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**Trying For The Kingdom**

By

**Lauren Stiers**

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2022

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*Trying For The Kingdom*

by

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## Declaration Of Originality

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## Abstract

“Trying For The Kingdom” is a novella exploring the themes of queer culture and communication, the coded languages our communities have utilized to seek each other out across time, and the circumstances which made coded communication necessary. Set in the spring of 1987, the story follows Daniel McBride over the weekend of his uncle’s funeral, as he uncovers three interwoven mysteries: what happened the night St. Jude Catholic Church caught fire, where Dorothy McBride vanished to when she crawled into her family mausoleum decades ago, and what his relationship with ex-boyfriend and suspected arsonist Lachlann Mills means to him in light of these revelations. All three mysteries culminate in a series of posthumous ciphers left to him by his Uncle Arthur, the priest of the local parish.

In this thesis, the concept of ‘queer coding’ is utilized in the language queer people have created throughout history to safely connect and form communities. Daniel’s struggle to engage in the decoding of these ciphers reflects his reluctance to engage in his sexual identity in light of his religious family and the ever-watchful eyes of his small home town in rural Ontario.

The thesis title and chapter titles are inspired by songs from The Velvet Underground. Other allusions include the poems of Sappho, the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and *The Wizard of Oz*.

## Table of Contents

Declaration Of Originality .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
Prologue .....	1
Chapter One: St. Anthony's Coin .....	7
Chapter Two: Lost And Found .....	22
Chapter Three: Dead Man's Letters.....	29
Chapter Four: The Hayloft.....	40
Chapter Five: Oh! Sweet Nuthin' .....	55
Chapter Six: Ain't Got Nuthin' At All .....	63
Chapter Seven: The Service.....	76
Chapter Eight: Truce.....	87
Chapter Nine: Grave Young Men.....	109
Epilogue .....	125
Queer Communications, Queer Love .....	131
Vita Auctoris.....	149

## Prologue

Hours after the fire reduced St. Jude's to skeletal carbon, Daniel McBride can smell the smoke still clinging to his clothes. He sits slumped at his kitchen table, smoothing out the notches in the edge of a piece of scrap paper, while his uncle paces himself into tangles with the phone cord in the living room. Daniel's parents and older sister are asleep upstairs, and the excitement of the night has left the house in a restless quiet. Father Arthur has too much fallout to deal with, calls to make and plans to arrange. Daniel for his part simply can't sleep.

With final goodbyes, Arthur hangs up the phone and crosses into the kitchen. He braces his hands on the counter, hangs his head low and exhales. From the window, the first suggestions of dawn stain the horizon. Scattered on the table are a few sketches of the church done in watercolour and charcoal. Daniel drags the closest one to him and looks it over.

"Did Mrs. Mills do these?" Daniel asks.

"Hm?" Arthur looks over his shoulder at Daniel as if just realizing that he's there. It takes a moment for the question to settle in. He waves his hand, sighs, and turns to the coffee machine. "Oh, yeah. I asked her to do a painting for the rectory. Got the sketches from her a few days ago. Glad she finished them when she did." He smiles, lifts two coffee mugs, and when Daniel nods, sets them both out. There's still no telling how much destruction there was to Arthur's home. The rectory beside St. Jude's didn't take the brunt of the fire, but it spread far enough to do damage before the Fire Department made it up the hill. By the time they managed to put out the fire, it was pitch black out. The morning would reveal the extent of the loss.

The coffee pot bubbles and hisses, and Daniel feels that his whole body's been drained and stuffed with cotton, then embalmed in his own sweat. At the counter, Arthur pours the coffee out, loads up cream and sugar. The scrap paper in Daniel's hands feels brittle from his constant fidgeting. A few lines of shapes stretch in groups across the top of the page. Underneath, Daniel had decoded the message: "*Meet Me At The Graveyard At Midnight.*"

"Lachlann didn't do it," Daniel says abruptly.

The rattle of the teaspoon stops. Daniel doesn't look up from the table, but he hears Arthur's sigh as he sets the spoon in the sink. Arthur places a mug in front of Daniel and takes up the chair on the opposite side of the table. "What happened, Daniel?" he asks. "Do you know?"

Daniel doesn't, but he knows more than he can say out loud. He watches the slick oil on the surface of his coffee, swirls it a bit by the handle. Watches it slosh over the side and burn his fingers.

He'd just snuck into bed after coming back from making out with Lachlann Mills. His window was still open, shoe prints scuffed on the eaves-trough, and suddenly there'd been frantic knocking at the door like gunshots popping off in the night. He'd thrown himself at the window to see his uncle at the front door, and a warm light growing on the other side of the gorge.

"I was in bed. Heard you at the door." Daniel shrugs. Wipes his hand on his jeans, "and I just — wanted to see it for myself."

Arthur's chair creaks as he shifts forward, elbows on the table, taking a long sip. "Have you seen Lachlann?"



At the gorge. Staring up at the church fire over the river, warm in the blazing glow of it. The smoke spilling down the other side of the gorge, billowing into the woods, dreamlike haze throwing bars of shadow through the trees like searchlights. Daniel hadn't set out to find Lachlann, had no reason to think he'd be anywhere but his mother's house where Daniel had left him an hour before. Half the town had dragged themselves out of bed to watch wide-eyed as St. Jude's burned up. But Daniel found him there anyway, staring at the flames, heaving in panic, grabbing onto Daniel's jacket in a senseless repetition of "*It wasn't me, I didn't do it, I was just there,*" before shoving away and running off into the crosshatched haze of the woods.

Daniel doesn't look at his uncle. "No."

"He was seen running away from the fire, Daniel," Arthur continues. The words come out unsteady and uncertain. Too much like he's trying to comfort a cornered animal. "And it's well known he was... troubled."

"It wasn't him," Daniel snaps.

He knows Uncle Arthur doesn't believe him. The parish won't either, but Arthur doesn't say it out loud. He's too kind for that, and Daniel squirms in his seat under his pity. Arthur sighs, taking a long sip as he stares out the dark blue windows, and pivots the conversation. "Do you know any reason why he might have been up there?"

Daniel swallows and still tastes ash in his throat. He's not sure he's going to answer until he does. "We heard about the story of Dorothy McNabb," Daniel confesses as he shows Arthur the scrap of paper. Lachlann had slipped it into the back pocket of Daniel's jeans. "It's the Freemason cipher. He wanted me to go up there with him."

Arthur drains the last of his coffee. He sits there for a moment, watching the residual drops pool at the bottom of his mug. Clearing his throat, Arthur stands and crosses over to the sink to wash it out. “What did you hear about her?”

“Just the rumours.” Daniel scrubs at his eyes, shrivelled dry in their sockets. “That she was this lady who disappeared from town a long time ago. One night she just went crazy and ran away from her husband. Crawled into her family’s mausoleum and never came out. When they went to look for her, she was gone. It’s just this ghost story we heard at school.” Daniel pauses, leans his chin into his hand, and picks at the lace on the table. “It’s stupid. Me and Lachlann — we were reading the books you gave us.”

“The detective stories?”

Daniel hums and takes the paper again, holding it up to the light. “And the code books. Y’know, like the Freemason Cipher, and using lemon juice as invisible ink that shows up when you heat it up.”

Arthur nods slowly. “I’m familiar.”

“Well, we heard that Dorothy McNabb was into that kinda stuff too. Used to leave messages to her maid. Lachlann thought she might have left a code or something, and we could figure out what happened to her.”

“What happened to Mrs. McNabb is unfortunate.” Arthur shuts off the tap and takes his time wiping his hands on the dishcloth. He opens the fridge, roots around, and comes back with a ceramic dish of leftover apple crisp Daniel’s mom had made two nights ago. Arthur sets it in the middle of the table with two spoons, and offers Daniel a tired smile. “But you’d be best off

forgetting it,” he says as he sits down and takes a swipe out of the cold dish. “What does that have to do with Lachlann?”

Daniel reaches across the table for his spoon and takes a chunk. “He wanted to go into the mausoleum,” he says around a mouthful, washing it down with his coffee. “I said no.”

Daniel had said it was stupid. He said that he wasn’t going to break into a grave behind his Uncle’s Rectory just to satisfy Lachlann’s curiosity, and that they were going to get caught. And Lachlann called him scared. Hidden by the green foliage of Mrs. Mill’s conservatory, they’d bickered and pushed at each other, until Daniel saw a shadow move away from the window. Any trace of their earlier romance gone, Daniel went home thinking it was just another fight, that they could talk at school between classes, like they always did. Maybe afterwards kiss under the bleachers at lunch.

“Look, I can talk to Lachlann, clear everything up.” Daniel leans forward across the table, arms folded, half pleading. “Maybe it was an accident, I can talk —”

“Daniel, talking’s not going to do anything. He’s gone,” Arthur interrupts calmly. And there’s that awful pity again. “He’s gone. His Mom put him on the first bus out of town an hour ago. He’s going to live with his dad.”

Daniel’s stomach turns inside out. He knows it shows on his face, can feel the palid heat in his cheeks, the souring in his mouth. He feels for a moment like he might throw up. Breathing through his nose, Daniel drains the last cold dregs of his coffee.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur continues. He hesitates before reaching across the table to lay his hand over Daniel’s wrist. “I... know you two are close. You know you can tell me...”

Daniel pulls his arm back. Drops his spoon in the apple crisp and pushes away from the table. "I reek like a bonfire," he says. "Gonna go take a shower."

Arthur starts to rise with him at first but settles back into his seat with a wan smile. "Alright," he says thinly. "Just... come talk to me when you need to."

## Chapter One: St. Anthony's Coin

He gets the news Thursday afternoon. Just as he arrives home from the boxing ring, work boots draining sleet onto the rubber mat by the door. His roommates, Edith and Tom watch him from the kitchen, hovering by the phone. He knows something is off the second the door shuts out the late March chill behind him, and the air in their shared apartment is left stagnant and tense. His mom rang a few minutes ago, Tom tells him. She wanted him to call her back.

Uncle Arthur passed away around 3pm. Forty minutes ago. Daniel leans against the kitchen counter and stares out at the piebald grass in the courtyard. *He went so peacefully, Danny, but it was all so sudden, you know. Your dad's not said much, but he's hurting, I know. His younger brother. Beth is coming around for dinner tonight so we can get everything sorted. The parish wants to do something for him at the Hayloft tomorrow night. Wouldn't that be nice? Come by around five.*

Daniel starts writing the obituary in his head on the walk to his childhood home, a stretch of dirt road leading from the centre of town into the shaded lanes of farm country. Father Arthur will be remembered at St. Anthony's Church as one of the good ones. He was a local boy, started out young in the parish. Filled his sermons with a sense of wry humour. Had a stellar taste in music. Sat in the same stool at The Hayloft's bar top for twenty years drinking Canada Dry. The ready ear for the town's confessions. Father Uncle Arthur, wanted to be a rockstar, couldn't sing or play guitar, so he became a priest.

Walking up the gravel drive to the McBride Family's white-sided bungalow, he can already smell his mother's pot roast. The curtains are drawn shut and the door left open wide

when he makes it up to the front porch. Daniel steps in cautiously. A floral bedsheet lays draped over the mirror in the foyer. The cross-eyed Virgin Mary statue his mother had bought at a flea market fifteen years ago sits on the entry table, the first thing you see upon entering the home, giving a disapproving once-over to everyone who steps inside. And at two different angles, the judgmental bitch.

“Hullo?” Daniel calls into the dead-quiet house as he stumbles out of his sludge-damp boots. His socks soak into the muddied water pooling on the rug. “Mum? What’s up with the mirrors?”

His older sister pops her head out from the opening to the kitchen left of the foyer. She swipes her hand across her neck and shakes her head, but whatever it is she tries to mouth to Daniel in warning, he can’t make it out before his mother bowls Beth over in her sobbing haste to get to him. Daniel staggers back as she throws her arms around him with enough pressure to pop his eyes out of their sockets. Beth only shakes her head as she disappears back into the kitchen.

It takes Daniel a few moments to worm his arms free enough to hug his mother back, the four-foot-something of her tiny frame latching onto him with surprising force. Whatever it is he’s supposed to say, whatever recorded and rehearsed exchange he’s meant to know, he can’t find the words. Bonnie McBride doesn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, I’m so sorry you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye,” she sniffs as she pulls away. “He wasn’t in any discomfort in the end. Oh, he was still so young too. Came out of nowhere! And the two of you were so close.” Bonnie reaches up and smooths Daniel’s sandy hair back. “How are you, Danny? How are you feeling?”

Daniel ducks out of his mother's reach and attempts to reassure with a smile. "I'll be alright," he says. "I mean, I'll miss him, I'm just – glad he didn't suffer." Easiest way to open and close the conversation, he hopes. Daniel turns back to close the door behind him when his mother steps in his way to open it wider.

"Leave that, Danny. The doors have to stay open." She shuffles past him again and toward the kitchen. "Just hang up your jacket in the hall closet, leave the door."

"I don't have my jacket." Daniel follows her out of the foyer. "Lost it at the ring. What about the door?"

In the kitchen, Bonnie shoos Beth away from the bubbling pots on the stove so she can open the oven door. A waft of heat surges through the kitchen. "It's tradition," she says with her head halfway in the oven. "The windows and mirrors are covered so the spirit doesn't get trapped in the glass. The door stays open so it can find its way out."

Daniel catches Beth shaking her head, but only frowns as he pushes on. "Mom, Uncle Arthur didn't die here."

Beth rolls her eyes as the oven door shuts and Bonnie stands upright. "He could have followed us home, you don't know," she snaps, and with a great show of sniffing and wiping of hands on a dish towel, moves to the sink. "No sense in risking it. Don't you care if your poor uncle's soul is trapped in purgatory forever?"

The accusing silence that follows has Daniel shifting on his feet. The pots on the stove bubble and splatter over. "I thought that was just a superstition."

“I think what Dan means,” Beth steps in before their mother’s righteous indignation can reach its zenith, “is that Uncle Arthur’s sure to have gotten exactly where he was going.”

Bonnie shakes her head, a greying curl of dark hair spilling out from her up-do. “Well, it doesn’t hurt to help him along.” She straightens out the dishtowel on the side of the sink.

“Of course not.” Beth takes the opportunity to turn down the burners under the simmering pots on the stove top.

A shrill ring splits Daniel’s ears and sends his mother scurrying over to the phone in the sitting room. From the other side of the railed divider between rooms, he watches her pick up the phone and twist the cord around her fingers. “Hello? Oh, Renee, I haven’t heard from you in ages, how’s your boy? Good, good. It’s awful, isn’t it? Thank you, you have no idea what it means. Poor Irving’s so broken up over it.”

Daniel tunes out the conversation. With their mother distracted, Beth takes the pot of potatoes and drains them into a colander in the sink. “Read the room, would you?” she whispers to Daniel as she passes.

Daniel frowns. “What?”

Beth shakes the colander until the water stops dripping and dumps the potatoes back into the pot. “Grab the butter and milk from the fridge for me,” she says as she sets the pot on top of the folded dish towel. Taking both from Daniel, she fishes around in the drawer for a masher and gets to work as he takes a seat at the table.

“Where’s Dad?”



“Out in the shed, I think,” shrugging. “I saw him when I first came up. Think he’s taking it pretty hard.”

Daniel’s eyes shift instinctively to the window, where normally the view would stretch out across the grass and to the long white shed around the back of the drive. The heavy curtains suffocate the sunlight. “Did he say anything?” he asks.

“Not much.”

“Beth, not too much salt,” Bonnie calls from the sitting room, holding the phone to her shoulder.

“I haven’t touched the salt yet, Mom,” sighing.

“And check on the gravy, I don’t want it to burn. Yes, I’m still here, Renee.”

Beth drops a tablespoon of butter into the pot and grabs the saltshaker as if it’s a neck she’s keen to throttle. Daniel watches her with a bit of fear. “Did you, uh,” he clears his throat, “Did you see him at all?”

“I just told you, he’s in the shed.”

“No, I mean Uncle Arthur.”

“Earlier this week when he first got admitted. He asked me to bring him some books. And he had this weird craving for lemons,” Beth replies as she pours the milk in. She stops for a moment when she sets the carton down. “He looked alright. I mean, he looked sick but not... *that* sick, you know? Still in good spirits. I don’t get it.” There’s a heaviness to her voice, but with a shake of her head, she straightens up and keeps mixing. “What about you?”

“We were supposed to go fishing two weeks ago.” Daniel picks at the corner of the frayed tablecloth. “I cancelled on him.”

Beth stops and turns, leaning back against the counter with that awful, pitying expression Mom always reserved for break-ups and lost boxing matches. Daniel’s sure that if he pointed that expression out to Beth, she’d throw the potato masher at him. She crosses the kitchen, slings an arm around him. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” she says. “No one knew.”

Daniel nods, nudges her lightly, but otherwise doesn’t shrug away her kindness. With a last squeeze, she moves back to the stove and checks on the gravy, as Bonnie comes rushing back in, shooing Beth away again. Daniel rises from the table and stretches. “Gonna go find Dad.”

“Out in the shed,” Bonnie says.

“No, I know, I-“

“Go say hi if you haven’t already,” she all but pushes him out of the kitchen. Daniel stumbles along, thrown back out into the hallway where he bumps his hip against the entry table. Mary wobbles dangerously. “And wear your coat,” Bonnie says as she returns to the kitchen and scoops the mashed potatoes into a floral ceramic dish, “it’s getting cold out.”

“I lost it at the ring, Mom.”

\*\*\*

The old man has Buddy Holly crackling from the radio on the windowsill in the garage, doors lifted open to let in that rare sunny spring day. The cross breeze whisks up the scent of motor oil, mildew, and decades of pipe tobacco. Daniel hears the radio before he sees his father,

halfway back at the dark end of the shed, the hulking figure of him bent over a tool bench, hands drenched in black. Daniel fights back the urge to put his hands in his pockets, to duck his head down like he's a kid again, sent out to fetch Dad inside for dinner. His father: the type who'd have been happy as a farmer, had his own dad not sold the land to housing developers near to forty years ago.

“Hey, Dad,” Daniel calls out as he enters.

Irving doesn't look up immediately, just nods his head in bare acknowledgement that he heard him and continues tinkering. Daniel hovers uncertainly in the large doorway, and when he isn't turned away, pushes back his sleeves. He takes up an abandoned rag, sits on a hollow crate, and picks up the first piece of metal he sees. He starts to polish.

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Dinner's eaten and cleared away by the time the last evening light hemorrhages through the curtains, the breeze from the open door carrying the lingering heat from the oven out of the kitchen. For an hour, they play happy, functional family as countless other unhappy non-functional families do, if only on special occasions like the death of a relative. It almost works.

“The burial and funeral service will be this Sunday,” Bonnie says as she sets out a tin of cookies she's kept in the freezer since Christmas. “And there will be a visitation on Saturday at noon. We're the only surviving family, so we'll be the receiving line. The bishop is coming down to take over, Father Pat, you remember him? He baptized you, Danny.” Before Daniel can comment that no, he definitely *doesn't* remember a man he'd encountered when he was eight months old, Bonnie pushes a shortbread cookie at him and continues. “Was there anything else?”

She lays her hand over her husband's on the table. Irving, slouched back in his chair, shakes his head, raises his eye to his lips.

