists. "And then waitin' two goddamn weeks for the sheriff to make his 'investigation', only for him to write off the whole damn thing as 'mysterious circumstances'!" Her lip quivered as she stared him down. "Bull fuckin' *shit*. There's only one mystery here, 'Sheriff'. *Why didn't you do enough?*"

Sheriff Crowley dragged from the coconut, staring back at her. As he drank, some of the whitish liquid seeped from his mouth, dribbling down his front. Marge's face broke with disgust. "Gawd damn!! What the *hell* is wrong with you?!"

Crowley stood up, depositing a ten- and twenty-dollar bill onto the table in front of her. "My condolences, Marjorie Adler. He was a good man. Shame he had to go like that." And with that he turned robotically and walked out of the bar, his gait as straight and sober as if he'd never had a drink in his life.

"Useless!" Marge yelled after him. "You are *useless*! You go back there and bring this thing to rest, you lunatic *bastard*!" But he had long disappeared from the torchlight into the dark.

Despondent, Marge downed the rest of her vodka tonic in one gulp. The bitter sting burned her throat, yet it contributed nothing to the tears in her eyes. *Goddamn hopeless...stupid...*

As she ducked away from the table, slouching in her chair, the cloud of drink muddied her head, and she could have sworn that the way the liquid leaked from Crowley's mouth, the way his lips and cheeks remained utterly motionless...as if he hadn't forced it out, but it had simply pooled over, overflowing...

Marge dug her fingers into the side of her head, steadying herself. Her shift was barely halfway over and nutcases like Gerry and Sheriff Crowley had already gotten her to drink. She eyed the crystal bottle reproachfully, wondering if she'd have a functioning liver by the time the night was done with her.

10:12am

Rowan woke with a start and immediately seized with panic – *Oh God, where am I?* Then he remembered, and deescalated with a throaty groan.

He stretched, flexing the tiredness from his limbs, then reached over and checked his phone. 10:12...he had slept for over thirteen hours. He blinked, trying to remember what had possibly induced such a deep sleep. The all-nighter he had pulled while writing, his disastrous class, the drive over, and...

It hit him like a fist to the face – the little sermon his mother had given him the previous afternoon. He sat up, the promise he'd made the night before a cool lump settling somewhere under his ribcage.

Right...definition. Now what does that entail?

After another five minutes of staring into space, he concluded that he still didn't know what that entailed.

Rowan climbed out of bed, blinking himself to wakefulness, and paused as he realized he had crashed in his daytime clothes, now creased and stiff like cardboard against his body. It had been a long time since he had done that; normally he couldn't fall asleep without donning a pair of trusty pajamas. *Weird*, he pondered. *I must've been more than just tired.*

Regardless, shedding his clothes and donning a clean set was more refreshing than any shower might have been.

He exited his bedroom to find Millie sitting at the table, twiddling her phone as usual, and his mother next to her writing a list. Millie looked up at Rowan, her expression strangely disappointed. "Darn it, I thought you'd died!"

"Told you he wasn't dead," Bridget replied, smiling. "Unless he's a zombie now?" Rowan, still drowsy, stubbed his foot against the pleather couch and stumbled forward with a yelp. "Uh oh, that might just confirm it," she remarked, turning back to her list. Millie laughed and returned to her phone.

Kneading his toe against the floor, Rowan shot a look through the sliding glass door. The sun was out in full, illuminating the ocean's unabated colors. Rowan stared, a peculiar mixture of disappointment and attraction brewing inside him. The water's sapphire blue surface shimmered from the sunlight and rolling waves, revealing a stained brown underlayer, another strike against it in favor of the Emerald Coast. But dots of light danced erratically across it like shattering glass, which seemed to burn a memory through his eyes into his mind...

Making sandcastles with his mother, who was kneeling in front of him, studding his drizzled towers with tiny, gem-colored clams...*coquinas?*...and standing in knee-deep water, his black windswept hair standing out...his father was clutching a fishing rod, reeling in after one long, powerful cast...

"Honestly, I kinda thought you'd died, too," Bridget said, appearing at his shoulder. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Rowan. "Mom..." He glanced over at Millie, confident that she was too absorbed to listen in. "About yesterday..."

"I'm sorry," said Bridget. "I could have phrased what I said better. I just want you to get out and have fun, and maybe learn something from this trip. That's all."

"No, no..." Rowan responded. "What you said was perfectly fine. I agree with it. I just...gotta figure it out for myself."

His mother regarded him with pensive eyes. "Well alright then. What were you thinking?"

"Fishing," said Rowan almost instantly.

"Fishing." Bridget spoke the word as if it were a foreign language. "Why?"

"I remember Dad doing it at the Emerald Coast," said Rowan. "He took me on a few trips, too. And I just think...maybe if I picked it up here, I could expand on it and take it to other places. Something to work on."

"That's...certainly interesting," his mother discerned. "We're heading out to the store soon. You want to come with us and get what you need?"

"I'd love to," said Rowan resolutely.

"Hey Rowan, listen to this!" Millie shouted, reading from her phone. "Apparently when Spanish settlers first came here, they started out as a fishing village, but the fishing was so bad they said the waters were 'barren and lifeless as...as Hell!'" She giggled at her cursing. "And that's where it got its name from!"

Rowan rolled his eyes. "Thanks for the encouragement, Millie."

"Millie, you can say 'Hell' as long as you're talking about Hell's Gulf," said Bridget, walking back to the table.

"Okay! ...Hell's Gulf! Hell's Gulf!"

"Alright, that's enough."

Rowan turned back to the sea, tuning them out with no small effort. *Is the fishing really bad here?* He supposed things could have changed in the last few centuries...and besides, it was less about catching fish and more about delving into the skill to begin with. Still, though, reeling in his first fish could be the first big act of validation he needed...

There was only one way to find out.

Now, is there some kind of special knot or something? Rowan pulled out his own phone, intending to conduct his own research.

10:49am

The drive into town was slow, but Rowan neither noticed nor cared, as he had been poring through online angling spreadsheets, mouthing directions on how to tie the classic fisherman's knot (*loop, through the hole, seven wraps, back again, pull tight*).

By the time he had delved into different lure types, the car had pulled to a rugged stop. Rowan looked up to see they had parked in front of a single outstretched building with a corrugated tin roof, multiple doors along its length signifying individual stores. AUTO PARTS, read a painted wooden sign. HADDINGTON'S GROCERIES, said another. THE SHUCKED SHELL. CRABS 'N' STUFFS. BETTER CRABS 'N' STUFFS.

"Is that part of the same chain?" Rowan wondered out loud, pointing out the two stores.

"Can't be," said Bridget, observing them quizzically.

"Trademark infringement is probably way down on these peoples' priority list," Rowan muttered, exiting the car. Along with the familiar shoreline cocktail, the air carried the smell of engine oil, metallic water, and a lick of refuse. Around them, the Hell's Gulf locals ambled down the sidewalks, or milled in and out of different buildings. Most of them wore plaid shirts and filthy jeans, and from a cursory glance Rowan determined that his sister, his mother, and himself were the three youngest people in the area.

"That might be a baitshop down the road," said Bridget, pointing to a blue-and-white wooden shed nestled close to the shoreline. A rectangular workboat was docked behind it. "Want us to meet you there?"

"Sure," Rowan answered, starting towards the building.

"Actually," Bridget said suddenly, "why don't you come in with us, honey."

"Why? You know what I like, it's fine."

"Well, maybe you'll see a souvenir or something," she said hurriedly. Rowan stared at her, incredulous, until he looked over her shoulder and saw two greasy old men sitting on benches outside the store, eyeing Bridget and Millie with hungry intent. Rowan zipped his lip and followed them inside.