Daniel and Beth wash and dry the dishes before she heads home to her suburban rental, her steady boyfriend Frank, a plumber and respectfully the most boring man Daniel's ever met. Daniel sees her off while Mom rewashes the dishes and Dad sips a nightcap in his armchair.

"Danny?" His mother peeks her head around the corner as she dries a plate with so much force, he's afraid it'll break in her hands. "I have something for you, before you go."

"Yeah?" Daniel, taking the plate from her as she tiptoes into the sitting room, sets it back on the dish rack.

She returns with a plain wooden box tucked under her arm. The brass hinges and latch loosely rattle. "Your Uncle wanted you to have this. Told me yesterday, when he could still speak," she says with a hitch in her throat. Daniel wraps an arm around her. She pats his cheek with a teary smile. "Look at you. My strong young man. He was so proud of you, you know."

Daniel isn't sure what he should say, what the right words are, but Bonnie doesn't seem to mind. She never has. She pushes the box toward Daniel, and he runs his hand over the smooth top before tucking it under his arm and kissing his mother's cheek. "Better head out," he says as he moves into the foyer.

"Alright, if you have to," she says as she follows him, watching as he struggles back into his damp boots. Bonnie scowls, leaning against the wall. "You're not leaving without your coat, Dan."

Daniel stops with his heel uncomfortably smashed in against the back of his shoe. “Mom, I told you,” he groans. “I lost it.”

“Oh, I know just the thing for that.” She brushes past him. Daniel watches her curiously. He’s hoping that *just the thing* is one of Dad’s spare jackets. Instead, Bonnie McBride bustles over to the entry table. She opens a drawer under the lazy-eyed Mary to reveal a whole bank’s worth of trinket coins glistening in a shoe box. After pawing through the trove, she pops up again and stares expectantly at Daniel until he holds out his hand. She drops a single coin into his palm. On one side, the image of a bearded man with a halo holding a disturbing homunculus child. The words *Saint Anthony* inscribed along the border. Daniel flips it over. The inscription reads:

*Patron Saint of Lost Articles.*

*Something’s lost and can’t be found.*

*Help me as I look around.*

“Now, you just say that with your prayers,” his mother says as she shuts the drawer. Mary rattles uneasily. “And you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

Daniel only hopes his smile isn’t as painfully forced as it feels. In any case, his mother doesn’t seem to notice. She kisses his cheek and sends him on his way, coat forgotten. He’s always thought she’d have been happy as a Nun. She has that kind of self-importance about her. On the porch, Daniel pockets the coin and heads out onto the gravel drive.

Winter still lingers in dirty snowbanks on the sides of the road, but the night is clean, and he wants to keep it that way, and walks away from the hazy light of his one-street town blocking

out the stars. Daniel takes the old back roads, avoiding Main, until he comes onto the old railroad. The tracks haven't seen a train in decades now. They cut clear through the town, the black pine woods, and across the gorge. He doesn't have a destination in mind. He follows the rotten wooden planks, littered with pigweed and rusted pop cans, making it to the river. Moonlight crests on the rapids, but the picturesque view does nothing for the stench of dead fish and algae sitting in pools on the rocks. Ahead of him the old train bridge stretches over the water, and above its rusted beams, if he squints, Daniel swears he can see the charred peak of St. Jude's.

Eddy and Tom are still up when he gets back to their apartment over the laundromat, lounging on the couch and watching *Star Trek* with a whole pot of spaghetti and two forks on the coffee table. Eddy turns the moment he walks in, dislodging Tom's head from her lap. "Hey," she says cautiously. "You alright? I'm sorry about Father Arthur."

Daniel nods, breathes in through his nose to keep in check. "Thanks," he says. "Yeah, it was just... really sudden."

"Did they say what it was?" Tom asks as he readjusts himself on the sofa.

"Tom," Eddy snaps.

"What?"

"I haven't heard anything," Daniel cuts in. "Not even sure if the doctors knew. He just went in for the flu last week."

Daniel feels Eddy's eyes boring into him. "Well," she says, "you've got open ears if you want to talk about it, alright?"

“Appreciate it,” Daniel says, “there’s just... I dunno, not too much to talk about. I’ve known for a couple days that things were going south, but I guess I’m...”

“Processing?”

Daniel coughs. “Anyway, there’s going to be a memorial at the Hayloft tomorrow night.”

Eddy stands and heads to the refrigerator, where she takes out three cans of beer and expertly juggles them back to the coffee table. “I got the call from Marty about that an hour ago. Asked me to pick up a shift.” Cracking the tab back, she passes a can to Daniel. “I’ll keep your drinks coming.”

“And I,” Tom says as he opens his own can, “will help you finish them.”

Daniel laughs, the first time he’s managed to since the afternoon, and he still feels the sound ringing hollow in his chest. He raises his can in a cheer to Eddy and Tom, and takes a healthy chug. “Think I’m gonna turn in early.” He wipes his mouth on his forearm. “Wind down a bit.”

“Do what you need to,” Eddy says.

The first thing Daniel does is open his bedroom window. Pulls up the blinds and lets the waft of cool night air wash in. There’s got to be something wrong with him. An easy conclusion to draw. The grief hasn’t come boiling over yet, he presumes, and every time he expects the loss to spill out, he feels it settle deeper down. He wants to be sad. He should be, but whether the reason is that he hasn’t absorbed the reality of his Father Uncle’s passing or because there’s nothing left to feel for the dead man, he can’t tell. Daniel sits on the edge of his creaky bed and stares down at the box in his lap, smooths his hand over the lid, and wonders if his uncle is

already scrubbed clean and drained out, waiting in a wooden box like this for his grand send off. The image, a waxy corpse that once resembled Arthur McBride, still does little to rouse the tardy grief in Daniel, and he cannot figure out why.

Perhaps because his mother is right — they were close. When Daniel was a kid, he'd spend hours with his uncle, raiding his personal library, fishing off the old train bridge. Uncle Arthur had been his confidant. Who better to confess to than a priest? They *were* close. The chasm that'd opened up between Daniel and his uncle since the fire had grown with every year, bridged by half-hearted conversations at the Hayloft, unaccepted invitations to go fishing, and the glass façade that nothing had changed at all. What any good Catholic family excels at.

Daniel's thumb hesitates over the latch. It comes undone with a weak click. Daniel assesses the contents: a stack of weathered photographs, the watercolour sketch of St. Jude's done by Renee Mills, a wad of newspaper wrapped around something thin and delicate, a paperback book, and a letter. The letter sits on the top of the pile. Daniel plucks it out first, turns it over in his hands, smoothing out the creases, but sets it aside without opening. For each of the other items he does the same, takes them out one by one, holds them up to the amber lamplight, and sets them on the bedspread beside him. He unwraps the newspaper to find a piece of weathered cardstock pressed with dried violets. Next comes the sketch: beautiful watercolour on thick paper detailing a view of St. Jude's from the gorge in vibrant colour. Scribbled pencil lines billow out from the roof of the church. He frowns, vaguely recalling the last time he'd seen the sketches, the night of the fire. The smoke clouds hadn't been there. Daniel runs his thumb over the smoke, skin coming back blackened with graphite, before he moves on.

He pauses on the book — *Codes, Cyphers, and Secret Writing*. It'd once been his favourite. Daniel had spent years bringing this book everywhere with him, travelling in



backpacks and back pockets, pages dog-eared and cover curled to fit wherever he needed. Years of greasy fingerprints stain the pages as Daniel flips through, glancing over ancient pencil scribbles. Next Daniel picks up the photographs, flips through an assortment of snapshots from his childhood. Easter Egg hunts in the forest behind St. Jude's, the first perch he caught on a fishing trip when he was eight. The photos begin to predate him as he sorts through the loose stacks. Arthur at his seminary school convocation, Dad and Grandpa on the farmstead, baby photos so worn and faded he could barely make out the faces. Daniel's first boxing match championship against a peer, his bruised lip and sweaty glee as the Ref holds up his gloved fist next to a scowling Duncan Murray.

In the middle of the stack are two photos taken in the same location, decades apart. Daniel stops when he comes to the first. A fundraiser picnic, nearly ten years ago in front of St. Jude's. The parish volunteers all stand in front of the church, crowded around Father Arthur standing bright and grinning in the center. Daniel's parents stand beside Arthur, arm in arm. Scattered throughout the crowd are faces he recognizes without names, the same people he saw every Sunday for the first decade and a half of his life. In the front row are the children of the volunteers, most of them classmates of Daniel's. There's Duncan about to pull Edith Campbell's hair the second after the flash goes off. Tom Wigle picking fistfuls of grass. Jane Dawson, with pigtails and crooked teeth. And at the far end of the row, Daniel sits with Lachlann Mills. The two boys all scraped knees and unruly hair, laughing at each other in ignorance of the future spectator holding the picture.

Here, Lachlann is still shorter than Daniel by an inch, but it won't last long. He's about to shoot up past him over the summer, and the Daniel in the photo, the one trapped in that August

afternoon, will never let it go. Wild, dark curls nearly cover his blue eyes. Between the two of them, lying in the grass, is the same cypher book.

Daniel tosses the photo back into the box. The photo after it is nearly identical, displaced by about thirty years. A parish group picture in front of the doors of St. Jude, grainy and sepia toned. Arthur stands to the side with Irving, the McBride brothers in their prime, in his brand-new clerical collar. Daniel flips the photo over to read the back, looking for a date he can place it in, and finds instead a list of names identifying the group from left to right, row by row. He scans through the names, wondering if he might find anyone he recognizes from this older generation, when his eyes stop on one name: Dorothy McNabb.

Daniel sits up, strains toward the lamp to see clearer. The name rings hollow through the back of his head and down his spine. Middle row, third from the left. He turns the photo back over, counts through the anonymous faces until he comes to her. The age of the photo makes it difficult to parse out any distinct features. All Daniel sees is a serene face, staring straight back at him through the camera. Her husband stands next to her, stern-faced with a heavy hand on her shoulder.

Daniel drops the photo into the box, shoves everything back inside, and pushes it underneath his bed. His hands shake as he cards them through his hair, exhales into his palms as they scrub down over his face. There are too many questions, too nebulous, flooding his head until he sees stars with how hard the heels of his palms dig into his eyes. Daniel paces to the window, sticks his head out into the cool night air, the mist of March rain stinging his cheeks.

When he can breathe again, Daniel pushes away from the window. The box sits unassumingly under his bed, half hidden by a drooping corner of his quilt. He feels the hairs on

the back of his neck stand on end, like someone's breathing just over his shoulder. It's too early to be haunted, he thinks, but still, Arthur's presence lingers heavily in the stagnant room. Daniel nudges the box out of sight under his bed as he passes toward his bookshelf. He picks out the first book his fingers brush over: *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. It's feeble as a distraction, but he brings it to his bed anyway, and opens it to the first case. *The Empty Houses*.

Daniel reads late into the night.

## Chapter Two: Lost And Found

Daniel wakes up the next morning with an ache in his neck and crust in his eyes. A thick, musty damp has settled into the room overnight from the open window, the second-hand curtains glowing nicotine gold in the early light. He groans, rolls over, rubs at his eyes, and remembers that his Uncle is dead. And with that comes the litany of tasks needing to get done: cleaning out the rectory, setting up the memorial, finding time to let it all sink in. He's heard before that grief comes in many forms, that everyone feels it differently, but he's pretty sure that the compulsory part is feeling *something*.

All he feels is frog-throated with an emotional hangover, a throbbing mass in the base of his skull and a numbness down his spine. He still has the workday to get through before the get-through of the weekend, so with some reluctance, he peels himself out of bed and tip-toes into the shower before either of his roommates wake up. Shampoo in his eyes, and a Bergamot-scented body wash his Mom got him for Christmas like she was trying to make a point. He feels a touch more human when he comes out of his bedroom, dressed in yesterday's jeans and halfway dried. Tom's Post Office shift starts earlier than either Eddy's janitorial gig at the gym or Daniel's job at the cannery, and so he and Eddy have a tradition of walking to work together. With minimal warfare, they lock up, shrugging into boots left to dry in road-salt stains at the front door. Eddy eyes Daniel from the bottom of the stairs, the two of them crowding out the narrow entryway onto the street. "Where's your coat?"

"What're you, my mother?"

She nudges Daniel with her elbow.

Daniel nudges her back. “Lost it,” he replies. “It’s not that cold, feels nice out.”

Winter hasn’t retreated yet, but it’s given up ground. Earthworms rise from the dirt and flounder in snowdrift puddles on the concrete. Everything that died in the fall wafts up freshly rotted. Today, it cuts through the chill with teasing warmth and blue skies, dangling spring just out of reach. Eddy, still bundled in her winter coat, shrugs and kicks at a stubborn mound of slush on the side of the road. “And how’re you feeling?”

“Fine,” he replies. “I mean, it all just... sucks. Trying not to think about it too much. I’m going over after work to help start the clean-up.”

Eddy scuffs her boot against the pavement. “Seems a bit fast.”

“It’s something to do,” Daniel replies. “Keeps everyone busy. And they’ve gotta bring in a new priest permanently at some point anyway. Besides,” Daniel’s grin comes with a natural strain in his cheeks. “I want to get my hands on his record collection.”

“You’re fucking awful,” Eddy laughs.

“Hey, I’ve got to get to it before my Mom does. She’d toss it all. It’s what he would have wanted.” Daniel finds himself laughing in spite of himself as Eddy takes a punch at his shoulder.

“Well, bring some of the records up to the Hayloft tonight,” she says as they come to the corner of the street. “We can put some on, make it a tribute.”

“Sounds nice, actually,” Daniel nods, and with a promise to consider it, they part ways, Eddy around the corner toward the gym for her cleaning hours, and Daniel across the street for his coffee. Aiming to kill a half hour before he clocks in.

The cafe takes up a corner of the main street, a brick terrace that decades ago had housed the local newspaper. Daniel hasn't seen it change much in all his life, not before they started doing take-out coffee. Rose-wash walls and cracked vinyl covers on round seats, photos of Paul Anka, every crack. Daniel spent nearly every Sunday morning of his childhood with his face pressed up against the donut display case, breathing fog over the names until his father smacked his head away from the glass. He's never been prone to sentimental musing, but maybe he can be excused for it this weekend.

Daniel shuffles his way into line, hands in his pockets, pretending to be in a hurry in the hopes that no one will talk to him. Already, the wayward eyes of the morning crowd sitting in the cafe pick him apart where he stands, their attention itching underneath his skin. Daniel shifts from foot to foot and looks over the menu board as if he's going to order anything but his two-milk-one-sugar coffee and apple cinnamon muffin.

He makes it to the counter without the flight-or-fight response kicking in. A bored teenager at the register asks for his order. "One eighty," the boy reports back without looking up.

Daniel nods, fishes into his wallet for change and drops a handful onto the linoleum countertop. Two dollar bills, five quarters, two dimes, and a disapproving homunculus child glaring up at him from St. Anthony's arms. "Shit, sorry," he cringes as he sweeps the coin back into his hand and sorts out enough to pay for his order and a tip. The kid scoops it into the register, barely taking the time to count it out before giving him his receipt. Daniel moves on to the hand-off by the window. The bell over the door rings.

No lead up, no warning. Daniel looks twice, squints, convinces himself he's having a long overdue mental breakdown. The alternative doesn't seem any better. Lachlann's hair is a

little longer, his shoulders have filled out and his limbs don't hang so awkwardly on his tall frame. Still, the dark curls are a dead give-away. He walks inside, scrutinizes the menu board as he steps into line, hands in the pockets of a dark denim jacket. There's an idiom here, something about thinking of the devil and there he is, but Daniel's too shell-shocked to appreciate it.

Lachlann's eyes land on him. Daniel's tongue goes dry as kindling in his mouth. The line seizes up behind Lachlann, and an older woman sighs impatiently before side-stepping around him. Lachlann blinks once, twice, a hopeful smile growing on his lips. "Daniel." He says his whole name, every syllable, like it means something.

All at once, Daniel can't take it. He's been wondering what his limit is, and it just fucking walked in. Pushing away from the hand-off Daniel stalks out of the cafe, shouldering past Lachlann, ignoring the confused shout of the cashier calling after him with his abandoned breakfast. The frigid sunlight knocks the wind out of him the moment he steps out the door, bell ringing above his head. He turns the corner and stalks down Main Street, taking long strides to put as much distance between himself and the cafe as he can. The bell rings again behind him.

"Dan!"

His feet arrest on the ground. Lachlann has stepped out of the coffee shop, and Daniel feels like he's dying standing up. A chalk outline of himself just waiting to hit the pavement. Cursing his luck, he turns to face Lachlann, his mind still reeling with this dead boy walking. He stands under one of a dozen dogwood snags lining the open street, watches as Lachlann's courage bleeds out.

Lachlann's shoulders drop with a heavy shrug. "Nice to see you too."

"What are you doing here?" Daniel snaps without preamble.

Lachlann blinks. Starts to speak three times before he gets the words out. “What do you mean?”

Daniel stomps a step closer. He would rather slice himself apart and slip down the sewer grates than have this conversation, but someone seems to have made damn sure he doesn't have a choice. The spotlight narrows, and the Giant Foam Finger of God points straight down at him. At least He's got to find this funny. Daniel, seething, stops a few feet shy of Lachlann. “What the fuck are you doing here?” he repeats deliberately.

Lachlann's frown deepens. “I heard about your uncle.”

Daniel's hand twitches with the effort not to deck him. “And?”

“I'm sorry, I thought...” Lachlann fumbles.

“Thought what? You were going to come and pay respects? Bullshit.”

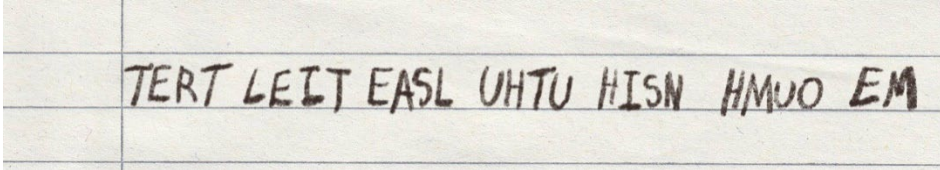
“Jesus, Dan...”

“Look, I don't know what you thought you were going to do here, and I don't give a shit.” Daniel hears the words and how stupid they sound when he actively contradicts them but pushes on anyway. “Stay away from me and stay away from my family.”

Lachlann's mouth curls into a snarl. He rolls his eyes, shoves his hand into the pocket of his jacket and pushes a crumpled white envelope against Daniel's chest. “So, you didn't send this to me, I take it?”

Stumbling back with the force, Daniel has half a mind to break Lachlann's nose, but the shock keeps him at bay. He snatches the envelope from Lachlann's hand and slips out a piece of lined notebook paper that reads:





Daniel reads the letter again and again, if only to reassure himself he isn't having a stroke. "What is this?"

"I got it in the mail a few days ago. Then when I heard about Father Arthur..." Lachlann shrugs. "Figured it was you."

Daniel shoves the letter back at Lachlann. "Well, it wasn't."

"Convincing," Lachlann sneers, tucking the letter back into its envelope and into his pocket.

"I'm not into that anymore."

"Sure."

"Even if I were," Daniel snaps, "I have nothing more to say to you. Alright? Leave me alone." He turns away, tries to leave the conversation at this stalemate, but he doesn't get two steps away before Lachlann reaches out and grabs onto his shoulder.