Haddington's Groceries was cramped and lit with rows of harsh fluorescent rods, each containing a handful of dead insects. There were only about ten aisles and a section of wall dedicated to frozen products. Bridget and Millie scanned them rather briskly, avoiding eye contact with the locals, who shuffled through the aisles, slow and woozy. Rowan trailed his mother and sister, wondering how he'd fare in a fight if the occasion arose.

Their cart finally full, Bridget and Millie rolled up to the gaunt cashier and began paying, Rowan lingering to examine a bowl of lurid keychains.

"Mom, I have to go," Millie piped.

"Why didn't you go at home? Let me guess – you didn't have to go then," said Bridget, cutting her off. "Well, where's the, uh..." She scanned the entirety of the store, then frowned. "Sir, where are the restrooms?" she said, turning to the cashier.

The cashier's face somehow drooped even lower. "Outside, 'round thataway," he croaked, sweeping a liver-spotted arm.

Bridget's mouth tightened, but she bagged the groceries and thanked the cashier before exiting the store. They pushed the cart down to the side of the complex where a line of aquamarine porta-potties sat nestled against the wall. "Oh, Lord," Bridget sighed to herself. "Well...you good to go in on your own?" she asked Millie.

Millie, however, stared at the porta-potties as if they had just materialized in a burst of fire. "Oh no. No, no, no, no! I won't!"

"Millie, if you have to go, then now's your chance," Bridget coaxed.

"I'm not going in those!"

"Why? I'm sure they're clean, Millie – I can check before you go in."

"No!" Millie sidestepped behind her mother's legs. "There's...there's *latrine lizards!*"

Even Rowan, to whom ignoring his sister's nonsense had become a learned skill, had to stifle a laugh. His mother, however, was perplexed. "There's *what?*"

"Latrine lizards!" Millie repeated. "Robbie Lambert at school told me about them! They live in porta-potties and reach up and bite you in the butt when you sit down! I'm not going in there!"

"Millicent, there's no such thing as latrine lizards," Bridget said firmly. *Uh oh, formal name*, Rowan thought.

"How do *you* know? Robbie Lambert showed me the scars!"

"On his – wait – Millicent Dorothy Vane, when did a boy at school show you his butt?"

And there's the full name. "I'm gonna go to the baitshop now," Rowan announced, sidestepping away. Neither appeared to hear him, but Rowan knew better than to stick around. He broke into a lively walk and crossed the road, finally clacking up a wooden boardwalk through the front doors.

The atmosphere was similar to Haddington's Groceries, but the aisles were packed with lures of all colors and sorts, sealed in tight plastic packages. *First things first.* He gravitated to the back of the store, where a selection of rigged-up fishing poles stood up against the wall like spears.

Rowan looked through the prices, his eyes narrowing in discontent. The cheapest rod was thirty dollars and he only had two twenties. Sighing, he removed a slick black one from its rack and went to examine lures. He finally settled on a pack of blue-and-silver rubbery flukes, then walked up to the counter.

The cashier was an African American man with a dreadlock-goatee combo, dressed in flashy rasta wear. He was rolling a cigar the thickness of a sausage link before he finally noticed Rowan. "That all?" he grunted.

"Yep," said Rowan, pulling out his wallet. "You, um, have any advice?"

"As to what," said the cashier.

Rowan hesitated. "Um...how to, like...catch them?"

The cashier sputtered with a snicker. "Bruh. I'm sorry – *what* was that?"

Rowan's face reddened. "I'm...I was just wondering if you could...like...tell me the best methods for...here."

The man put his fist to his mouth and ducked away, racked with laughter. "I'm sorry – I'm sorry. You're not from 'round here, aren't ya."

"I'm on vacation," said Rowan sheepishly.

"Well you take this shit and put it back where you found it," said the cashier, batting at the flukes, "and go get one o' them chartreuse buzzbaits and some wire leader. *That's* the shit you need."

"Thanks," Rowan muttered, before disappearing behind the aisle again. *Another good first impression*, he scolded himself.