"Daniel, wait — "

Maybe his sanctimonious anger is misplaced. Maybe this is just the release that he needs, but he takes it anyway. Tastes the words like black bile in his fleshy throat and needs to spit it all out on the concrete before he chokes on it. Daniel rips his shoulder out of Lachlann's grasp, spins around, grabs him by the collar of his jacket, and pins him hard against the brick wall of

the cafe. “You say one more word, I’ll break your fucking nose,” he hisses, jaw clenched so tight his ears ache. Lachlann goes shock still, pale blue eyes blown wide, hardly daring to breathe.

The bell over the cafe door chimes. Daniel, suddenly very aware of the compromising position he’s put himself in, hastily shoves himself away from Lachlann. The cafe patrons continue on down the street unaware. Daniel takes a moment to collect himself, chest heaving. Lachlann straightens out his jacket, smooths his shirt down, and meets Daniel’s glare head on.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” Daniel repeats. Point made. He leaves Lachlann slumped back against the wall. Turns away for the last time, makes it down the street and around the corner toward the factory before the mental vertigo hits with a pinpoint ache between his eyes.

## Chapter Three: Dead Man's Letters

The condolences of the day run on a toneless loop. Granted, the town isn't so small and isolated that everyone knows everyone. Not *everyone* is Catholic or more accurately in his case Catholic adjacent. It's a town of acquaintances once-removed, a steady-enough flow to keep the rumour mill churning without enough friction to catch fire (most of the time). Daniel spends the morning wound so tightly that he feels like one more "sorry for your loss" will snap the tethered cord keeping his head on. He'll go spinning off, out of control, drill himself straight into the ground and stay there in the dark and the mud.

As it is, that doesn't happen. Daniel goes about his day, accepts the cast-off solace from his co-workers, and tries his damndest to banish the confrontation with Lachlann from his mind. Naturally, the confrontation is all he thinks about. After the shock, the details fill themselves in. He feels stupid for getting so hung up on it, but Lachlann looks so much older. In his mind, he's remained a perpetually scowling teenager, the permanent shadow over his brow allowing light in only for sardonic grins and the rare softening of his eyes when Daniel did something particularly idiotic or charming. Daniel had all but exiled the boy to his memories for the past five years. Lachlann's sudden re-emergence into reality feels like a parole violation.

He gets through the morning. Oversees vats full of corn feeding into mills feeding into more vats. Allows himself to sink into the repetition. His apoplectic rage hammers itself out smooth to the mechanical pummeling until he can chalk it up to rotten luck. By lunch break, he can at least stand his own company enough to inflict himself on co-workers. The break room

with its necrotic grey walls and long prison-style table, filled with fellow twenty-somethings dumped straight out of high school, still convinced they'll get out and find something better some day. Daniel side-steps consolations with awkward nods and strained smiles but for the most part keeps to himself at the far end of the table. He doesn't make it halfway through his bologna on rye before the little bit of peace he's scraped up is disturbed.

"McBride." The foreman has popped his head into the doorway. "You've got a call."

With a sigh, Daniel makes a half-assed attempt at re-wrapping his sandwich in its wax paper packaging and steps into the hallway to take the phone. The receiver sticks to Daniel's palm as he pulls it up to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hey." Eddy's chipper greeting on the other end of the line doesn't leave him time to respond before she barrels on. "Found your jacket."

"Great. Where was it?"

"In the spare glove bin by the ring."

He leans back against the wall. "Shit. Knew I should have checked again."

"I'm just about finished up. I can bring it by the factory if you want."

"Nah, that's too out of the way. Thanks, though. If you could bring it back home, that'd be great."

"Sure thing." Over the line he hears the rattle of Eddy pushing her cleaning cart aside.

"Oh, you'll never guess who I saw on my smoke break."

Dread becomes an ache between his eyes. Daniel groans, tilts his head back against the wall. "I think I can."

“Lachlann Mills? Didja see he’s in town too?”

“Briefly.”

“He didn’t mention it,” Eddy says. “We caught up a bit. I told him about the memorial at the Hayloft tonight. He said he might swing by.”

Daniel pushes off the wall and crowds his frustration over the receiver. “Eddy, why the fuck would you invite him?”

“Jesus, Dan.” She huffs. “It’s a public event, I didn’t *have* to invite him.”

“Eddy, I really can’t deal with him —”

“Oh, would you let it go? It’s been five years. You’re the only one who cares anymore.”

“I don’t care about him.”

“Then lay off,” Eddy snaps. Dead silence clouds the line until she sighs. “I know you’re going through a lot. But it’s just one night. I thought it was nice of him to come back, y’know?”

“Sure,” Daniel says by way of admitting defeat.

“You’re still coming?”

“It’d look pretty bad if I didn’t.”

“Now you’re just being a baby.”

“Shit, no, that’s not what I mean.” He scrubs at his forehead. “I mean of course I’m still coming. Look, I’ve gotta get going alright?”

With dwindled goodbyes, Daniel pushes the receiver back onto its hook and breathes out his nose. If he were a cartoon, he'd be steaming. Out the ears too. But he knows it's too late to do anything, and he knows that Eddy's right. He's the only one who's still hung up on the fire. So, he can either suck it up and ignore Lachlann or he can pout about it and refuse to show up. Neither option sounds all that appealing.

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The Rectory sits just south of St. Anthony's Parish, on freshly broken and consecrated ground. Construction on the new church sitting off Main Street began not long after St. Jude's caught fire. One of those real heartwarming stories of a community pitching in together and all that. Could make a Hallmark movie out of it. In the end, the parish agreed that the fire had been a blessing in disguise, bringing the church closer to town. No more treks across the gorge and up the hill to the drafty old shrine. The new site is closer to town for after-church donuts and coffee. What could be better? The charred skeleton of St. Jude's still sits untouched on the hill over the gorge. Daniel heard talk of the site being turned into a motel, or a gas station. If only they can figure out what to do with the old cemetery.

Beth's car is already parked out front when Daniel walks up the lane. The door has been left open, the windows darkened inside suggest his mother must be there as well. Daniel taps his knuckles on the door frame to announce his presence, and for the first time, feels his uncle's absence.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the *fucking* donkey," Beth hisses from the sitting room. On the sofa nearest the front door, surrounded by piles of in-memoriam pamphlets, she sticks her fingertip in her mouth. A half-folded paper with a smear of blood on the corner falls onto the rug.

The moment Daniel walks in, Beth catches his smug grin and glares at him. She takes her finger out of her mouth and points the cut appendage at him. “Not a *word*,” she says with underlying threat.

“Beth?” Mom calls from upstairs. “Who are you talking to?”

“Danny’s here,” Beth replies.

Heavy footfalls thunder from above their heads and down the stairs. Bonnie scuttles in carrying a large cardboard box. Stepping forward, Daniel takes the box from his mother. Underneath the straining tape, pieces of worn fabric push against the flaps. “Where’s this going?” he asks.

“Just over here.” Bonnie guides him into the kitchen, where similar boxes, milk crates, and garbage bags are stacked in separate piles. “This is for donation, these are keepsakes. Everything else still needs to be sorted. Beth, you’re making a mess!” she chides. Beth scoops up the bloodied pamphlet and crumples it in her fist.

“Do we know what to do with everything else?” Daniel sets the box down.

Bonnie swipes the paper out of Beth’s hand and brings it to the trash bin. “With what?”

Daniel follows a few steps behind, hands in his pockets. “I mean, did he have a will?”

“He’s a priest Daniel, what would he need a will for? The big things like furniture stay in the Rectory. Personal items go to family. Your dad’s already taken his fishing equipment,” Bonnie answers. “If you want any mementos, go ahead and take them.”

“Where is Dad?”

“At the funeral parlor getting the headstone and flowers sorted.” She tosses these words over her shoulder as she rearranges the box Daniel had just put down.

There’s no knowing where to begin in clearing out a dead man’s home on a time limit, so Daniel wanders the darkened halls. His mother’s made quick work of the place, every mirror and window covered, leaving the air stale and dim. When Daniel makes it to his uncle’s office, he quietly shuts the door and pulls the curtains back. Allows the daylight to flood into the claustrophobic wood-panelled room. The heavy oak desk has charred markings along the legs. It was one of the few things saved from the fire at St. Jude’s. A small wicker chest sits at the base of the desk, and a crucifix hangs at a crooked angle above the door. To his left hangs the finished painting Renee Mills had done of St. Jude’s. The wall opposite the window is made up of one long bookshelf, with a cherry-red record player on the middle shelf, flanked on either side by a vinyl collection.

Running his hand along the thin spines, Daniel reads through the albums. *A Day At The Races*, *Diamond Dogs*, and *Avoid Freud* to name a few, their covers cracked and faded from use. Uncle Arthur used to joke about hiding them when the little old ladies from church came knocking. Daniel doubts that the parish will want to claim them, so he starts packing them away carefully. Eddy’s offer to play them at the Hayloft tonight resurfaces by the time he gets to the end of the alphabet. The Velvet Underground. He picks out the grey album, *Loaded*, and the Andy Warhol *Banana*, setting them aside in a milk crate.

He goes for the books next, skipping any tome with *Holy*, *Saint*, or anything inclined toward the divine in the title. He hesitates on the collection of Sherlock Holmes stories and a few Shakespeare titles, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and tucks them away with his stash of keepsakes. Figures if he’s meant to have his emotional revelation, it should be as he closes off



the box of mementos, the last remnants of his uncle. It doesn't come. He keeps clearing the office out.

Anything he assumes might be important, he stacks on top of the desk: scattered documents, letters, unkempt manila folders. Anything else, he makes a quick decision to keep or toss. A lot of it comes down to gum wrappers, the plastic lids of ballpoint pens, and a surprising amount of bus tickets to Toronto. An orange pill bottle rattles in the drawer as he pulls it open. He sweeps it into a garbage bag with the rest of the junk he's cleared out. In the bottom drawer of the desk, he finds a sleek black photo album, but as he sits on his haunches to flip through, he finds the first several pages entirely empty.

A light tapping on the door nearly has Daniel jumping out of his skin. At the very least it has him falling back flat on his ass as he looks up to find Beth slipping inside. He sets the photo album aside and rises to his feet, brushing off his jeans to preserve the last measure of dignity. "Done downstairs?"

"Just about," she nods as she paces along the bare bookshelf. "So, I heard Lachlann's back in town."

Daniel sighs. "How is it that *everyone* knows already?"

Beth shrugs. Swipes a finger through the dust on a higher shelf. "You've seen him?"

"Yeah," Daniel grunts as he ties off the garbage bag.

"And?"

"Well, he tried to talk. I nearly gave him a black eye." Hefting the garbage bag, Daniel crosses the room and dumps it at the door. Beth shifts on her feet, crossing her arms over her

chest as she peers out the window. As he pulls another garbage bag out and shakes it open, she takes a thin black ledger from the windowsill and fans through. Daniel watches her with a frown.

“Why?”

Beth shrugs. “No reason.”

Bullshit. Tempted as he is to prod, Daniel has too much on his mind already. Beth puts the ledger back in its place and continues her pacing around the room, stopping at a tall and narrow cabinet against the wall underneath a crooked painting of *The Last Supper*. She opens the doors, and begins filing through old papers. They work like that in silence for some time, Daniel setting the new garbage bag down between them. The office isn't exactly filled with trash, Arthur far from a hoarder. If anything, he was meticulous about his spaces with the exception of the typical accumulated junk pushed to the back of his shelves. Daniel gets the impression as he works that Arthur likely kept the things he did for some reason — it's just that those reasons are moot, because the man is dead, and his receipts from a Florist he visited on Church Street a month ago isn't much use. This is the office of a man who expected to be back in a few days. Nothing seems to be in pre-mortem order. Not like a man who expected to die as soon as he did.

“How was he?” Daniel asks before the question has fully formed.

Beth doesn't turn from the cabinet. “Hm?”

“Uncle Arthur. Before... y'know, before.”

“I figured ‘before’,” Beth counters. “I can't really speak for him on ‘after’.”

“Beth, c'mon.”

She sighs, turns and adjusts her ponytail. “He was... I dunno, I really thought he was going to pull through at first.”

“I did too,” Daniel murmurs. He drops into the swivel chair at the desk, rolling back a bit on the hardwood.

“Is that why you didn’t go see him?”

Daniel flinches but doesn’t answer. Beth takes pity on him and doesn’t push further. In the ensuing quiet, the house settles and creaks, bird songs drift through the open window. Daniel turns side to side in the chair, Beth’s attention itching underneath his skin. Finally, she has a bit of mercy, and comes to sit on the edge of the desk.

“It seemed like he was in good spirits at first,” she says, bracing her hands on the solid oak as she leans back. “Had a few visitors. One old woman from Toronto always came in bringing him flowers. She’d stay for a while, but I never got her name. But then he started asking me to bring him things — paper, envelopes, the lemons, that box he left you —”

“Did you put that together?” Daniel sits up in the chair.

She shakes her head. “Everything was already inside it. I just brought it to him. He kept it over there.” Beth points to the shelf underneath the record player, where an empty spot had been left between two rows of books Daniel still had yet to go through. When he stared at it closely, he could see years of sunlight had created an impression against the wood. “A few days in, it felt like he was trying to get his affairs in order in a hurry.”

“Do you think he knew?”

Beth considers it, picks at the smoke damage on the desk, and shrugs. “I think... he felt the end coming. Once he asked me for the Yellow Pages, I knew he was making arrangements, and it started sinking in that he wasn’t leaving the hospital.”

“The Yellow Pages,” Daniel trails off as Beth tenses, still intent on chipping off wood flakes. “You got him Lachlann’s address.”

“Well I couldn’t exactly say no, could I?”

“You could have given me some warning,” Daniel snaps.

Beth hops off the edge of the desk. “I didn’t know he was going to invite him back. He didn’t tell me anything. Don’t you think I would have let you know?” Her voice drips down into a low hiss, as their mother’s footsteps pass in the hall outside. “Is he coming tonight?”

Daniel shrugs. “Sounds like it.”

“Beth?” Bonnie’s voice pierces through the thin walls. “Beth, where did you put the invoice from the Florist?”

Beth exhales sharply through her nose, crosses back to the window and pulls the curtains shut, before she dares to open the door. “I don’t have it, Mom!”

“Well, go find it! The funeral home is on the phone.”

“I thought Dad was taking care of the funeral home?”

Bonnie doesn’t respond, but her stomping across the hall shakes through the floor. Beth looks about two seconds from ripping her hair out when she turns her frustration on Daniel. He goes rigid in his chair, reaches back into the garbage bag, and slowly pulls out the missing receipts. Expression softening, Beth sighs and takes them from him. “Just... be careful, alright?”

“Don’t know what you mean.” Daniel brushes her off, unable to quite meet her eyes. Beth says nothing in retort. Stands there in the doorway a beat before she leaves Daniel with all the light suffocated out of the room. The door swings short of shut, the voices of his mother and sister muffled by their footsteps and the growing distance as they bicker down the stairs. Daniel leans forward. Presses the heel of his palm between his eyes until colours bloom like bruises behind his eyelids. The dead air in the room sits stagnant in his lungs.

So, he puts himself back to work. Flicks the overhead light on and clears out the drawers of Arthur’s desk with considerably less interest in sorting out garbage from valuables. He finishes the drawers and moves to the cabinet, dumping menial papers, books, and knickknacks into the garbage bag. Unplugs the speakers to the record player and lays them down in a hastily folded box. Packs the record player on top and tapes the lid down. Everything must go. He nearly trips over the wicker chest tucked against the desk, and turns his ire to cleaning the whole thing out. At that point Daniel hardly stops to read through the papers as he stuffs them into another garbage bag. The room a box of dry tinder. One spark could send it skyward. He shoves handfuls of newspapers into the bag, stops only when he comes to a newspaper with its front page torn off. He doesn’t know why it makes him pause, the hastily ripped edges and lack of gaudy bold font catching his attention. Two kindergartners judo-toss each other in faded black and white, underneath a thin banner reading “Toronto Star, Fri, February 6, 1981 /A3”. Daniel pauses a moment before dumping the rest of the basket into the trash bag, but the date echoes like a hollow bell tone in the back of his head long after he’s left the Rectory with a box of records under his arm.

## Chapter Four: The Hayloft

By the time Daniel returns to his apartment, arms straining as he lugs the records up the stairs, his whole body is ringing with the need to revisit the box Uncle Arthur left him. He drops the records onto the couch, where his lost jacket has been tossed over the backrest, and pays it no mind as it tips over, albums spilling onto the cushions. Tom sits at the kitchen table, slouching back in his chair with his feet kicked up on the seat next to him, as he flips through a Stephen King paperback.

“Ed’s just finishing up in the shower,” he says as he dog-ears his page. “You need it?” The spray of the shower in the single bathroom radiates through the thin walls.

Daniel stops halfway to his bedroom and cocks his head at his friend. “You think I need it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fair enough.”

Tom drops the book on the kitchen table and pushes out of his chair. “She’s gotta leave in the next half hour, but we can head out whenever,” he says as he opens the fridge and takes out two cans of beer. Setting them on the table, he cracks the tab on one. Daniel takes the second can, turning it over in debate. Tom watches him, standing across the table. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Daniel pulls the tab back and takes a long swig, barely suppressing a burp. “Just great. Honestly, wish people would stop asking.”

Tom nods without complaint, tapping his can against Daniel's before bringing it to his mouth. Said and done. "What time does it start again?"

"Five thirty, I think," Daniel replies as he continues his way down the hall. "I'll hop in the shower when Eddy's done."

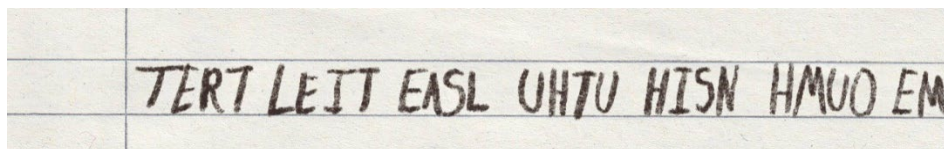
In his bedroom, Daniel crouches down beside his bed and takes the box out. He drops it onto the mattress, the contents rattling in protest, and flicks the latch open. The photos, the book, and the envelope get set aside with hardly a second look as he sorts through for the single page of newsprint. The moment he plucks it from the bottom of the box, he sits on the edge of the bed, flattening the paper out on his knee. His earlier suspicions are vindicated when he reads the fine print above the headline. Toronto Star, Fri, February 6, 1981. Pages A1 and A2. The photo of Pierre Trudeau at the Juno Awards on the front page only scratches at a vague recollection, but he turns the page over and suddenly he's eighteen again.

Walking in after school to find his dad in his armchair, nose burning with the scent of maraschino cherries soaked in rye. Newspaper crinkling as Dad tugs the pages straight, shaking his head, scoffing in disgust. "*Police arrest hundreds in steambaths,*" printed on the left of the centrefold. Dad folds the paper in half to get to the next page, and standing with one foot up the stairwell, Daniel sees the second page. "*Police raids net hundreds of men*". Above the title, a man trying to duck his face away from exposure to the camera, standing with his hands against a police wagon as two police officers pat him down. Daniel knew what the steambaths were, and he knew what a police raid meant. The last issue of *The Body Politic* sat tucked between his bed frame and the wall, a delayed land mine waiting for one systemic shift to set it off.