After a minute he found a row of lures marked "buzzbaits", which resembled metal leaves and tentacled fish connected by a bent piece of metal. But as he ran his finger down the packages, he couldn't remember what the cashier had told him. *Shar-what?* Nothing remotely similar to the word appeared on the labels. *What even is that, some kind of alloy?*

Rowan hated the idea of going back and asking again; the cashier's perception of him didn't need to sink any lower. But Rowan swallowed his dignity and walked back to the counter. "I'm so sorry...*what* kind of buzzer bait?"

The cashier stared dimly at him. "What?"

"You...you said a certain kind of buzzer bait. I don't know what you meant?"

"What I *meant?* I don't got a hootin' of a hankerin' what you thought I meant," he said.

Rowan's face heated again. "You...you told me to...to...get a...uh..." He took a shuddering breath, the urge to stutter creeping in again. "I'm sorry, you..."

"You alright, kid?" said the cashier with something like mock concern. "Do I need to get a mop?"

A choked noise escaped Rowan's mouth. He looked away, the urge to bolt from the store building in his legs.

“Sebby, don’t be an ass.” A carbon copy of the cashier suddenly emerged from a side door, and Rowan nearly floored himself. “Sorry, bud...my brother pulls that gag all the time.”

“Oh, so do *you*, Mr. High-‘n’-Mighty,” Sebastian jabbed. “Get off that high horse, kiddo – you ain’t that big yet!” Sure enough, side-by-side, Rowan could tell that Sebastian was slightly larger-proportioned than his brother. “I’m surprised you don’t need an apple crate to see over the counter,” Sebastian continued.

“*I’m* surprised you don’t got brain damage from bangin’ your fat head on the doorframe,” the brother snapped. Rowan watched with mortified amusement. The original cashier turned to him. “Sorry again, bud...what was your question?”

“What kind of buzzer bait,” said Rowan.

“Chartreuse *buzzbait*,” the brother corrected. “Means lime-green.”

“Ohhhh,” said Rowan. “I’ll be back!” It took him no time to locate the lime-green lure. “Seven dollars?” Rowan mouthed. “Sheesh...” The rubbery flukes were three for five. But he took the buzzbait off its hook and paid for it with the fishing pole.

“Lime-green does better in brown water,” the brother assured him, handing Rowan his change. “Name’s Jerome. The handsome one.”

“Also the shitmouth,” Sebastian added. “Had to open a window today, it was so bad.”

“No, bro, you used another word wrong – ‘shitmouth’ means I talk shit, not my breath smells like shit.”

“You hear somethin’? All I hear is diarrhea comin’ outta someone’s mouth.”

“Okay, see here, you –”

“See *here!* You’re trippin’, bruh, you’re really expectin’ me to see what it is you’re sayin’?”

They bickered long after Rowan had exited the building and closed the door, fishing gear in hand. He crossed the road back to the strip, where his mother and sister stood waiting by the car, both looking irritated with each other.

“Got what you needed?” his mother asked in a would-be casual tone.

“Yeah,” said Rowan, as Millie entered the car and slammed the door behind her. “Uh...”

“Oh, I finally got her to go,” said Bridget, rolling her eyes. “Had to go in with her though. ‘*Latrine lizards*’. Really...”

Rowan shrugged. “I mean, at least it’s not *totally* ridiculous.”

Bridget sighed and rounded the car to the driver’s seat. “Just get in before the groceries defrost.”

12:25pm

They arrived home and settled in once more, and after some time to himself in which Rowan finally figured out the fisherman’s knot, he was ready to go.

The lure swung freely on the end of his line, jangling lightly. Rowan stared at it, doubtful of its ability to perform. It resembled a baby’s mobile more than anything that looked remotely appetizing. For seven dollars, Rowan wondered if the brothers had ripped him off.

Only one way to find out, he told himself again, but not before lathering his skin with copious amounts of sunscreen. A sunburnt Rowan Vane could stop traffic if he stood at an intersection.

A nervous gnaw in his stomach, Rowan descended the wooden stairs and walked to the beach below.