Daniel still holds onto that moment; thinking of those men, herded out half naked and vulnerable into the winter street. How it felt like the end, seeing his father's lip curling as he drops the newspaper on the coffee table, and the sudden sensation of Daniel's organs shutting down, going rotten in the encasement of his dirty skin.

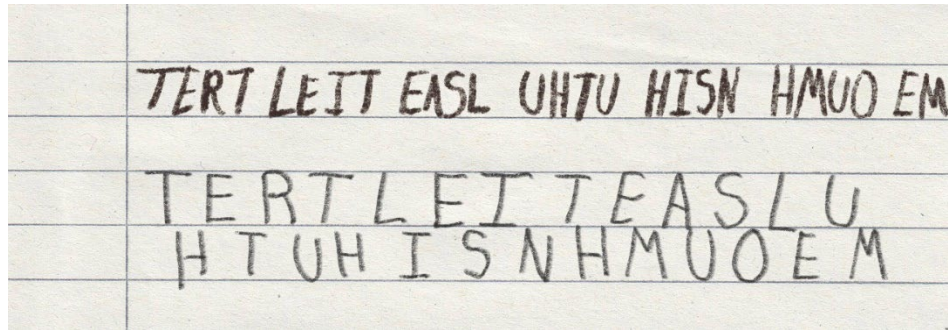
Because he was in love with a boy, which meant he might as well be dead anyway.

The obvious question is the one Daniel can't acknowledge: why did Arthur keep that page? He turns to the other contents of the box scattered on his quilt, the pristine white envelope screeching back at him until he picks it up and swipes a finger underneath the seal. Somehow, he knows what the letter inside is going to say, but it still doesn't prepare him for reading it.

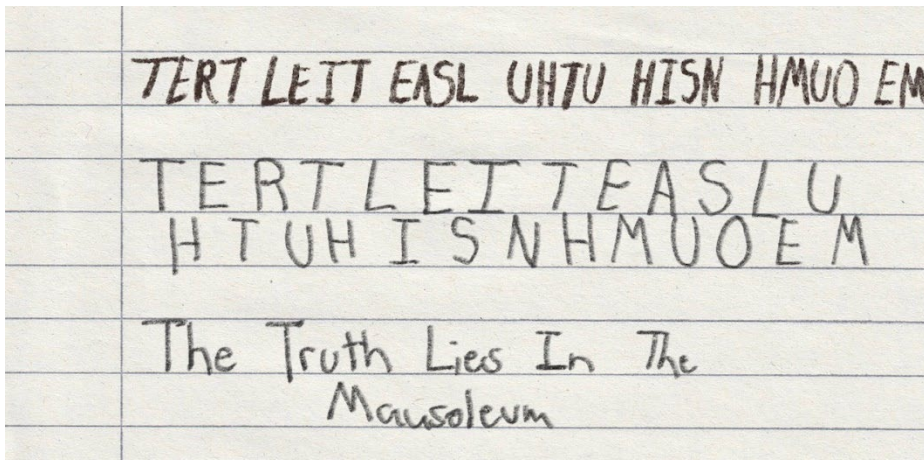


Daniel reaches for the code book and flips through with only a vague nostalgic memory guiding him to the page on Rail Fence Ciphers. He remembers what they looked like on torn pieces of notebook paper, passed to Lachlann between classes, slipped into lockers and backpacks. Scrap confessionals protected from prying eyes. Sure enough, the chapter walks him through decoding the message when he can't do so from memory. Daniel grabs a pencil off his desk and writes out the cipher underneath the original, cuts the line of nonsense words in half and repositions them.





From there, he follows the rows up and down in a zigzag, holding the pencil so tight he feels the edges bite into his fingers.



Daniel slumps back against his headboard, lets the pencil roll onto the floor as he reads the sentence over again.

“Dan?” Eddy knocks on his door. “Shower’s yours.”

Daniel hastily shoves the letter into the open pages of *Codes, Ciphers, And Secret Writings*, and stashes it away in the inner pocket of his jacket. Everything else he puts back into the box, and throws his bed quilt over it for good measure as he stumbles to his feet. “Yeah-

great, thanks!” he calls. “Just give me a minute.” A minute for what he has no fucking idea. Maybe to stand in front of the mirror like he can stare back at himself and scrub the telltale memories off his face. That’s exactly what he does, at least for two seconds before realizing he’s an *idiot*. Daniel opens the door.

Eddy crinkles her nose at him the moment he walks out, her hair still wet from the shower and pulled back in a tight ponytail. “You okay?”

“He doesn’t like people asking that!” Tom interrupts from the kitchen table.

Eddy turns and flips Tom off, to which Tom responds only by blowing her a kiss and returning to his book.

Daniel takes the distraction as an opportunity to slip past Eddy, into the bathroom. Just before he shuts the door, Eddy shouts from the other side. “Don’t forget the albums!”

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Daniel and Tom walk the old train tracks out to the Hayloft about an hour after Eddy leaves. Daniel carries the albums he’s picked out tucked under his arm. Through breaks in the trees, they catch glimpses of the river as they head farther from town. Daniel basks while he can in the peach evening light slanted across the gorge and the sweet smoke of distant bonfires.

The Hayloft sits on the lower end of the gorge, an old cattle barn that’d been repurposed as the town’s watering hole long before Daniel was around. He’s seen pictures of the place when it was still in use, his grandfather sitting on a rickety wooden fence when he was a boy, sepia tones clearing any expression from his face. The old train tracks run through the woods just over

to the west of it, marked above the treeline by rusted silos and grain elevators that haven't seen use since the Great Depression. Still, the stench of barn animals has long since been aired out, and with its open space the Hayloft has made itself a firm local establishment. So long as the taps never go dry, the business won't either - if only because there are so few other options within an hour's drive of here.

The memorial is already in full swing by the time Daniel and Tom cut across the woods from the railroad. Light pouring out of every window and every crack in the walls, carrying bass-heavy music, and slurred voices raised in half-coherent toasts to cheers from the gathered crowd. As they make the short hike up the hill, Daniel peers down through thick evergreens at the craggy rock of the gorge, where the tracks stretch across the river on a rusted red bridge. He'd much rather vanish down into pine needle oblivion than go much farther.

Inside the overhauled barn are the same faces Daniel's been exposed to all his life, but he doesn't know half of their names. The same voices he's heard giving liturgies every Sunday of his early adolescence, shouting over a game of pool, or calling for another beer. Eddy mans the bar made of what used to be the stable, pouring drinks and making small-talk with the handful of patrons taking up the stools. Daniel recognizes the back of his father's grey head among that crowd. On the far side of the barn, his mother stands by a table draped in wrinkled black cloth, with pictures of Arthur in his prime, the memorial pamphlets with information about the funeral services, and an open guest book for the mourners to sign. Chatting to a gaggle of other women, she dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief and pushes the pen and guestbook insistently at them.

Daniel follows Tom's lead, not paying too much attention to the direction they're headed in until his roommate hollers to the group taking up a table by the billiards. Their high school friends, the tight-knit gang of them that actually stayed home after graduation. Tom waves their

way, eagerly met by Jane Dawson, a mousy little brunette Daniel had taken to prom. She wears the same chunky cardigan she had worn that night, on the insistence of her screaming mother telling her she'd get pregnant if she didn't cover up, while Daniel stood red-faced on her front porch. Sitting across from Jane are Claire Mellot, Grant Champlain, and just Daniel's luck, Lachlann Mills. Lachlann doesn't sit with the rest, but hovers at the end of the table, shuffles on his feet, maintaining an invisible boundary when he sees Daniel approach.

"Mills," Tom drops himself next to Jane. "Heard you were back in town. What brings you back, huh?"

Lachlann shrugs. "Well, I thought I might do some sightseeing, but you're still pretty fuckin' ugly."

Tom grins. "You know, the rumour was that your dad was in the Mob. That's why you skipped town."

"Russian Spy, actually. Spent the last five years in Moscow." Raising his beer, he winks at Tom with a sardonic "Nostrovia," as he raises the can in a cheer and drains it.

Tom leans forward in his seat. "Wait, shit, really?"

"No, dumbass. I moved to Toronto." Lachlann chucks the empty can at him. Tom's just fast enough to bat it away, sending the can flying against the wall with a spray of foamy beer.

Laughter roars up from the table, hardly making a ripple in the over-current of noise. Daniel and Lachlann have come to stand at opposite ends of the table, a silent and one-sided stand-off. Lachlann hardly spares a glance his way. Daniel's fist clenches dangerously tight on the stack of albums at his side.

“Dan,” Grant nods to an empty seat. “You staying, or what?”

Daniel contorts his mouth into a tight smile. “I should check in with my family,” he says, and in his peripheries sees Lachlann turn away. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

He takes his leave without any objections, weaving his way through the crowd to the bar, where Eddy just finishes pouring an amber pint from the tap and passes it off. Daniel comes up to the bar top in a free space next to his father. “Hey Dad.”

Irving grunts in faint acknowledgement of his existence but says no more, turning toward Mr. Gallagher, the white-whiskered companion on his right.

Eddy comes down to his end of the bar, wiping her hands on a rag that might once have been white but now more closely resembles an old gym sock. “You’re late,” she says as she drops the rag and holds out her hands. Daniel hands over the chosen albums, watches her flip through the covers. Eddy offers a cheeky smile and calls a co-worker from the backroom to put them on. “Can I start your tab?”

“I’ll have a Labatt, thanks.”

Eddy ducks under the bar to get at the fridge, taking out a glass bottle and popping the cap on the edge of the counter with practiced finesse. Daniel reaches for it, only for his Dad to throw himself back laughing at something his buddy said, knocking into Daniel’s arm. The bottle goes flying off the counter and shatters on the floor. Irving grumbles incoherently as he struggles to right himself in his chair.

Eddy’s look of pity is more than Daniel can bear. “It’s no problem, I’ll get you another.” She grabs another bottle, putting it directly into Daniel’s hand this time.

Daniel nods his silent thanks to her. He almost raises a hand to pat his father's back, but thinks better of it, muttering a defeated "Take care Dad," as he veers into the crowd.

His mother surprises him that night by only making three impromptu speeches. The third time she hisses for the music to be turned down, right in the middle of "Heroin," the Hayloft patrons barely look up. "*Arthur will be so dearly missed,*" and "*he would be so touched to see each and every one of you here,*" she sobs, as a pool cue hits a red stripe into the side pocket. That night there are, to be fair, a few rounds of earnest cheers in memory of the departed, lifted drinks and hollers, prayers slogged onto the sticky floor. Daniel is certain that whoever comes to take Arthur's place at St. Anthony's will find a few generous alms in his name.

Daniel sticks close to Beth for a while by the memorial table, but soon enough Frank shows up, and Daniel tries to make himself scarce for fear of being sucked into a conversation about submersible pumps. He mostly wanders between the bar and his friends' table, but only when Lachlann is nowhere to be seen, and quickly finding excuses to slip away when he sees him moving through the crowd. The mourning crowd filters out, and the regulars take over, trampling what little sanctity there was to begin with. The high beams of a rumbling car flash too close to the windows, as Duncan Murray and his crew of unwashed jock straps pile out of his jacked-up Cavalier. The tyrant prince of his father's car dealership, Murray's arrival brings an effective end to the mourning.

"Campbell, babe!" Murray leans against the bar. "Put a round on my tab, will you?"

Eddy fixes him with a haughty glare. "You still haven't paid off your last time, Duncan. Settle first and I'll think about it."

"Babe, c'mon, you know I'm good on my word."

Beside Daniel, Tom bristles at the interaction and nearly rises to his feet. “Motherfucker calls her babe one more time —”

“Don’t start shit, he’ll enjoy it too much.” Daniel grabs Tom’s shoulder and tugs him back down. “Eddy can handle herself.”

Sure enough, Eddy crosses her arms, unmoved by Murray’s crooning. “Settle first.”

“Jeez, you don’t have to be such a dyke about it,” Murray grumbles as he goes fishing through his coat for his wallet.

Daniel knocks back the last of his beer in one strained gulp. “Be right back,” he mutters as he excuses himself from the table. Just as he heads toward the bathrooms, he catches sight of Lachlann across the barn, watching him from the billiard tables. One of Murray’s buddies nudges him and points in Lachlann’s direction. Their salacious laughter settles like crude oil in Daniel’s stomach. He pushes through the bathroom doors.

It’s nearly impossible to tell how drunk he is until sees himself in the mirror, sunken red eyes and ragged hair refusing to stay still in his reflection. Daniel washes his hands, turns the faucet as cold as he can get it, and splashes water on his face. The raucous noise outside barely penetrates the cinder-block walls, the faucet a steady stream of grey noise. Bracing his hands on the sink, Daniel lets the water drip off the tip of his nose and lips until the door opening behind him has his head snapping up.

Lachlann steps inside. The roar swells and dims again as the door swings shut behind him. Daniel stares him down in the mirror before shoving away from the sink. He yanks a length of brown paper towel from the dispenser and scrubs his face dry. “What do you want, Lachlann?” he asks, shoving the towel into the gum-covered trashcan.

“Believe it or not, I was actually invited.” Lachlann replies easily as he leans back against the wall.

“You hate parties.”

“I hated parties in high school,” he corrects. “It’s been a long time, Dan. A whole new world. I could have changed.”

Daniel shuts off the faucet. “But you didn’t.”

Lachlann turns a dark, disapproving glare his way, and Daniel meets it. Lachlann caves in. “I really didn’t,” he groans.

Turning to face him head on, the wet sink soaks a line through the back of Daniel’s jeans, but he pays it no mind. He shoves his hands into his pockets, and stares Lachlann down until the man explains himself.

It doesn’t take long. Lachlann chances a smirk. “The truth lies in the mausoleum.”

“Yeah, figured that out for myself,” Daniel scowls. He takes the creased cipher book and letter out from the inner pocket of his jacket.

Lachlann’s smile only grows more confident. “So, you did get the same note.”

“No shit.”

“And?”

“And *what?*”

“You don’t think that maybe Father Arthur had a reason for all the theatrics?” Lachlann shrugs. “It’s not exactly subtle.”



“Well.” Daniel pushes off from the sink. “I’m not interested.” He makes for the door, but Lachlann stands in his way, crowding over him.

There’s an earnest pull in his brow, eyes gone flint grey in the light of the single flickering lightbulb overhead. “You really don’t want closure?”

“There is no closure. He’s dead,” Daniel snaps. Lachlann’s face falls, nearly taking the wind out of Daniel’s sails along with it. Daniel sighs roughly through his nose, shakes his head, and shoulders past him. “Leave me out of it.”

Stepping into the wall of *Loaded’s* B-side nearly bowls Daniel over, but he muscled through, desperate to put distance between himself and the bomb shelter of a bathroom. For all the noise, the night is on its last leg. Patrons drain downhill out of the barn, those left behind getting louder and louder with drink. Behind the bar, Eddy shouts last call. The last stragglers of Daniel’s high-school friends shrug into their coats and say their goodbyes with well wishes that he meets with a tight smile, before he and Tom head to the bar. Eddy catches Daniel’s eyes from over the heads of the slumped bar stool occupants, where his Dad sways as he nods sagely to his friend. She shakes her head, swipes her hand by her throat and nods straight to the McBride patriarch.

Wonderful. Daniel holds up three fingers, and Eddy nods, going for a bottle of middle shelf rye as Daniel walks up beside his father. “Dad,” he says, treading carefully. “It’s getting late. I think Mum’s just packing up, why don’t you head home with her?”

Irving only grunts dismissively in response.

“Dad,” Daniel tries again.

His father shoves away from the bar top. The stool goes clattering backwards as he stomps to his feet, all brutish, wobbling mass staring down his only son. Dark vermouth drains out of his pores and the stench of it burns Daniel's nose, but he doesn't back away. Stands his ground broad-shouldered and silently defiant before his Dad's drunken tantrum in the making. The stand-off lasts a whole bar measure of *Lonesome Cowboy Bill*, until Daniel sees the violence twitching on Irving's lips. Tight-jawed, Daniel averts his gaze. His dad scoffs, still trembling, as he steps with effort away from the bar.

Bonnie swoops in, the state of her husband barely warranting remark, though Daniel can see the resignation in the draw of her shoulders as she takes his arm. "We have to be up early, Irving," she tuts. Over her shoulder, she smiles at Daniel. "I've got him from here, baby. Remember, the service is at noon tomorrow. Come early if you can."

Daniel, still watching his dad, waiting for his legs to give out with every step, makes a pitiful attempt at smiling back at her. "Sure thing. Get home safe."

The lights behind the bar shut off. Eddy slides a glass to Daniel, three fingers of rye on the rocks, before shooing away the last of her customers and closing up the till. The Hayloft has a half-hour left before the owner closed, time for last games of pool and half-baked conversations to wrap up. Daniel sets the fallen stool upright and takes a sip of his rye, as Eddy comes out from the back, with her coat.

Tom slings an arm around her shoulder and plants a fat kiss on her temple. "Ready to go once you finish?" he asks Daniel.

Daniel swirls the rye around his glass. "Think I'm gonna take my time with it. Wind down. You guys head back without me."

Eddy frowns. “You sure? You can get back alright by yourself?”

“Yeah,” Daniel says around a rough swallow, maybe a little too quickly. “G’head.”

With no small amount of reluctance, Eddy and Tom bid their farewells, and Daniel is alone in a moribund bar. Alone. For all it’s worth, anyway. The last patrons, bloated corpses drag their feet from the bathrooms to the tables and back again. They pass him like he’s got one foot in the grave ready to join them. Daniel drains his rye until the shrunken ice cubes clank against his teeth and he’s left sucking on water. Maybe the alcohol’s getting to his cheeks, but the heat inside is too much. He needs some fresh air.

Leaving his glass at the bar for the busboy to get in the morning, Daniel stumbles his way out of the barn. Immediately washed over by the clean midnight air, he stands in the puddling light of the open door and tries to force the world to go still under his feet. Slack guitar riffs meander from the speakers inside, dampened by the thin walls. The treeline beyond the gravel lot makes a hazy silhouette beyond a star-filled sky. Daniel exhales and tries to expel every unwanted emotion out of his lungs.

A set of high beams temporarily blind him. Daniel blinks and shields his eyes as a rumbling car comes to a stop on the other side of the gravel lot. The lights catch the silhouette of a man smoking against the far end of the exterior wall, grinding his cigarette out underneath his boot. Four bodies pile out of the idling car, headlights still thrown against the gravel. The smoker steps up into the refracted light.

Lachlann, surrounded by Murray and three of his buddies all cocky in their swagger. Daniel can’t hear the words they’re saying drowned out in noise and distance, but what he can

make out is the rising tones and the vicious inflections, until the first punch catches Lachlann in the gut.

And suddenly it's just that simple. Daniel storms across the gravel lot, grabs Murray by the collar of his shirt, and *finally* lets loose.

## Chapter Five: Oh! Sweet Nuthin'

By the time Daniel realises that his feet are carrying him somewhere, the red spots have only just faded from his eyes. His muddied boots are grazing along patches of dead grass between splintered wooden boards, hardly lifting off the ground as they stumble along. By the time Daniel realises that there is a second pair by their side, doing most of the work for the both of them, he comes to the slow conclusion that he's running along a train track. Well, running in an informal sense.

The remainder of his senses shift into place after that, gears catching on rusted teeth, churning wheels in his head. The body pressing so tightly against his side is all harsh edges and warmth, a persistent hip bone jabbing into his side as it moves. The hand on his opposite side, holding him upright, is broad, gentle almost — the grip holding his arm over a sharp shoulder blade, significantly less so.

“You're a fucking idiot, you know that, right?”

The voice startles Daniel, though in hindsight he knows it shouldn't. The body dragging him along the train tracks must have a person living in it, an accompanying voice. That person, evidently, is *pissed off*. Daniel can't place it at first until his ears have finally stopped ringing with a haunting chorus of The Velvet Underground. There's something rough tearing at his skin underneath the collar of his shirt. Shards of emerald glass clatter to the ground as they're shaken free. *Right*. The last thing he remembers is the ear-splitting shatter of glass over his head, and the blinding white pain flashing before — blackout. He has the vaguest sense of having collapsed,

the side of his head crashing into the unforgiving gravel, then... yeah, everything went blank. Just the last dregs of him, getting his ass kicked to *Oh! Sweet Nuthin'*.

No shit, sweet nothing.

“Dan? Daniel. Come on, you’ve got to help me here. I can’t carry you the whole way. Pick up your damn feet,” Lachlann Mills snaps in his ear.

Daniel groans again, the sound ripping through his throat. He lifts his head. It’s dark out, probably well past midnight. He can’t see Lachlann clearly at first, the bright spots in his eyes dancing in and out of his vision. For a moment, he thinks the moon might be one of them, blinding and bright as it is, flashing between the peaks of black pines. Daniel doesn’t so much blink as squeeze his eyes shut two or three times before trying again. It doesn’t help much, but he can at least see the man carrying him down the abandoned railroad.

“You’re bleeding,” are the first words to stumble out of Daniel’s cotton dry mouth. He nearly gags on the first taste of blood and stale alcohol on his tongue. Daniel recoils, aiming to spit a gob into the weeds and succeeding only in drooling onto his own boot.

Lachlann falters for just a moment to his credit, as he looks down at him. His expression is unreadable, his face turning away from the moonlight to stare back, but even so Daniel feels his stomach tighten. Lachlann snaps his attention forward again. “Wait until you see a mirror.”

The pain wrenches up to the surface now, a late arrival but nonetheless making itself known. Daniel can hardly pinpoint the source but rather feels it radiating through his bones, down to his limbs and back again tenfold. His head, he can tell at least, seems to have taken the worst of the beating. “I take it I didn’t win?” he coughs.

“It wasn’t even close,” Lachlann replies tersely. “You shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

Daniel loathes to think it, but Lachlann is probably right — purely for the sour taste of admitting that Lachlann is right about anything. Three beers and a few fingers of rye had him feeling noble when he’d stumbled out of the Hayloft and saw Lachlann surrounded by Murray and his crew. He’d stood there for all of five seconds, the acidic light inside the barn pooling out onto the dirt through the open door. Four against one, and still Lachlann had been running his mouth, snarling insults until a sucker punch to the gut told him frankly that he couldn’t talk his way out of this one. Daniel remembered feeling murderous, in spite of the fact that he had threatened to break Lachlann’s nose himself several hours earlier.

None of that had mattered in the moment. All that had mattered was that Lachlann was outnumbered, and no matter how he’d hurt Daniel in the past, he wasn’t about to stand by and watch. Not while he could do something equally stupid.

So, yeah, he’d done exactly that.

Gotten involved.

Daniel only shrugs in response, a movement he instantly regrets when his bruised shoulder roars in strict protest. His feet stutter out of autopilot for the first time, nearly tripping Lachlann along with him. Choking out a rough “I’ve got it, I’ve got it,” Daniel stumbles enough to catch himself and stay upright. Lachlann, however reluctantly, lets him go when it becomes clear he isn’t going to topple over again. Lifting his hand to his head, Daniel wipes at his brow, the side of his hand coming away slick with blood and the foamy tail end of a beer. Most of the blood is already dry, chalky crumbs of it smudged into his skin. Finally, standing there in the

middle of the woods with a clear line cut a mile one way and the other along the railroad track, Daniel looks to Lachlann. “What happened?”

Now that he’s at a good distance, Daniel can see the extent of the other man’s injuries; the blood slipping down from his temple, abrasion on his cheek, broken lip, the beginning of a nasty bruise spreading out from the underside of his jaw, and he’s holding himself in a way that suggests a sore ribcage. Lachlann shifts on his feet, glancing back the way they came. “Murray left his car door open when he jumped out,” he shrugs. “When he’d...” Lachlann gestures to Daniel, and clears his throat, “you went down hard. I ran to the car and put it in neutral. They chased it down the hill. Bought enough time to grab you and start running.”

In the moonlight filtering through pine needle-points and bare trees, Daniel stares at Lachlann. He cannot, for the life of him, make the connections necessary to turn his nebulous thoughts into words, much less get them to fall coherently off his tongue. Concussion, most likely, but in that strange disconnect, he can’t find it within himself to give much of a shit. The dark is all-encompassing, and the moon is shining like the headlight of a train coming straight for them through the trees. Daniel starts to laugh.

Lachlann scowls at him, the deep brown of his curls soaked red against the broken skin on his forehead. “Glad you think it’s funny.”

“Hilarious, actually,” Daniel grins, coughing through a sharp ache in his chest. He raises a brow at the other man. “Don’t be a dick. I just got my ass kicked for you.”

Lachlann tears his eyes away from Daniel, his lip curling as he stalks ahead along the tracks. “I didn’t ask for your help,” he snaps.



“No,” Daniel clips as he reaches up to shake the remainder of the glass out of his jacket, “you never have.” A searing pain flares up on his bicep as he moves. Daniel grits his teeth, turning his arm over to spot the long cut through the corduroy on his sleeve. “Shit.”

Whether it’s for the bitten curse or the absence of footfall behind him, Lachlann pauses and turns back to Daniel as he clasps his hand over his bicep. Daniel’s gaze only flicks up for a moment, but it’s a moment long enough to catch as the disdainful glower in Lachlann’s pale eyes simmer down into something gentler, almost pained. His lip twitches for a moment, eyes blinking once, then twice, three times rapidly. He looks like he might say something. Then, he looks over Daniel’s shoulder and his expression flashes in an instant to wide-eyed panic.

Daniel doesn’t have the time to piece together why his shadow is growing longer at his feet before Lachlann dashes forward and grabs onto his uninjured arm, yanking him roughly off the track. They slide down the steep embankment on the side of the railroad, grass tearing away in the mud underneath their heels. In his dazed confusion, Daniel half expects a train to come barreling through with a deafening rumble. He anticipates the cutting wind and the earth rattling beneath him, waits for the horn to blast through the black pine forest.

The flickering headlights of a car grow steadily brighter in its place. Daniel peers up through the pigweed and nettle and watches as the dented front end of a Cavalier rolls by. The engine rattles in complaint as it passes. Three heads lean out the passenger and back seats, calling out slurred protests to the driver every time the car swerves and the tires graze the rail. Daniel holds his breath until the car disappears around a bend in the path far ahead, the car lights and voices fading into the trees.

Head falling back against the weeds, Daniel closes his eyes and breathes harshly through his nose. The night is starting to catch up with him as the adrenaline fades. With nothing left to impede it, the alcohol, the pain, and the bone-deep exhaustion are all free to flood his body like a dam bursting under too much pressure. The ground is damp and cool underneath him, and Daniel has the oddest sense of feeling the earth turning backwards on its axis. If he uncurls his fingers from the underbrush, he might be flung off. The ringing has returned to his ears, and he can swear the phantom chords come right back with them, repeating guitar riffs on a tuneless loop.

Lachlann props up on his forearm, one hand bracing against Daniel's shoulder. His arm stretches across his chest, his stomach presses flush against Daniel's hip. He can feel every strained breath in the hitch of his chest, no matter how Lachlann tries to keep quiet, pressing warm into his body. Lachlann has always been all lanky height and sharp edges, but there isn't a cutting thing about him. It takes Daniel a moment too long to realise that Lachlann's hand is shaking. Lachlann swallows, slowly sinking down into the underbrush, and presses his forehead into his outstretched arm. The proximity alone is enough to send Daniel into a tailspin of thoughts he has absolutely no business having right then.

They aren't kids anymore. They aren't stupid teenagers running off into the brush where no one can see their lingering gazes and the brushes of fingertips against forearms, shoulders, hair, making up reasons to push and shove at one another just as an excuse to touch. Fuck, Daniel swore he wasn't going to do this again. He's the one meant to be angry with Lachlann. He has every right to be fucking furious, to hold onto that grudge by the neck and throttle it until there's nothing left to fight back.

“Daniel. *Daniel*,” Lachlann’s grip on his shoulder jostles him into reality. Daniel opens his eyes to find Lachlann leaning over him, hawkish gaze searching his face on the verge of frantic as he tries to rouse him. “If you don’t get up, I’ll leave you here.”

Daniel calls his bluff. “No, you won’t.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Lachlann retorts. “Come on, we’ve got to go before they come back. We can make it to town if we —“

“No,” Daniel cuts him off with a grunt as he rolls over, stumbling up to his feet.

Lachlann stands right behind him, his foot nearly slipping in the mud. Daniel grabs the sleeve of Lachlann’s coat before he can tumble down the embankment. Struggling the rest of the way back up to the railroad, Lachlann brushes the dirt off his clothes and glares at Daniel. “You need a doctor.”

“I’m fine,” Daniel insists.

“Yes, that is *exactly* why I’ve been carrying you for the past two miles.”

Daniel seriously considers his earlier vow to break Lachlann’s nose. Given what his impulses had gotten him into so far that night, though, he resists the temptation. “Look, the last thing I need right now is this getting out all over town, alright?”

Lachlann opens his mouth and shuts it just as quickly. His nostrils flare, his head cocking to the side as he struggles to find a retort, and Daniel knows then that he’s won this argument. It’s always been rare, but it happened sometimes. After a few moments of posturing, Lachlann throws his hands up in defeat. “*Fine*,” he spits. “Then you’re coming back with me.” The

moment Daniel opens his mouth, Lachlann cuts him off. “You’re not going to make it all the way back to town like this anyway.”

Daniel hums and haa’s about it for all of one minute before resigning himself to the inevitable. He jerks his head down the track (and regrets it instantly). “Whatever.”

Still, as soon as Daniel walks ahead, Lachlann hesitates, peering past him and toward the pitch-black line cut through the trees ahead, second-guessing himself. Though he doesn’t say a word, Daniel catches the apprehension in that look alone. “They won’t be able to turn around on the track. They’ll have to wait for a crossing to get back onto a solid road. They’ll have given up by then. It’s fine.”

Lachlann cringes. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Daniel raises a brow. “You pissed them off that badly? The hell did you do?”

Dismissing him with a wave of his hand, Lachlann steps up onto the rusted steel rail and walks ahead in silence. There would be time for prying later. He’s tired and aching, and though he knows that a train hasn’t touched these tracks in over a decade, he can’t stop himself from looking over his shoulder, waiting for the lights to come.

## Chapter Six: Ain't Got Nuthin' At All

The Mills house sits at the bottom of the gorge where the river crests, not far before the rapids underneath the railroad bridge. You can only see it from the gorge, or down the winding lane that takes you to the secluded home pitched far off from the town. Its isolation hasn't deterred vandals over the years from taking rocks to the glass conservatory looking over the water; ten points if you break a window, twenty if you can hit the highest panel on the dome-shaped roof. Inside is a dead forest, hollow husks of tropical trees and invasive weeds that'd seeped their way inside the abandoned garden. Nothing like the lush paradise where Daniel and Lachlann used to watch Mrs. Mills paint for hours on end, the trance-like silence punctuated by their muffled excitement as they poured over whatever secret history they'd gotten into that day — the Enigma machine, detective novels, any mystery they could get their hands on.

Daniel had taken the first stone to the glass when Lachlann vanished from his life. Took his rage out on every stone he could scoop from the river silt and hurl at the house before Mrs. Mills came out in the dead of the night to search for the anonymous miscreant on the banks. He'd run off, scrambling into the woods and sprinting all the way back home.

It had been years since Daniel had given in to the temptation to walk by the decrepit house. After Lachlann's departure, Mrs. Mills began spending less and less time at the house, until finally packing up and moving to Toronto. Over time, the walls had been overtaken by vines, the paint flaking off the window sills, and the yard overgrown.

Coming out of the woods, Daniel faces the old Georgian again. Its stately façade, all crumbling shutters and wide double doors, gives Daniel the impression that it wants to swallow

him whole. He's startled to find an orange glow against the blue night, coming from the living room window. He stops, and in doing so nearly slips down the sloping treeline. Lachlann grabs the back of his jacket like he's scuffing a kitten until Daniel gets his feet under him again.

"Is your mom home?" Daniel asks, and for a moment nearly misses the irony. It's been a long while since he asked that question, and in an entirely different context.

Lachlann, however, doesn't miss it. He does a poor job at suppressing a smirk as he nudges Daniel onward. "No," he replies. "She's in Toronto. Dad's back in London, last I heard."

Lachlann leads the way up to the front porch, the boards creaking under every step. Daniel shifts awkwardly behind Lachlann while he fiddles with the key in the lock, listening to the midnight noise of spring's bare branches rattling together. A fat bushcricket hops across the porch and rubs its legs together before the crack of the deadbolt finally coming undone sends it skittering away.

The light he saw from outside comes from a lamp left on between the couch and loveseat. It's the first thing Daniel sees as he stumbles out of his boots, leaning on the wall for support. The foyer leads into a wide staircase and a living room to the right. A sliver of the kitchen is visible just beyond the staircase, and to the left, a set of French doors lead into the attached conservatory. He feels the strange familiarity of walking into a space he hasn't inhabited for years and knowing every turn around every corner.

Daniel shrugs out of his jacket and tosses it in the vague direction of the coat rack. Lachlann's already moved ahead and hung up his jacket, disappearing into the kitchen with the sound of the faucet sputtering into the sink. Suddenly unsure of what to do with himself, Daniel pads into the living room. He feels the need to walk quietly but isn't entirely sure why. The lamp

sits on a round endtable, along with Lachlann's letter from Arthur and a handful of crumpled pieces of scrap paper. The only intact paper has the cipher written out and solved in blue pen.

A thick layer of dust coats most of the furniture, covered in white sheets. The sheet he assumes had been covering the couch has already been thrown off, and footprints leave a track of Lachlann's earlier return to his family home. Daniel follows them out of the living room, but by the time they lead him across the foyer, he can only see the faint outline of them in the dark. The clouds are getting thicker outside and smother what little moonlight cascaded from the windows. The trail isn't too difficult to figure out. The only place they could lead is to the conservatory doors. Daniel peers through the grime-encrusted glass at the encased forest and its eerily still shadows.

"I haven't had the chance to check out the first-floor bathroom." Lachlann's voice behind him has Daniel turning with a start. "But it should be good enough, if you want to get cleaned up." Lachlann stops just a few feet away at the balustrade of the grand staircase and leans against it. Daniel practically sees the moment the thought crosses Lachlann's mind, just before the words *Are you alright* are about to come out of his mouth, and quickly moves away from the conservatory doors.

"Yeah, sounds great," he says as he walks past Lachlann.

Lachlann turns with him. "It's... y'know, just down the —"

"I remember."

"Good..." Lachlann murmurs. "First aid kit's under the sink."

Stepping into the bathroom, Daniel flicks the light on, and the overhead seems to consider working for a moment, hesitantly flickering and ultimately dying off. Plan B, then. Daniel pushes the curtains aside. The moonlight isn't much, and the rumbling promise of rain doesn't give him hope, but he makes do. He kneels in front of the cabinet under the sink, rooting around in the dark until fingers brush over the handle of a plastic case. Daniel drags it out, the chipped paint on the red cross flaking off some as he sets it down on the counter. He pops it open and checks the date written on the inside of the lid — not expired yet, but old enough that the paper around the bandages has gone a bit yellow, and the entire case reeks of astringent. The bottle of iodine lies half open, leaked and dried up. Still, it's all he has to work with.

He's just started fumbling with the contents, lifting them piece by piece closer to his face so he could try to make out the labels, when the room lights up in faint amber. Daniel blinks, his head pounding for a moment until his vision adjusts. Lachlann stands in the doorway with a flashlight.

"Thanks," Daniel mutters as he picks out a thin box of butterfly stitches and a few alcohol wipes. Lachlann says nothing, hesitating in the doorway for a moment before setting the flashlight down on the sink.

With his goods in hand, Daniel sets himself down on the lid of the toilet and takes on the task of cleaning up his sorry ass. He sheds his flannel shirt, leaving him in his blood splattered T-shirt. His savaged arm requires attention first. The cut along his bicep runs deep, but the flannel has already soaked up most of the blood by then. Daniel rips an alcohol wipe open with his teeth and begins to clean around the edges of the wound, trying to avoid touching the cut — and failing more than a few times with pitiful groans at the sting.



Sticking the last bandage in place, he tapes a strip of gauze over top. When he stands, Lachlann is in the doorway again with a box of matches in hand, staring at the bandaged wound in mild horror. Daniel sighs and points to the toilet. "Sit."

Lachlann looks for a moment like he wants to refuse, but Daniel stands his ground, staring him down until he gives in with a sigh, slumping over to the toilet seat with an astounding impression of a kid on time-out. Daniel turns the water on, clicking his tongue when the tap sputters out a deep, rusted tint. He lets it run as he reaches into the first aid kit for two more wipes.

Daniel slowly begins cleaning away the blood dried to Lachlann's forehead, making his way down over his cheekbone. Lachlann hisses and flinches away the moment the wipe grazes against the broken skin there. Daniel makes a face and holds Lachlann's chin to keep his head still. "Fuck off, it doesn't hurt that bad."

"You fuck off," Lachlann retorts, and *God*, Daniel doesn't want to laugh. He shoots Lachlann a glare, squaring his jaw off as if it will make it any less pitifully obvious that he's trying not to smile. He presses the wipe to the graze again. Lachlann groans.

"Just stay still," Daniel mutters. His hands aren't exactly steady, and he knows he's still a far cry from sober, but he gets the job done. As he makes his way deeper into Lachlann's hairline, parting the loose dark curls, he finds more and more coagulated blood. "Murray really did a number on you, didn't he?"

"It was four against one at the start," Lachlann sighs, eyes closed against Daniel's brutish care. "Hardly fair. I think I got this lovely number when I hit the wall of the barn."

"Guess none of those boxing tips I taught you stuck," Daniel hums under his breath.

Lachlann grins. “You always pulled your punches.”

“Right,” Daniel replies. “If I’d just knocked your teeth out, maybe you would’ve gotten the hint that you’re supposed to avoid the punch.”

Cracking an eye open, Lachlann leans back enough to peer up at Daniel with a raised brow. “Oh, so we’re making jokes now, are we?”

“Maybe.”

“Glad to know you actually care.”

And it’s not like Daniel can refute that truthfully. He’s already shown his hand. So, he maintains his silence on the matter, and bullies Lachlann into letting him clean the blood off. The rain picks up its fervour against the windowpane. “...What did you say to him anyway?”

“To Murray?”

“Yeah.”

Lachlann laughs. “What makes you think I started it?” he asks, and when Daniel only pauses and stares back at him, surrenders. “Fine. I mostly avoided him the whole night. Tried to, anyway. Bad blood.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Murray wasn’t especially friendly to Daniel either, to anyone he couldn’t get something from, but he’d taken a special pleasure out of targeting Lachlann.