The tide was low, and the sand was squishy between his toes. Every other footstep pushed tepid water up through cracks. The smell of marine death was even more pungent. Something globular and translucent had washed up about twenty yards to his right; this too was being picked on by a pair of seagulls.

Rowan waded up to his knees and fiddled with the reel for a minute, before finally pulling back and making his first cast. He halted on the downward swing and the lure splashed a few feet to his left. “Oops,” he said, reeling in. He drew back again, sensing the weight of the lure at the end of his line. He made another cast. It flew twenty feet forward this time, and

Rowan reeled it in, feeling a wobbly resistance in the rod. "No way!" he exclaimed, reeling in, a spike of thrill in his heart. But he reeled in a bare lure. He stared at it, his brow furrowing.

He dropped the lure into the water and swept the rod tip. The metal blades spun and flashed attractively, sending tremors up the pole. "Ohhhh," he realized, its design now making sense to him.

He swung back and cast again, twitching the rod tip with the buzzbait's rhythmic pulses. It felt natural, eking out a few extra flashes, to really catch the attention of predatory fish. He found himself wading out deeper, subconsciously yearning to get the lure further, where the fish might be.

Movement to his left caught his eye, and he looked to see a gaggle of girls a hundred feet down the beach, their neon bikinis blazing against the drab sand. *Nice to know there are other vacationers down here*, he thought. *Very nice, actually...* They lingered by the waterline as if daring each other to be the first to go in. Rowan's fishing pole hung loose in his grasp as he stared. *Damn...if I could catch a big toothy fish and reel it in all showy, that'd be very impressive...very impressive indeed...*

At that moment an older woman, their mother probably, beckoned them back in, and shot Rowan a dirty look before reentering the house. Rowan dipped his head in humiliation. *Oops. Tactless.*

He pumped out an angry cast, reeling in more frantically. But suddenly there was a resistance – the rod bent forward – and a jolt of excitement coursed through his chest. "Yes!" Rowan backed up onto the shore, retrieving line – he was certain this was the real deal, he knew now the lure had done its job –

A nasty clump of seaweed washed up on shore, the buzzbait buried somewhere deep within it. Rowan blinked, his brow wrinkled in disgust. "Oh, come on," he grumbled, bending over to free up his hook.

"Those mermaids are flirtin' with ya," a voice said.

Rowan almost toppled forward, catching himself and wheeling to his right. Standing next to him, regarding him with faint curiosity, was a girl around his age, a few inches taller, blonde with piercing gray eyes. She wore a long-sleeve button-down plaid shirt and denim shorts. Somewhere within Rowan's scrambled brain a single rational thought surfaced: *Local...she's a local too*. Yet this girl was by far the most attractive of all the Hell's Gulfians he'd seen since his arrival.

"Excuse me?" he stammered.

She smiled. "Mermaids...they're flirtin' with ya." Her voice was full of light and accented with a Southern twang. "They leave their pubes on your hook. That's how they flirt."

Rowan gazed incredulously at her, his mouth going slack despite himself. She then broke and doubled over with laughter. "Sorry..." she gasped. "That's somethin' my dad used to say."

Rowan couldn't help but laugh too. "Oh! Yeah! Uh...she sure left a lot on there, though...maybe she was just looking for an excuse to get rid of it."

She laughed again, and Rowan felt a brief surge of confidence. *So far so good. No comparisons to dead frogs yet...*

"Well, you're not gonna catch much out here," she said, looking out into the sea. "Nothing comes 'round this way. You wanna catch fish? Try the mouth of the creek 'bout a mile up thataway." She pointed back the way she came, towards the distant green wall of trees. "You get there 'round sunset, the tide'll be comin' in, and all the fish'll all be in one place."

"Wow...thank you."

"Let me know how you do," she said with a smile. "I'll probably see you again. I come on down this here beach at least once a day. Sound good?" She started up her walk again.

"Rowan!"

She looked at him. "Rowin' where?"

"No, no, sorry...my *name's* Rowan."

"Ah." She smiled again. "Heather. Nice to meet you, Rowan."