“Well,” Lachlann continues. “When he pulled his car around with his buddies, he was already looking to pick a fight.”

Daniel frowns. “So then he *did* start it.”

“No, I did,” Lachlann admits unabashedly. “He made a comment about it being a little reunion, that we could pick up right where we left off in high school. So, I asked him if that meant he was going to ask me to suck him off in the locker room like he did in grade eleven. Then he punched me.”

“Jesus, Lachlann.” Daniel shakes his head. He tosses the used alcohol wipes in the trash and turns to the sink to wash his hands. “You’re lucky he didn’t kill you.”

“Suppose I’m especially lucky you were there then.” Lachlann says behind him. “You always did like playing the hero.”

The bathroom goes silent, aside from the rush of the faucet. Daniel stops with his hands under the questionably clear water until the temperature spikes and threatens to burn his skin. He turns the cold tap on. “You should be good,” he says. Daniel only catches it in the mirror when Lachlann watches him for a moment, mouth opening and closing with whatever unspoken words he’s struggling with, before shoving himself up off the seat and walking out of the room. Daniel sighs roughly. He leans down, sticks his head in the sink and splashes the icy water over his head. The rust red blood pools in the basin before finally twirling down the drain. Daniel accepts the sting as the cuts wash clean.

It’s several minutes before he emerges from the bathroom again, drying his hands and his hair with the only towel in there. When he walks out, the living room is warmer than he’d left it. A fire crackles in the hearth with Lachlann’s failed attempts at decoding the Railroad Cipher as kindling. A brisk wind cuts through the room from the open window, where Lachlann leans out and smokes into the night. The trail of his cigarette twirls above his head and drifts out the window. The soft patter of rain on the roof becomes steady streams where it runs off the eaves.

Daniel meanders through the house. The only light that works is the feeble hood bulb above the stove. A full kettle sits on the lit hob, not quite yet steaming. After an indecisive lap around the kitchen, Daniel finally caves and opens the door to the conservatory with a creak that might as well have been a gunshot. The stark quiet and stillness inside has Daniel holding his breath as he enters.

The conservatory is exactly how Daniel remembers it, and not at all at the same time. Every plant inside is dead, for a start. Renee Mills' brief stays never brought much care back to the topiary. It'd once been her obsession. She'd brought in a florist from Toronto on Arthur's suggestion to design and plant it all. The beds where peonies and marigolds had flowered closer resemble dried up thorn pits. Daniel makes his way down the once-cultivated laneways of the greenhouse with an intangible ache making home in his chest. What's left of the massive fig tree now stands barren, skeletal branches stretching overhead. Rain cascades down through the shattered holes in the ceiling the walls.

The lush green foliage that once hid Daniel and Lachlann as they traded kisses between muffled laughter, pressed up against tree trunks, shielded by giant birds of paradise leaves, lies shrivelled up on the conservatory floor. The easel by the stool where Lachlann's mother sat painting for hours without looking up from the canvas sits waiting for its master's return. He maps out the space in his memory, replants the pansies, violets, and lavender. Daniel all at once feels like he's being watched, turns in circles to look out every glass wall into the midnight dark, feels like the night he had Lachlann pinned up against the fig tree, when he saw a shadow move past the windows.

His foot catches on a broken pot. Daniel's arms pinwheel as he tries to right himself. His heart jumps the moment gravity wrestles control away and sends him slamming onto the hard

concrete ground. Daniel groans, rolling from his side onto his back, and just lies there. Waiting for the world to quit spinning.

The conservatory doors fly open. Lachlann comes running in, his shadow falling large across the dead wood. “Daniel?” he calls, before a few hasty steps inside bring him straight to Daniel. Lachlann fixes him with a cocked head and an incredulous stare.

Daniel glares up at him. “I’m fine.”

“You’re on the floor.”

“And I’m fine on the floor.”

Yeah, not as convincing as it sounded in his head, and evidently Lachlann agrees, rolling his eyes as he extends a hand. “Sure,” he says. His offered hand remains stubbornly outstretched until Daniel concedes to take it. “Come on,” Lachlann grunts as he hauls Daniel to his feet. “You’ve gotta sober up a bit.”

Lachlann takes Daniel into the living room, with the roaring fire and the dust covers shaken off the furniture. Two mugs sit on the endtable, wafting with earl grey, and a plate of toast spread with strawberry jam. Lachlann all but pushes Daniel onto the couch and takes one of the mugs for himself. “All I’ve got,” he gestures to the plate as he returns to his post at the open window. “Didn’t pick up much on my way into town.”

“No, it’s fine,” Daniel says, stuffing a piece of toast into his mouth. He barely chews before he swallows. “Thanks.”

Lachlann pops a cigarette out of the cartridge on the coffee table, holds it between his teeth as he flicks his lighter to it. He turns and exhales out the window. Shaking his hand through

his curls, Lachlann leans his forearm against the sill, sweeping aside the dead black flies.

“Listen,” Lachlann begins, “what you, uh... did back there.... Thank you.”

Daniel eases back against the cushions, cradling the mug of tea in his hands. “Even though it was stupid?” he asks as he takes a sip.

Lachlann’s shoulders shake. “Even though it was *stupid*,” he says, and takes a drag.

For the record, Daniel allows a smile to twitch at the corner of his mouth only because Lachlann is facing away. He sinks back into the couch, picking at a pill in the fabric of the armrest. In the aftermath of the fight, he feels drained. His tender knuckles protest every stretch of his hand. Daniel stares into the hearth until the flames sear into the space behind his eyelids. “You staying in town long?”

Lachlann shrugs. “Haven’t thought that far ahead, honestly,” he answers. “I’ve got nothing else going on.”

“Nothing?” Daniel repeats.

And again, Lachlann only shrugs, bony shoulders peeking through his shirt. “I did what I was supposed to, kind of,” he begins. “Went to school, got a degree, but it was in Fine Arts so I did fuck-all with it. I’ve mostly been working as an assistant for Mom’s exhibitions. Tried my hand at painting, but...” Lachlann inhales on his cigarette and holds onto it for too long before letting it go. “Nothing’s clicked. And what about you?” he turns, leans back against the windowsill to face Daniel. “Last I remember, you were thinking about journalism.”

Daniel shoves another bite of toast into his mouth to buy himself time. He washes it down with the tea, wincing at the heat. “Yeah,” he finally replies. “I was. But I just... started at

the factory to save up money and once I did there wasn't really a point anymore. And my family's here, so..."

"I get it," Lachlann says, even though Daniel's sure he doesn't. It comes out as sincere anyway. "For what it's worth, I am sorry. About Father Arthur."

Daniel still hasn't quite learned how he's meant to respond to the sentiment. A *'thank you'* or *'yeah, so am I'* doesn't seem to cut it. So, he shifts, scrubs his palm down his face and winces. "Well, the funeral's going to be something." Daniel prods at the discoloured skin around his left eye and feels the ache straight down to the bone. "I'm never going to hear the end of this."

"I could probably cover it," Lachlann offers. "Bit of makeup."

Daniel pauses in mild horror and curiosity. "You wear makeup?"

"No, I'm just naturally this attractive, jackass," Lachlann fires back. "But I know a lot of drag queens that do."

"Really?" Daniel sounds more surprised than he means to.

Lachlann doesn't appear to care. He taps his ashes out the window. "You tend to befriend a few when you're at the bars on Church."

Daniel frowns. "Church...?"

"Street. In the city," Lachlann chuckles. "Although I'd pay to see Mass performed at a Drag Show."

Daniel eyes Lachlann and sets his tea aside in favour of kicking up his feet and lounging across the couch. "And you never got into that?"

“I’ve been told I’ve got the legs for it, but I can’t dance. Go figure.”

Daniel can’t hope to keep his laughter in now, head tilted back on the armrest until he can breathe again. Lachlann’s turned back out the window to smoke. Adjusting himself on the lumpy old couch in search of comfort, Daniel watches the glow of the fireplace play with the shadows on the ceiling. “So... what exactly do you do there?”

Lachlann brings the half stub cigarette up to his mouth. “Where?”

“Church,” and then, after a pause, “Street.”

Looking over his shoulder, Lachlann flashes him a wide grin. “It’s a den of carnal sin and debauchery, what do you expect?” He pauses for an answer, and when Daniel doesn’t supply one, he takes a drag. “We watch *The Golden Girls*, mostly.”

Daniel snorts. “Get out.”

“I’m serious,” Lachlann laughs. He blows smoke into the rain, continues on, quieter. “It’s a big world out there, Daniel. You need to get out there.”

That’s all it really takes. Two words, and the spell is broken. Daniel sits up, nearly losing his balance but pushing on stubbornly anyway. “Yeah, like you did right?”

Lachlann huffs in frustration and tosses his cigarette butt out the window. “Dan —”

“No,” Daniel cuts him off with a growl. “*You’re* the one that left when things got tough.”

Lachlann pushes the window shut. “I was seventeen. I didn’t have a choice, they were going to blame me for the fire.”



“You chose to leave without a word!” Daniel bellows. The moment Lachlann moves toward him, he gets to his feet, bracing his poor balance with a hand on the back of the couch. “Y’know what? This was a mistake.”

Before he can make for the door, Lachlann surges forward and grabs him by the forearm. And when Daniel tries to yank his arm free, whirls on Lachlann like he’s looking for a fight, and he is, Lachlann doesn’t flinch. “It’s the middle of the night,” Lachlann hisses. “You’re drunk and probably concussed; you’re not going home. Don’t be a stubborn ass. Just stay the night, alright?”

The ensuing stand-off effectively cools Daniel’s temper enough for him to see reason. Still, he pulls his arm out of Lachlann’s grasp with more force than necessary, and this time, Lachlann lets him go. “Fine,” he grumbles as he drops onto the couch again.

Safe to say any conversation is killed at that point. Lachlann roots around in the linen cupboard and comes back with two itchy blankets, tossing one to Daniel before taking up the loveseat. Daniel doesn’t question why he doesn’t sleep in one of the beds upstairs. Just pulls the blanket up over his shoulder and wrestles with sleep for the rest of the night.

## Chapter Seven: The Service

Daniel wakes the next morning to a very persistent mourning dove out in the fog. Aching and all together miserable, he sits up, rubs his eyes, and immediately regrets it. His tongue is heavy and coated with stale alcohol and the threat of bile in the back of his throat. His head pounds. He can feel his heartbeat in his cheeks. With a few deep breaths to steady a trigger-happy gag reflex, he takes inventory of the room. Lachlann, still asleep in a tangle of long limbs and a wool blanket on the opposite couch, hasn't been disturbed. Peripheral memories of the previous night trickle their way back in as he catches a glimpse of himself in the reflection of the window. The bruise around his eyes has darkened. Harsh lines strike down either side of his nose. His lips are dry and cracked, cheeks red and face pale.

Daniel groans and hesitantly swings his legs over the side of the couch, testing weight and balance before he stands, muscles revolting against every movement. On the couch, Lachlann sighs in sleep and turns over toward the back of the couch. The silence of the huge, empty house makes Daniel's own breathing loud in his ears. Smothering his inexplicable guilt, he stumbles to the door, puts on boots, grabs jacket off the coat hook, and creeps out the door. The cool and damp morning air floods over him the moment he steps onto the porch. He breathes it in, closes his eyes, embraces the sobering chill at the first hints of a blue morning, and heads down to the road into town. A full, clementine moon hanging low in the sky on his left, the sun rising over the trees on his right. His long shadow stretches over the road.

The town centre is mostly dead quiet as he walks up from the back roads. A few strays roam the streets, equally miserable to be up at this hour. Daniel makes it home before either Tom or Eddy are up and manages to sneak into the shower without waking either of them. Every cut

and scrape on his skin burns like hell, but he emerges from the spray feeling a touch more human. He leaves a trail of wet footprints into the kitchen as he grabs a water bottle from the fridge, a box of chocolate granola bars, and two overripe bananas, retreating back into the safety of his bedroom before hearing the creak of Tom and Eddy's bedroom door.

"Dan?" Tom calls through the door. "When'd you get home last night?"

"Late." Daniel answers as he steps into his boxers. Not technically a lie.

Tom doesn't push it. "'Kay. What time's the service again?"

"Noon, but I've gotta get there early."

"Cool. Do you, uh..." Tom clears his throat. "You want me and Ed to come?"

Daniel *really* doesn't, but the offer sounds genuine, awkward as it is. "Ah, you don't have to. I mean, I appreciate it, but it's just the viewing. Tomorrow's the actual burial if you want to come then, I guess."

A second pair of footsteps patter down the hall to Daniel's bedroom door, as Eddy joins in. "We'll be there. On our best behaviour too."

"Yeah. Sounds good," Daniel calls back. A few beats of suspecting silence cut through the conversation. Daniel takes it as an opportunity to chug half the water bottle down.

Outside, he hears the scuffle of Eddy nudging Tom out of the way, her heavier knock shaking through the door. "You gonna come out any time soon?"

Nearly choking on a cough as he pulls the bottle away from his lips, Daniel wipes his mouth on his arm. "Changing," he replies with an audible crack in his voice.

“Well, we’re gonna do a coffee run, if you want to co-”

“I’m *good*, alright? Can I have two minutes to myself?” Daniel snaps, harsher than he meant to. For a moment, it sounds like Eddy might be gearing up to argue back, but Tom’s voice, low and inaudible, interrupts her bubbling tirade, and grows quieter as he ushers her down the hall and away from the bedroom door. Daniel sits there in silence, listening to the hushed and tense voices from the living room until they vanish with the latch of the apartment door.

The moment he’s alone, Daniel groans and flops back onto his bed. The drop sends the world spinning. He closes his eyes, envisions himself back on the embankment by the railroad tracks, lying in the weeds and feeling like he’s about to slip right off the edge of the earth. Lachlann’s elbow jabbing into his sternum as he looks up over the underbrush for danger, his pepper cologne wrapping around Daniel’s head. No good following those thoughts for too long, he tells himself. Even now, he can smell Lachlann’s cologne.

No, he actually can. Daniel reluctantly peels himself off the mattress and turns to the jacket he’d abandoned on the bed. Lachlann’s jacket, dark blue denim, and a fleece collar. He’d grabbed the wrong one on his way out. Daniel reaches for it, and the moment the thought of bringing it to his nose crosses his mind, he snatches his hand away and stands quickly enough to be slammed with vertigo. He doesn’t have time for this.

Making himself presentable for the service is no easy task. He doesn’t have too many dress clothes, so he settles with a grey dress shirt, a black tie, and the suit he wore to a wedding last summer. If he thought he looked like shit in his reflection earlier that morning, he looks even worse now. The temptation to hazard a go at Eddy’s make-up bag creeps in, but Daniel dashes the thought before he can take it seriously. After polishing off his meagre breakfast and refilling

his water bottle three times from the tap to sate his aching thirst, he pockets wallet and keys and starts on the walk to St. Anthony's.

Daniel makes it there by twenty to twelve. Already, parish mourners fill the parking lot, making small talk on the pavement before the viewing service is set to begin. Daniel walks up the path to the Rectory to avoid the crowd of black cloth. Around the back of the hall, he tries every door until he finds one unlocked, and steps inside to find himself in the sacristy. The room smells of old wax candles and vinegar. Daniel peers into the entryway, the empty church pews and altar, the champagne dust-beams from the windows. Further inside, past the oak confessional booths, he hears his mother's busy commands and the low chatter of volunteers setting up from the Parish Hall. Daniel has to take a moment alone, bracing himself before he braves his way into the hall.

The Parish Hall reeks of fresh-cut flowers. The scent makes him want to sneeze, eyes watering long before he even reaches the doors. The same set-up from the memorial at the Hayloft has been put out on another fold-out table, a large portrait of Arthur in black and white surrounded by pamphlets. A donation box for the church sits in the middle, underneath an easel holding the picture. Along the sides of the room are more tables, set out with more photos, the guest book, donuts, and coffee and tea from tin carafes. Stiff aluminum chairs with moth-eaten cushions make up neat rows, all facing the casket at the front. From where Daniel stands, he can just see his Uncle's nose and the knuckles of his folded hands over the silk lining, surrounded by mounds of calla lilies and dark red roses. Green carnations line the inside of the casket. His father has taken up one of the chairs in the front row, staring ahead.

Sharp nails dig into his arm and yank him off to the side. "*What* happened to you?" his mother's voice hisses in his ear as she drags him to the back of the hall. Daniel stumbles along

with her, finally wrenching his arm out of her grasp once they're alone, but she still doesn't let up. She glares up at him in her freshly pressed black dress, lipstick smeared in the corners of her frowning mouth. Daniel nearly points it out — but he chooses life instead. In any case, she doesn't give him the chance to speak. "What are you thinking, showing up looking like this?"

"I'm fine, by the way," Daniel grumbles.

"Don't give me that," she snarls. "When did this happen? Was it last night? Christ Daniel, how much did you have to drink?"

It takes every ounce of self-control not to burst. "Mom, I just tripped, alright? Hit a... telephone pole."

"A telephone pole."

"Moved right in front of me."

Bonnie clicks her tongue. "Dan, do you have any idea how this looks?"

There it is. Bonnie McBride's top priority, her reputation, and by extension her family's. Unsightly appearances hidden. Negative emotions tamped down. Daniel clenches his jaw, breathes out his nose, tries to uncoil the tightness in his chest. "I have a clue."

The doors open at the other end of the hall. Visitors begin filing in, starting with Father Pat. "I don't have time for this, I have to go to the receiving line." She shakes her head. "Just go pay your respects and stay back here the rest of the time." Without waiting for an answer, Bonnie turns on her heel and starts toward the front. She makes it halfway up the aisle of chairs before turning sharply back to Daniel. "Well?"

Daniel stares past her at the open casket and the sea of green carnations. “I will,” he shrugs. “Just... later, okay?”

“What do you mean *later*?”

“Well, he’s not exactly going anywhere, is he?”

“Daniel!” Bonnie snaps in a sharp whisper. Before she has the opportunity to verbally lay him out, the crowd flowing in through the hall doors grows, too many eyes on the quiet altercation. Her lips press into a paper-thin line as she lashes him with one last glare. She turns to a teary mourner with a beatific smile and welcomes her grief with a kiss on either cheek. Daniel takes his opportunity to get out from underneath her heel, and retreats to the donut table.

Beth emerges from the crowd not long after. She nudges him out of the way to grab a powdered donut and a napkin to keep the sugar off her dress. “So,” she says. “You tripped and hit a pole, huh?”

Daniel’s shoulders seize up at first, his back rod straight, but her voice lacks any malice or disappointment. Hesitantly, he relaxes. “Actually, it walked up and hit me.”

“The same pole that walked up and hit Duncan Murray’s car?”

“Sounds like the one,” Daniel concedes. He watches his sister’s face carefully as she wipes blueberry filling from the corner of her mouth. It seems for a second that she might say more, but her attention is called by their mother to the front of the hall. She tosses her napkin in a nearby bin and catches his eye with earnest caution before she leaves.

The service drags on. A steady line-up of people coming in to kneel at the casket, gawk at the corpse, and make small talk over refreshments. Kids getting antsy and pulling at their

parent's sleeves, an old woman with a violet in her lapel, couples whispering harsh arguments in the corners over how long to stay. If it wasn't for the very dead elephant in the room, it would feel like any other post-mass brunch he'd attended as a kid, sitting restless in the corner waiting for his parents to take him home.