"Yeah, same! Good luck!" He immediately regretted that last part. *Good luck with what? Dumbass!* But she was already on her way, her footsteps wiped clean by an incoming swell.

Did...did that just happen? But Rowan watched her form retreat down the shoreline, only after several moments convinced that it wasn't a mirage.

Unbelievable...and I'll see her again...I gotta get ready, gotta get to that spot... He turned and observed the treeline. *Over there...a quick walk that way...sunset...it'll probably take a good half-hour...*

"Who was that, Rowan?" Rowan snapped out of it to find Millie peering up at him, wearing her bathing suit and clutching a hot-pink plastic bucket.

"Uh, I –"

"Is she your girlfriend now?"

"No, no, she's –"

"Hey Mom!" Millie shouted up the dunes, from where Bridget had arrived. "Rowan's got a girlfriend!"

"Oh, really?" said Bridget, regarding Rowan from behind a sunhat and a tortoiseshell pair of sunglasses. "I saw you talking to her. Who was she?"

"She was just walking," said Rowan, looking away. "She told me –"

"Your face is red, Rowan!"

"Yeah, it's probably the sun, Millie," Rowan growled.

"You're blushing! You think she's *hot!*"

"Millie, shut up!"

"Rowan!" his mother admonished. "Millie, go, get out of here." Millie obliged, trotting towards a dry patch of sand. Bridget looked back at him. "So, *what* did she say?"

"She...Heather, she just told me the best spot to catch fish," said Rowan, pointing. "Down there, at sunset, apparently."

"Well, that's useful," said Bridget. "And who knows," she added with a little grin, "maybe you could get Heather's number and become pen pals."

"*Pen pals...*" The amount of cheese in the phrase nearly bore a hole through his tongue. "Mom, no one says 'pen pals' anymore."

"Well, what do you call yourselves now?"

"Not that," said Rowan.

"Regardless, Rowan, she seems nice enough, but..." She hesitated. "Don't, well...just remember, we're only here a week, remember that."

"Yeah...I know." But as his mother walked away to accompany Millie, Rowan's mind set sail along a current of *what-ifs*. The prospect of potentially working his way up to a friendship with Heather, maybe even something a bit more...it was elating, but most of all, it felt *possible*.

He turned back to the sea, wading back out to his knees, casting out again. Behind him, his mother was showing Millie how to make sandcastles. The image was perfect. For a moment, as he practiced his fishing, Rowan felt something he assumed was closeness to his father.

7:01pm

Rowan spent the rest of the daylight hours practicing his casts in the barren waters, and lying in bed, Heather's image swimming through his mind.

What was once a crude brine pool to him had suddenly opened into a land of unspoiled possibilities. If stoking a passion for fishing plus a relationship with a charismatic local girl had come from only his second day, he shivered from the notion of what could happen next.

He powered through his tuna casserole dinner that evening and set off for the front door, eager to grab his fishing pole.

"Rowan, where are you going?" his mother called out.

"That spot Heather told me about, remember?" Rowan shouted back.

Bridget arrived behind him, her expression tight. "Do you know where you're going?"

"She said to just go up the beach and there'll be a creek," said Rowan, inching closer to the doorknob.

“Rowan...are you sure it’s a good idea to be going off to some strange place at this hour?”

Rowan stopped and looked at her. “Mom, I told you I’d be going there tonight and you didn’t bat an eye.”

“Rowan –”

“Mom – you said I had free reign,” Rowan said sternly, turning to face her. “This whole beach all to myself, that’s what you said. So this is how I’m choosing to spend my time.”

His mother slumped, gazing at a point somewhere on the floor to his left. “You’re right, honey...you’re right. Go on, be safe, keep your phone on.”

“You got it, Mom.” He was halfway down the stairs before the front door closed.

He retrieved his rod, which was leaning against the railing, and trekked out onto the beach.

The sky held onto a remnant of tired blue, a streak of yellow behind the sun. As he walked, the nervous gnaw rekindled, more ravenous than before. Rowan had only a surface understanding of what could potentially be out there. Fish, obviously...but maybe sharks...would one of them even go for a lure? Rowan eyed his line, which seemed to possess the structural integrity of a cobweb. And he wasn’t even sure of the “actual” fish themselves. Could they be dangerous too?

After a few minutes he had passed up the vacation houses on his right side, and the properties gave way to a field of boulders and gnarled dead trees, whose roots plunged into and jutted from the sand. He found himself having to climb over twisted mounts of wood, splashing down into ankle-deep water on occasion. Gray, louse-like creatures with long antennae scurried along the moist bark, making Rowan flinch.

The roots gave way to a field of grass, which cut off at the water’s edge. The air smelled even stronger of salty, rotten vegetation. Among the thin stalks, crabs with one enlarged claw scuttled away from him, raising their arms in a manner that somehow reminded Rowan of jazz hands. He dredged through the grass, his feet stinging as they sank into noxious mud.

Ahead of him, beyond the grass, was a channel of seawater that ran out of sight inland. Rowan paused, able to decipher the movement of tidal water coursing up the creek. His heart gave a leap – this had to be the spot. But the ground on his side was uneven; on the other side was a small patch of clean sand. He gripped his fishing rod harder, weighing his options.

I have to get over there.

As he approached the creek, he noticed a rusty white sign sticking up near its edge: WARNING: DOLPHINS

He passed it up with little thought, tossing around the words in his mind. “*Warning?*” *Are they, like, bad dolphins or something?*

He stepped into the creek, the water rapidly rising to a point where he had to remove his phone from his pocket. As he sank chest-deep, he felt the tides pushing at him, drawing him upriver, where a maze of reeds obscured his view. He held his phone high above his head when the water stroked his neck, as if searching in vain for a signal. He pushed off with his feet, the ground below surprisingly sharp, like glass. He opted to use his fishing pole as a cane, submerging it and prodding the area ahead before moving forward.

Finally, the creek sloped upward, and Rowan emerged on the distant beach, soaked up to his chin, reeking of putrescent mud, his skin rubbed raw and irritated. Regardless, he emitted a relieved sigh. He had finally arrived, and the setting sun had exploded into a frozen wildfire over the waterline. It was the perfect backdrop for Rowan’s endeavor.

He stared at the mouth of the tidal creek. Intuition told him it would act as a funnel for small fish, which in turn would attract predators. Planting himself in the sand, and setting his phone in a safe spot, Rowan cast out.

The reel spat minute flecks of water onto his arms as it spun. He combed the shoreline, working his one lure with various speeds and positions, hoping at least one combination would result in a fish.

As the hour dragged on and the sky took on a blood-orange hue, familiar uncertainty bubbled inside him. Rowan supposed that luck simply wasn’t on his side, but that didn’t change the fact that he’d wanted to impress Heather and make something out of his purchases and practicing. Even if he had the temerity to make something up, he didn’t know enough about

the fish of Hell's Gulf to even spin an educated lie. He threw out what felt like his thousandth cast. *Please, please...let there be something.*

The water's surface burst in a frenzied roil ten feet to the right of his lure, and a school of small fish, the size of Rowan's fist with conspicuous black spots, leapt from the water. Rowan jolted with excitement – and gasped audibly when bigger fish sliced through the school, murderously tearing up their prey. The predators were silvery and big-eyed, the size and shape of rulers, and bristling with scythelike fins. He reeled in so fast he nearly snapped the handle, but he retrieved his lure in and reset. *Perfect!*

He threw the buzzbait directly in the middle of the fray, pumping with deliberation - and suddenly his rod slammed forward, bending and pointing directly at the school. He could see his taut line reflect orange – and one of the fish rocketed from the water, a silhouetted missile against the sunset, a glint of lime-green hooked in its splayed mouth.

“Holy shit!” Rowan shouted as his quarry splashed down, thrashing to and fro. He held on, the fish's kicks electrifying his arms – he realized he had to start reeling in – and he led the fish back through the school, wondering how he was going to handle it once he –

With a snap like bone, his rod sprung back straight and inert, and the line flopped pitifully onto the surface.