Daniel does as he's told and sticks to the back for the most part, if only to avoid standing in the line with his family to accept condolences. He passes the time flipping through the albums set out on the tables, most of them copies of the same pictures he's seen a dozen times. When he isn't leafing the pages, he stares out the window, across the courtyard and the church parking lot to the dark windows of the rectory.

"You look like you met the wrong end of a horse," an old man chuckles as he steps up beside him.

Daniel takes a minute to remember him as Mr. Gallagher, one of his father's buddies and a regular at the Hayloft. He shrugs, hands in his pockets as he ducks his head. "Something like that," he says.

"You're the nephew?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry for your troubles," Mr. Gallagher offers a wan smile. He leans against the other side of the window, and claps Daniel on the shoulder, his coat pocket rustling with a pack of chewing tobacco sticking halfway out. "We went way back. Knew him when he was a boy. Your father too. Good man. Who knew he'd'a turned out that way?"

Daniel blinks. "What way?"



Mr. Gallagher laughs, the sound too loud and too out of place. “A priest!” He gives Daniel’s shoulder a shake. “Arthur, when he was young, he was quite a troublemaker. He came back a real good man when he did, but I tell you, he was a troubled one, always sneaking around. Can’t say I blame him either.” When Daniel can only meet his rambling with another blank stare, Mr. Gallagher rips open the plastic bag in his pocket. He tears off a yellow strip, a 25¢-off special offer, and stuffs it back in the same pocket. “You never met your Granddad, did ya? Oh, he was a mean old man, even for those days. Probably passed not long after you came along, ‘course the polite thing was to say he died of liver failure, but you know — ”

“Sorry,” Daniel cuts in. “When Uncle Arthur came *back*?”

“This is just hearsay, but the talk was that Arthur had some — ” Mr. Gallagher pauses as he pinches off a bit of tobacco and begins to chew, “behavioural issues his folks caught him out on. Something to do with a local boy, can’t remember his name. Your grandparents sent Arthur away to get straightened out. Not long after that, he was off to the seminary. Seemed like Mr. McBride had a heavy hand in that.”

“Sent him away where?” Daniel presses.

“Couldn’t say.” Mr. Gallagher shrugs. “You just didn’t talk about these things back then.” He pauses. “You’re his nephew, didn’t you know him at all?”

If there’s a correct answer, Daniel doesn’t know it. He’s not sure he could say much of anything in the moment regardless, and thankfully, Mr. Gallagher doesn’t linger long enough to comment on it. He gives him another pat on the back in passing and wanders off to spit into a garbage bin filled to the brim already with crumpled paper coffee cups, wiping the dribble off his chin with a complimentary napkin. Daniel, suddenly left aware of his isolation from the crowd,

pushes away from the window and tries to put the conversation out of mind. He's got three pikes driven into his skull already; one from Lachlann, one from the letters, one from his uncle's mortal exit. One more strike and he's going to split straight in half.

Daniel wanders to the guestbook table, flips through the pages looking for a distraction. He finds it, to be fair. The first several pages are filled with names and well wishes, shared memories, repeated sentiments.

*Rest in Peace, Father.*

*You will be dearly missed.*

*My condolences to the family at this time.*

*You officiated my wedding and baptized my first son. I'll be forever grateful.*

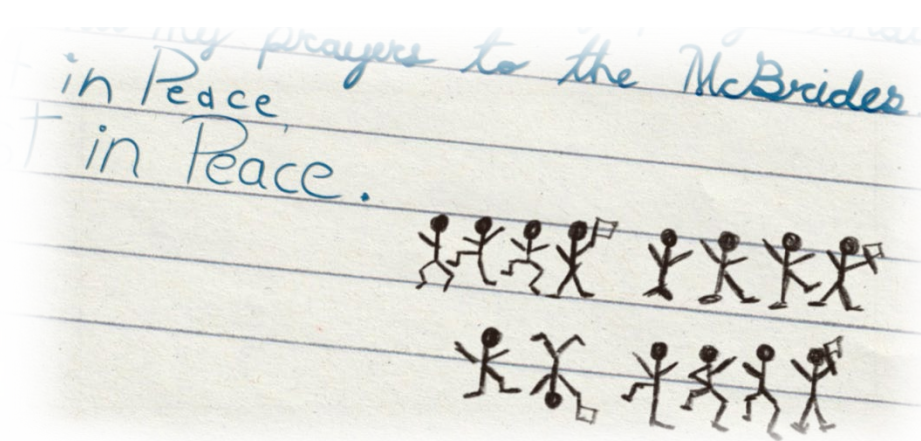
*Father Arthur, may you rest in peace.*

*I will never forget the way you rallied the community after the fire at St. Jude's.*

*It is with my deepest sympathy that I extend my prayers to the McBrides.*

*Rest in Peace.*

*Rest in Peace.*



Daniel nearly flips past it. He stops the second he sees the scribbled stick figures and turns the pages back so fast he tears the paper a bit out of the book. The line of dancing men sit on the bottom corner of the page. Daniel's head snaps up, searching frantically through the crowd as if he can pick out the stranger who wrote it. Nothing, but Beth isn't too far away, so he steps away from the table long enough to take her by the arm and tug her insistently back to the guestbook.

"What?" she whispers, annoyance on her tongue as she snatches her arm back.

Daniel points to the book. "Who wrote this?"

"Wrote what?"

"This," Daniel jabs his finger on the page. "Who wrote *this*?"

Beth flounders for a moment in confusion. "I don't know? One of the kids probably got bored."

"It wasn't a kid," he insists.

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to know?" Beth hisses right back. The crowd behind them begins to shuffle their way into the seats. "Look, the service is going to start soon. Just

leave it.” She leaves him at the table and joins their mother at the door as she ushers everyone into the chairs.

Daniel turns his back before he can be subject to his mother’s death glare. He rips the corner of the page completely out and slips it into his wallet. The noise and chatter of the packed hall grows louder, folks greeting each other as they finish the last of the complimentary donuts and make their way into the carefully laid-out seats. Daniel takes his chance to slip to the front of the hall. The vice around his chest tightens as he approaches the casket. He takes a knee on the cracked leather cushion, braces a hand on the edge of the casket, and peers inside.

He’d assumed Arthur would be buried in his vestments. Daniel isn’t sure why he’s so surprised to see him in a plain black suit, but it’s the first thing he notices. The second, how even in plainclothes, the fabric seems to hang loosely on his thin body, thinner than Daniel had ever seen him in life. His cheeks are gaunt, and even the layers of wax make-up can’t hold the illusion that he’s asleep. A wilting green carnation, tucked into the lapel of his suit. This is a dead man if Daniel’s ever seen one. Unrecognizable from the man Daniel had known, who gifted him his favourite books and taught him secret codes, who shared his music and listened when his parents didn’t. So completely unlike his uncle, that a part of him defaults to the belief that it isn’t him in the casket, and the moment that feeling trickles in, Daniel abruptly stands. He walks back down the aisle, and under cover of the crowded parish hall, slips out the back door.

## Chapter Eight: Truce

He goes fishing.

Daniel walks to his family home, the first stop between St. Anthony's and Main Street. Doesn't stop until he makes it to his dad's garage, lifting the bay door open with a great heave. Arthur's fishing equipment lies tossed underneath the crusted window. He was supposed to go fishing with Arthur and he canceled. So, he's going now.

The next stop: his apartment. Eddy and Tom are watching TV on the couch when he gets in, and he filters their questions about the service with brief answers until he can slip into his bedroom without either of them turning around. Trades his suit for jeans, a t-shirt, and grey hooded sweater. Swears and curses at the pocket of his dress pants until he can get out the piece of torn paper he'd taken and puts that in Arthur's box, which he tucks under his arm. Right. All set. The rain clouds gather on the east end of town and the temperature's already dropping. On a second thought with one hand on the doorknob, Daniel grabs Lachlann's denim jacket and throws it on over his sweater. Stuffs his wallet and his cracked paperback of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* into the pockets.

The clerk at the corner store misses his palm giving him his change, staring at the tar black blooming from his left eye. Pushes the styrofoam cup of earthworms into a plastic bag, nudges it across the counter, and watches him until he steps into the concrete wasteland of the parking lot. Daniel continues down the wooded road and onto the train tracks toward the gorge.

It's already started spitting by the time Daniel gets to the bridge. He sets his tackle box down, lifts a leg over the rusty iron guard rail and clamours down onto the outer platform. Kicks

an empty beer can over the edge on accident. And he figures, if he's already littered once, it won't do much more harm to nudge the paper cup of solidified coffee sludge over the edge too. All lost in the churning river ten feet down. Raindrops splatter the back of his neck, drip down ice cold, soak into his sweater. Feels nice, honestly; more mist than rain, chilly and damp against the broken skin on his face. Daniel lets the water slip down until he shivers and pulls the hood up over his head.

Doesn't take long for him to set up. He lowers himself down on the least scummy patch he can find, dangles his legs over the edge. He pops open the Styrofoam lid, digs his fingers into the dirt and plucks out a worm, skewers it on his hook with a fleshy pop, worm-ooze on his fingers as he folds it over on the barbed end so it'll stay put. Dozens of fishing lines and baubles tangle over the telephone wires stretching overhead, a gleaming web of wayward lures, so he angles his rod down low as he casts into the water.

He passes the time shuffling through the contents of the box, reading passages out of his book, and tricking himself into thinking he has a catch every time the fishing rod bends with the current. Ten minutes in, Daniel hears the slow approach of an engine suddenly cutting off on the road that runs along the river. Daniel's never believed much in a sixth sense, nothing like that, but it's the closest explanation that he's got for how he knows it's Lachlann before he looks up. He knows him by his lanky gait. A bit infuriating, that he can still pick him out blind. Daniel sinks back against the base of the bridge, tries to summon irritation, indifference, anything to put a gag order on his beating chest. "You stalking me or something?"

"Get over yourself," Lachlann replies as he hoists himself over the rail and climbs down to the platform. He folds himself in sideways, leans back against a beam, one leg hanging over the side, enough space between them to fit two more people. It's all Daniel can do not to choke

when he realises that Lachlann's wearing his corduroy jacket. For a moment, it looks like Lachlann might slip a cigarette pack out of the bulky pocket. He flexes his nicotine-stained fingers and opts instead to peel paint chips off the beam. A blue jay flies down and picks at the eye of the dead salmon left stranded and decaying on the rocks, drags the carcass into the cattails on the riverbank.

Daniel pulls lightly at his fishing rod and watches the end bend and dip. "How'd you find me?"

"You're predictable."

He feels like he should laugh, but nothing comes up. Instead he sighs, a kind of surrender as he watches the trail of his lure in the water. A lapse of silence falls between them. Only it's not a real, clean silence. The splatter of rain hitting the leaves, the rush of the water below: loud silence. Daniel shifts, brings a knee against his chest, fiddles with the reel. "Well?"

Lachlann opens his mouth to answer, but when Daniel feels a tug on his line and yanks the fishing rod back, Lachlann jolts forward and latches onto his sleeve to keep him anchored. Daniel pulls and strains against his catch, reeling back so hard he fears for a second that the rod'll snap in half. Just as quick, the line goes slack, and Daniel retracts it to find an empty hook. He scowls at it, pretending to ignore Lachlann chuckling at his expense, and digs his fingers into the dirt cup again.

Lachlann lets go of Daniel's sleeve, takes a moment to recover his wits and lean back again. "Just thought I should actually thank you. Properly."

Daniel nearly pricks the tip of his finger on the hook as he sews it into the worm. "You already did." He casts the line back into the river.

"Still." Lachlann says and shifts to pull the bulk out of his coat pocket. He holds out a

paper bag, not quite looking Daniel in the eyes — half a smooshed chicken club sandwich. Wilted lettuce and too much mayo, grease dripping onto the paper.

So far as olive branches go, it's not the worst.

Daniel wipes his hand on his pants, smearing worm guts on denim, and reaches to take the extended peace offering. Leaning back and planting his feet on the platform, Daniel holds the fishing rod between his knees so he can take a bite before the bread gets soggy. They eat in the muddied silence of rain and bird chatter. The air thick with mist and the stench of decaying fish, dead leaves and fermenting crab apples along the basin of the gorge. He could close his eyes and transport himself back to high school, to similar quiet lunches spent defacing public property and catching no fish.

But he's too aware of the distance between himself and Lachlann. Not even in some bullshit metaphysical way either, but the physical five feet between where he and Lachlann sit on this red rusted bridge. The negative space buzzes and stings but he can't broach it. He *wants* to want to. There's nothing so unattractive as watching another man eat a mediocre sandwich, but all he can think about is the veins in Lachlann's neck as he chews. Long tendrils of dark hair falling in his eyes. Daniel wants to tell him to get a hair cut. Wants to close a fist against his scalp. He swallows down rubbery chicken and averts his eyes to the river, but in his head he concocts a dozen excuses just to reach out, and every single one of those half-formed schemes to bridge the gap between them are so juvenile he feels he *should* be blasted with nostalgia as punishment.

Headlights pass on the road curving by the gorge. Daniel searches for something, *anything*, to say. Lachlann, as always, beats him to it. "Guess old habits die hard, huh?" he asks as he polishes off his end of the sandwich and crumples the paper. "Still stealing my clothes."



Daniel has to tear his attention away from Lachlann's neck again. He swallows. "Just grabbed the wrong one in the dark," he inwardly cringes at the dismissive words as soon as they leave him. Lachlann nods, sinks back against the iron beams, just another inch growing between them. Daniel holds the rod between his knees again so he can take his wallet and Sherlock Holmes paperback out of the pockets and shrug out of Lachlann's jacket. "Here."

Lachlann takes the trade. Unloads a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from the bulging pockets and takes the jacket off.

"What else do you have in there?" Daniel chuckles.

Lachlann tosses the wad of mayo-greased paper at him.

Daniel snorts as the paper bounces off his head. He shoves the crust- end of the club into his mouth, wipes his hands on his jeans again, and takes up the fishing rod. Lets his leg swing over the edge again.

In the brief lapse, Lachlann finally gives in, picks up his pack of cigarettes and pops one between his lips. Doesn't light it right away though. He flicks his lighter on and off, watching the flame. "So, you and Edith?"

Daniel catches himself somewhere between laughing and choking. The scowl Lachlann throws his way is almost worth the blow to his dignity as he coughs it down, pushes his dampened hood back just to get the full view of Lachlann's embarrassment. "Me and Edith what?"

Lachlann pointedly avoids looking at him now, his flame-lit cheeks flushed. "I figured — you two live together don't you? And I saw you talking at the barn — y'know what? Fuck off."

Even if Daniel wants to spare Lachlann his laughter, it's a lost cause at this point. "Me and Eddy," he snickers. "Hey, I've got a bridge to sell you."

“I should push you off.”

“I’m a pretty good swimmer.”

He sees the moment Lachlann finally breaks, turns his head away as his shoulders shake. Daniel feels a tug at the line, but one pull back and it’s gone again. And again comes the busy quiet, the space between them and the gorge stretching on into the grey mist seeping down through the craggy rock walls overgrown with dead trees. Daniel loses himself in it for a moment, trying to strain his sight through the rain to the shapes of the town far down the river.

“Guess that’s a good thing, though,” Lachlann says.

“Hm?”

“You and Edith,” he continues. “Or the lack thereof.”

Something unexpected rises up in Daniel’s chest, rushes hot and anxious into every cavity, burns his throat shut. Lachlann’s lit the cigarette now, but he doesn’t pocket the lighter. Just keeps fidgeting with it, flicking it on and off. Daniel breathes in through his nose, and the stark, wet cold in his lungs nearly gives him temperature whiplash. Outwardly stone-faced and casual (or so he hopes), he replies. “Why’s that?”

Lachlann takes the cigarette out of his mouth, taps the ash off, exhales a cloud of lazy smoke just to take his sweet time. “I was worried she’d lost her taste.”

“Don’t know about that,” Daniel shrugs. “It was me and Tom in the apartment first, but Eddy moved in when they started going out.”

Lachlann’s brows arch. “Who knew they’d shack up.”

“Please. He was practically humping her leg.”

“Wasn’t the only one.”

Daniel finally leans over, stretches across the short distance just to punch Lachlann in the shoulder. Lachlann jolts to keep himself balanced and drops the cigarette onto the zebra-mussel-crusted pillar below. They both stare at the trail of ember and ash as it tumbles off the dead shells and into the river. Daniel has to admit, he feels rather smug as he sits back up. “Maybe you should take that as a sign to quit.”

Lachlann looks him right in the eyes as he takes out his pack again.

As the rain moves down river and the skies begin to clear overhead, a sunburst washes out the gorge in too-bright light. For the first time, Daniel can see all the way to town, rising up on the left side of the river in staccato rooftops and power lines. On the other side of the gorge, the church spire of St. Jude’s. A charcoal smear. A used matchstick. Ash-trail gravestones spilling down the hill. This town, like livestock, herded from bars to the church and back again until they die. All their lives and they just end up going from one side of the river to the other, the end. Even the destruction of the church couldn’t upset the eternal Newton’s cradle. They just as quickly built a new church as the other was reduced to a burnt frame and continued on swinging again.

Giving in with a body-long exhale, Daniel reels in his line. “Let’s say I believe you,” he says.

Lachlann seems startled by the sudden intrusion of his voice. Suspicion soon-after takes its place. “What?”

“Hypothetically,” Daniel continues, catching the end of the line and the hook, “you didn’t start the fire. What happened?”

“Seriously?” Lachlann hisses. “You want to do this *now*? Thought you said you *couldn’t*

*deal.*”

Daniel rips the worm off the end of the hook and throws it into the river. “Yeah,” he bites out. “When I was drunk and concussed. Think that counts as a decent excuse.”

Lachlann spends all of a minute staring into the embers at the end of his cigarette before sticking it back between his teeth and pulling himself up. “It’s not going to change anything anyway,” he mutters as he grabs onto the rail and climbs over. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Daniel tosses the rod next to his tackle box and hurries up to his feet — he’s made it this far, he can’t let this go. Holding onto the rail from the other side, he grabs Lachlann’s wrist before he can leave. “It matters to me.”

For the first time, Lachlann seems just as much out of his depth as Daniel. He stares down at him, all shaggy hair and wide storm-grey eyes. He pulls his wrist free of Daniel’s hold, shrugs, looks at the tracks and back again. “Buy me a coffee.”

Daniel takes up his tackle box. “Fine,” he concedes. Dropping his shit on the other side of the rail, he hoists himself over. Lachlann offers a hand in the form of grabbing a fistful of his hoodie to help drag him over. On his feet again, Daniel shrugs the rumped, wet hoodie off and ties it around his waist. He replaces it with his jacket. The weight of the cipher book still folded into the left pocket bumps against his side. They turn together and start walking off the bridge.

“And listen,” Daniel starts, “I’m sorry. For, uh... for what it’s worth.”

“It is what it is.” Lachlann shakes his head. “Nothing you could have done.”

Daniel isn’t so sure about that. He doesn’t say anything, but the doubt is there. He throws his tackle and fishing rod into the back seat of Lachlann’s Granada and they drive out of town. The closest diner sits on a remote lot right before the lonely highway road. Last stop. Final

destination, sitting underneath a derelict billboard proclaiming *WARNING: GOD IS HERE*, which Daniel supposes could be true, if God enjoyed shitty coffee.