Rowan stared at the rod's tip, his jaw hanging slack.

“Uhhhhh...” He fingered the line running through the eyelets, plucking it back, feeling a sobering weightlessness. Fifty feet out, the fish jumped again, the severed buzzbait still clattering in its lip.

The roil died away, and the only disturbance on the water was the middling flow of the tide.

“Well then,” he muttered. A fitting end to a rashly assumed ‘passion’.

He reeled in the remnants of his broken line and trudged up the sand to grab his phone. He supposed he could buy a different, cheaper lure tomorrow, if he could find a quality one for what little cash he had left. At least he had a story for Heather, if not an actual capture...

Amid the crushing letdown, a peculiar pressure rose in his stomach. *Whoa...that tuna casserole went right through me.* He had to go, all but certain he couldn't make it home in time before soiling his swimsuit. He spun around, pleading silently for an answer. The sand? The grass? The ocean? And what would he use to wipe? A scallop? Some kelp?

Something in the forest behind him captured his attention – a sign, much cleaner and newer than the one at the creek. It depicted two pictograms, a man and a woman. Its meaning could not have been clearer, or more welcome, to Rowan.

He hurried up the sand into the forest, following a lightly treaded path to where he presumed was a restroom.

The sun had completely set, rendering the woods' interior a muted purplish gray. Some sort of cricket emitted a long, unbroken trill. The forest floor was littered with needles and dry leaves, which jabbed the bottoms of his feet; he cursed himself for not bringing a pair of shoes. But ahead, sitting off the trail, was the unmistakable figure of a porta-potty.

Rowan moseyed up to it, set his fishing pole against its outside wall, and turned on his phone light before entering.

As expected, its interior was cramped and dark and smelled sour with waste. But a full roll of toilet paper was more than enough to convince Rowan to drop his bathing suit and sit.

After a minute, the pressure had lifted, and Rowan exhaled, savoring the soothing emptiness inside him. He felt better about fishing, and Heather, and his brief brush with success at the creek mouth. *No matter. I'll try again tomorrow. I have every opportunity to try again.* He flexed his legs, readying himself to stand.

“AAAAAAAARGH!!!” Something had latched onto his left buttock, and he could feel its weight as it pierced his skin with brutal points. Rowan jumped forward, crashing into the locked door, his ass lit with searing pain. “WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK –” He slid on the slippery floor, fresh blood pouring down his upper thigh – his first thought was of some horrible infection in his ass, induced by fecal bacteria – he groped for the lock, his left leg cramping –

An echoing rattle welled up from the hole, and with it came the sounds of gripping, sliding claws on plastic.

Rowan wheeled around, his phone light illuminating the porta-potty, and from inside the toilet seat emerged a reptilian head, scaly and squared, with glowing orange eyes and peglike teeth, studded with flecks of dried shit.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAA!!” Rowan pounded on the door, which burst open, causing him to fall out. His swimsuit still around his ankles, he yanked them up and waddled as fast as he could, one hand on his butt, his phone light a white blur against the darkened forest –

The thing was chasing him, he could hear its feet pounding against the leaves...he shot a glance behind him and saw something long and low to the ground, the color of asphalt – he smelled the encroaching odor of stale piss –

“NO NO NO NO NO NO,” he blubbered, forcing himself to accelerate past the pain – he emerged onto the beach, his momentum carrying him far past the sand – and he tripped and faceplanted into the shallow water.

His squashed nose canceled out the pain in his ass, and he staggered to his feet, dripping water, his butt warm and sticky with what he hoped was just blood. He limped to shore, retrieving his phone, which had mercifully landed in dry sand.

A stitch in his side, his heart racing, he shined the light back into the forest. It was quiet and motionless beyond the trees.

Rowan babbled, his knees trembling, his eyes wide and unblinking.

I guess Robbie Lambert and I have scars to match.

Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author’s labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.



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