The sky's opened up in a torrent by the time the car crawls into the gravel parking lot. Daniel takes Arthur's box with him, figures it might come in handy. They pause just inside the door, stamping out soaked boots on the doormat and shaking the water from their hair, jackets, sweaters. Lachlann gives off the impression of a freshly bathed poodle with the mop of curly hair weighed down over his eyes. When he catches Daniel watching, *far* too amused, Lachlann elbows him in the side and nudges his way ahead of him.

"Two creamers, no sugar. Guy behind me's paying," he says at the counter.

The hostess inclines her head to Daniel, who shrugs. "No cream, one sugar in mine. Thanks."

"Throw in a side of home fries too," Lachlann adds.

Daniel swipes at Lachlann's shoulder but otherwise doesn't protest. The hostess scribbles on her notepad and says without looking up; "Sit where you want, it'll be a moment."

The perpetually sticky vinyl tables are empty, save for one old guy reading the paper in the far back table, so Daniel picks out a booth on the other side of the diner, right against the window. He can barely see the other side of the road as he slides into the booth and sets the wooden box on the seat beside him. The industrial-strength cleaner leaking from an abandoned mop bucket by the counter burns his nostrils.

"Glad you're not still on the bridge?" Lachlann grunts as he shrugs out of his coat and hangs it on the hook on their booth before sliding in.

Daniel pushes up the sleeves of his hoodie. “We’ll see.” He’s being an asshole, and he knows it, but no matter how the guilt prickles at him, ice cold on the surface of his skin, he can’t seem to shed the final barrier between him and the man sitting across the table. There’s a wall sliced down the middle of them, razor sharp and thin. He still needs it there.

The jukebox at the end of the counter is in desperate need of a new needle but keeps scratching on without a care. Between The Smiths and the torrential downpour, there’s almost no need to speak. The silence is full to the brim and spilling over. Stale coffee wafts over chlorine bleach.

Lachlann takes the plunge first. Always the brave one. “So?”

“So what?”

“You’re the one who wanted to talk.”

“This,” Daniel gestures around to the empty diner, “was your idea. I already asked the question.”

Lachlann just stares at him. Stares him down like he can draw some withheld truth, but Daniel has nothing more to give. He slumps back against the bench with a huff, fingers twitching on the table, scratching at the vinyl. Staring out the window like he’s wondering if the rain is worth a cigarette break before they even start.

Daniel leans forward, folds his hands, still caked in worm dirt, and doesn’t let up. “What happened?”

It's a restart, an entry back into the delayed confrontation. Lachlann exhales, and his staring out the distorted window is a little less desperate. "I don't know what to say that I haven't already told you."

"That was almost ten years ago," Daniel says. "Tell me again."

"You didn't believe me last time."

"No, I didn't." And he can't promise that he will this time, but he doesn't need to say it.

The hostess sweeps by their table, dropping off a bottle each of ketchup and vinegar. Lachlann rearranges the bottles on the table, next to the ancient salt and paper shakers and napkin dispenser. He attempts to shake a pile of salt into his palm, but the holes are so crusted over that nothing comes out. "I was only there that night to get into the mausoleum," he begins, still staring at his empty palm. "Completely different crime."

"That's what you said before," Daniel mutters. Lachlann fixes him with a glare that could melt paint off the walls. Daniel raises his hand in surrender. "Sorry."

Lachlann shakes his head and slides the saltshaker back across the table. "I was trying to get in when I saw the light of the fire. By the time I turned, the fire had already spread to the roof."

"So, you were trying to break into a grave-"

"I was seventeen," Lachlann bites out. "I'm not saying it was my brightest moment."

"And you just *happened* to be there."

"Look, if you're not going to fucking listen-"

The hostess returns. Plops the basket of homefries in the middle of the table and sets down two mugs from the tray. As soon as she's gone, Daniel and Lachlann switch coffees. Daniel hisses and pulls it away from his lips on the first sip, nursing a burnt tongue on the roof of his mouth. Lachlann pops a homefry into his mouth before grabbing a handful and dumping them onto a spare plate so he can smother them in vinegar and black pepper.

"Fine." Daniel takes another sip of coffee, swallows through the burn. It's bitter and tastes two hours old, reheated to scalding. "Fine, I'm sorry. It's just-," he stops, picks at the table cover. It's just that he can't figure out how to have this conversation honestly. He can't figure out how to tuck away years of anger just to hear Lachlann out. It's a black bile in his stomach, burning through the length of him, and he can't help that it sears up through his throat with every other word. He wants to hold onto it. He wants to swallow it down and let it fester in the core of him. Despite his best efforts, it's not working. It's all coming out. Daniel slumps forward. "It's just," he starts again, "that this is the only version of the story I've known for the past eight years. It's not that easy to let it go."

"Yes, but you don't have to make that my problem," Lachlann snaps.

"Then what the hell are we doing here?"

Lachlann's turn to pause. His face doesn't change at first, the resentment a semi-permanent curl in his lip. It doesn't change, until it does. He seems to size Daniel up across the booth, the way Daniel leans forward, breaching the invisible boundary, the no man's land of the table. Lachlann on the other hand leans back as far as he can. Daniel thinks for a moment that he looks like a dripping-wet muskrat backed into a corner, twitching between fight or flight.



Maybe it's the mental image, but Daniel laughs before he can help it. His shoulders drop and it spills out. Lachlann eases up, joins in, and just like that the last of the paper-thin boundary chips away.

"I don't know," Lachlann confesses as he finally sits up, bracing his elbows on the table as he shakes a hand through the wet mop of his hair. "Fuck, I don't know." Lachlann finally touches his coffee, drains half the mug before he sets it down.

Daniel shakes his head. Across the diner, the jukebox is caught skipping through *I Know It's Over*, over and over and over. The hostess curses behind the counter, takes the dirty mop, and bashes it against the side. The record screeches, plays two more bars, and skips again. She unplugs it in a huff and goes into the back.

"Look," Lachlann continues after a moment, "I don't know what else to tell you. I thought I could uncover some big conspiracy. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. What reason did I have to start it?"

The question takes Daniel by surprise although he knows it really shouldn't. The motive had always been a blank to be filled in with any half-assed reason he could come up with: because of their fight, or a grudge, or Lachlann gone off the deep end. Daniel had taken the rumours as truth because it was easier to be angry. The real truth was that Daniel wasn't even mad about the fire itself. He was mad that Lachlann had left him behind. "You know what's really stupid?"

Lachlann blinks back at him. "What?"

"I think I believe you."

There's more to it, and they both know it, but the baggage for now is secondary. They can set it aside, sort through it later. Daniel can't say he forgives Lachlann entirely, that's an entirely different weight he's carrying, but maybe this can be a start. It's daunting, he feels in that moment, to finally allow himself to acknowledge how much he wants it.

Lachlann reaches out his hand across the table. "Truce?"

Daniel looks at it for a moment, swats it out of the way, and plucks a fry from the basket. And Lachlann grins at him as he pops it into his mouth, kicking him in the shin underneath the table. Truce. The man in the back snores over his newspaper, oblivious as the hostess refills his coffee.

"So," Lachlann points to the wooden box sitting next to Daniel on the cracked seat.

"What's in there?"

"Just some stuff Arthur left me. Actually, you'd be interested." Daniel sets the box on the table and opens it for Lachlann to riffle through. The photograph of Dorothy and Arthur blows his eyes wide.

"I didn't know he knew her," Lachlann says as he passes the photo back.

Daniel puts it back in the box. "Neither did I. He never mentioned it."

Lachlann continues his survey of Daniel's inheritance, picking out the watercolour sketches. "Aren't these my mother's?"

"Yeah," Daniel nods. "He got them from her a few days before the fire. I remember he had them that night."

Lachlann stops. A soft frown drags at his brow. He replaces the contents of the box and pushes it across the table. “She didn’t finish these until the night of the fire. He couldn’t have gotten them sooner.”

“Are you sure?” Daniel asks as he latches the box shut again.

“Positive.” Lachlann stares at the box for a moment, before taking his fork and dragging a fry through the vinegar puddle on his plate. “It was a long day, sure he just got it mixed up.”

“Sure...”

When they’ve had their fill of diner food and a second round of coffee, Daniel fishes out his wallet and dumps out a handful of change onto the counter. “Mind counting it out?” he asks, and with Lachlann’s nod, slips out of the booth to use the washroom. By the time he comes back, Lachlann’s handing a pen back to the waitress, and the bill has vanished from the table. Lachlann slides the unneeded change back to Daniel. Struggling back into damp jackets, they head out into the rain.

Lachlann drives Daniel back to his parent’s place on his request, navigates the side streets with the ease of muscle memory. As they pull up closer, Daniel sees the lights on in the house, and his stomach drops. “Just pull over here,” he says before he can think, and despite the side glance he receives from Lachlann, he gets no argument. Lachlann pulls off to the side of the road, rain cascading down the car windows. Daniel twists awkwardly in his seat to reach into the back for his fishing rod and tackle box.

“Meant to ask,” Lachlann says as the car idles in place, “how was the service?”

Daniel stops, looks back over his shoulder, half bent around the seat. “Think you know.”

“What?”

His fingers scrape at the tackle box a few times before he gets a grip on the handle. “You dropped in, didn’t you? I saw the Dancing Men.”

“This?”

Daniel turns back again to find Lachlann holding up the corner torn out of the guestbook.

“How did you-”

“It was with the change you dumped out of your wallet,” Lachlann replies. “I was just going to ask you about it.”

“You didn’t write it?” Daniel settles back into his seat and snatches the paper back.

Lachlann rolls his eyes. “What, you think I snuck in and left a secret message for you at your Uncle’s funeral?”

“Honestly, yes.”

“Well, I *didn’t*,” he huffs indignantly. “I’d like to think I’m subtler than that.”

“Debatable.”

“Fine,” Lachlann sighs. “What’s it say, then?”

Daniel takes the paperback out of his jacket pocket. His bookmark on *The Empty Houses* nearly slips out. “Haven’t had the chance to double check, but I had a feeling,” he says as he flips to *The Dancing Men*. Daniel lays the ripped-out code next to its twin on the printed page. “Come here at once.”

Lachlann leans in close over the seat to see for himself. A wide grin stretches across his mouth. “And where do you think *here* is?”

“Don’t have a clue.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

Lachlann sounds far too pleased with himself, too vindicated, and Daniel already doesn’t like where this is going. He snaps the book shut and stuffs it into the tackle box. “No.” He pushes the clasps shut.

“I’ve been trying to tell you,” Lachlann says. “I think Father Arthur wanted us to pick up where we left off. Find out what happened to Dorothy.”

“I said *no*.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Daniel repeats through his teeth. “Because it went so well the first time, right?”

“The fire had nothing to do with it.”

“Look.” The force of his own voice grates on Daniel’s throat as he struggles to keep his emotions in check. “I get that this is why you came back. Or you think this is going to help me, I don’t know. But I just don’t want to get caught up in all of this again.”

Lachlann is entirely calm in the face of Daniel’s rejection. It should be suspicious, but in the moment, Daniel can’t feel much of anything aside from the inferno eating away at his gut. It’s the salt in the bubbling wound he doesn’t need. Daniel pushes the car door open, grapples with his fishing gear, and walks up the drive to his parent’s home in the pouring rain.

Daniel doesn't make it two steps through the front door before he's accosted by the hulking figure of his father shoving himself in the way. So close he can see the grey hairs in his flared nose. Daniel clenches his jaw and stands there at attention. He briefly fantasizes about swinging the tackle box at his father's head.

So, it's probably a good thing his mother comes bustling down the stairs, just taking off her pearl earrings as she shrieks down at him. "Where on *earth* did you go?" she demands as she squeezes her way into the crowded foyer. "You couldn't even stay for the service? For Christ's sake, Daniel, do you have any idea how that looked?!"

Daniel shrugs. "Thought you didn't want me seen."

Bonnie flounders in protest. "That's not what I meant and you know it!"

"How?!" Daniel's voice booms up from an unexpected place in his chest. "How am I supposed to know, Mom? No one ever actually says what they mean!"

"I'm not looking for excuses," Bonnie cuts him off, flailing her hands by her ears as she shuffles into the kitchen. "Just — put the tackle away. *Please*. And clean up, you're filthy."

Daniel tries to take a step inside, but his father doesn't budge to let him by. Unaware of the rising tension in the foyer, Bonnie picks up a rag from the stagnant dishwater and starts obsessively polishing a chipped wine glass, her anger bulbous in the distorted reflection. Bonnie sets it aside and wrings the wet cloth into the sink before going for the next glass. "I see you found your jacket," she says.

“I — yeah,” Daniel smothers down a wave of panic at the thought that she knows where he’d stayed the night before. “Told you, I just left it at-”

“I said that coin would work didn’t I? You can put it back in the drawer. Never know when someone else will need it,” Bonnie says. Daniel thumbs the coin in the pocket of his jacket, but doesn’t move, not that his mom notices. “Beth, remind me that I’m going to have a call with the florist in the morning,” she says. “What an absolute mess that service was. You know, that carnation wasn’t meant to be in his pocket, I *specifically* asked for a rose. Thank goodness I caught it before the casket closed.”

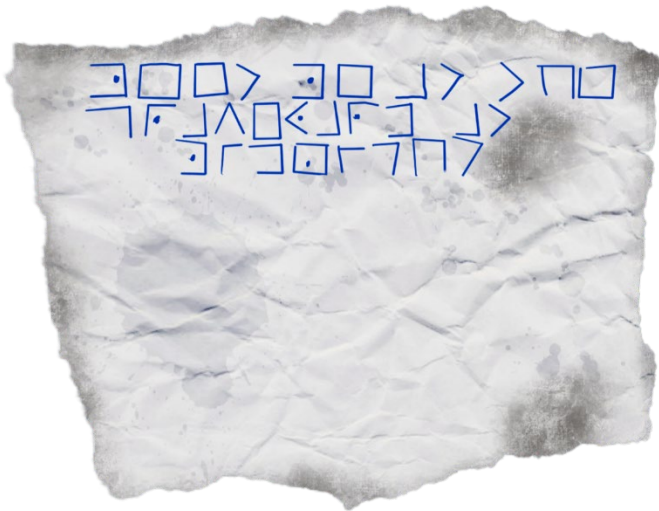
“You were with that boy.” Irving’s voice cuts through the house. The faucet leaks drip by drip into the sink. Beth, sitting at the kitchen table, watches him with sympathy but remains silent. Daniel doesn’t have to ask how his dad knows by now. A thousand eyes and ears in this town with nothing better to do than to catch his peripheral sins. He’s never had a chance. And it doesn’t matter that the statement is open-ended, the accusatory tone is enough. Daniel’s chest heaves with one harsh breath, his fists tremble at his sides, but Irving doesn’t so much as twitch in response. He’d pulled the teeth out of Daniel’s fight years ago.

Daniel throws the tackle box down at his father’s feet. The ceramic Mary rattles on her pedestal, but Daniel doesn’t wait to see if she topples over before pulling the door open and storming back out into the rain.

Soaked to the bone and freezing, Daniel makes it back up Main Street and to his apartment just as the storm starts letting up. The place is empty. Tom and Eddy probably out on a date, or maybe working, fuck if he knows, but he’s glad for it either way. Daniel peels out of his sopping wet clothes and takes a second shower, turns the temperature up to scalding in the hope

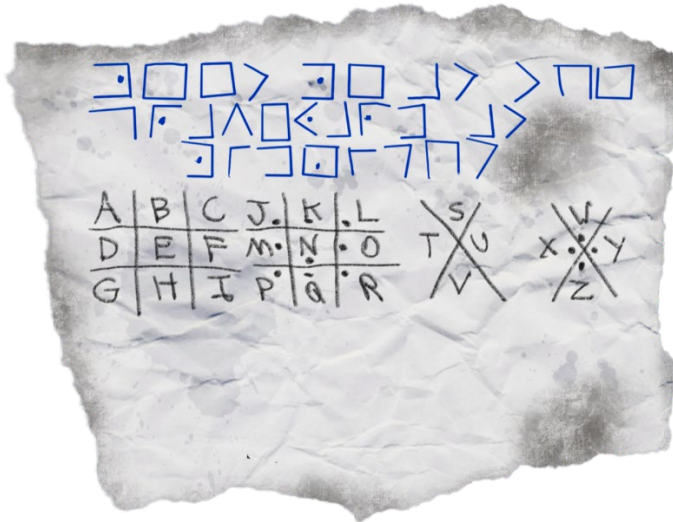
that it'll thaw the numbness in his head. Help him clear his thoughts a bit. He's rewarded with a headache and irritated skin.

Daniel takes to sitting on the edge of his bed, staring out the window at the streetlights, hazy with the lingering mist. He flops back onto his mattress, lets his head lull to the side. Too restless to sleep, too exhausted to do much else than lie there. His eyes wander the room, the cluttered mess on the floor, the wet clothes he should really get into a laundry basket, and his wallet, spilling out of the pile with a piece of damp receipt paper sticking out of the fold. Daniel frowns, rolls over and reaches just far enough that he can grab his wallet off the floor before he sits up. Blue pen marks scratch along the back of the paper. Daniel slips it out, unfolds it, and stares down at three lines of cryptic symbols.

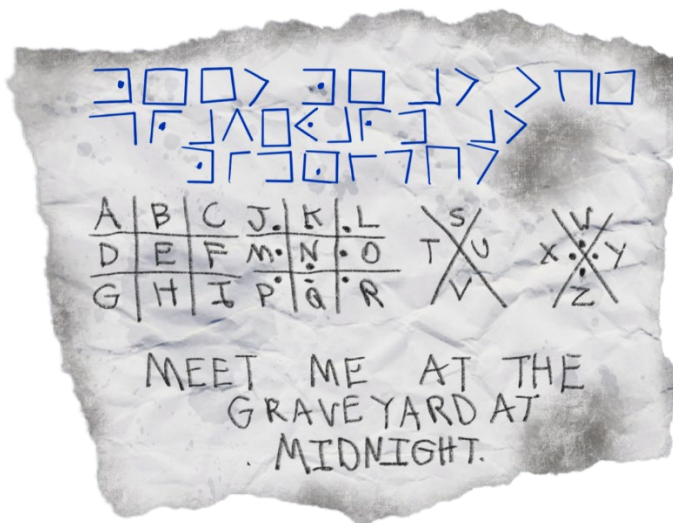


In all honesty, he should have expected this. Daniel takes it to his desk and smooths it out. He *knows* this one, remembers scribbling out messages between classes. Used to be able to read it by sight, but now he may as well be staring at an alien language. Daniel rummages around on his floor until he finds the cipher book. Sure enough, the key page is already dogeared.





The Freemason Cipher. That's it. Suddenly he's a teenager again, standing hunched over his desk as he decodes a message from his best friend like they're the only two people in the world who can communicate like this — who *get* it. Lachlann's message unfolds on the paper.



*Dick.* Daniel wads up the paper. Where does Lachlann get off acting like he's some dog that comes when called? It was a bold move, leaving the message behind, but Lachlann wrote it in code because he knew that it was a temptation, that Daniel wouldn't be able to resist decoding it.

Well, it's only worked out halfway, Daniel tells himself resolutely as he flops back into bed. Lachlann may have been right on his gamble that Daniel would cave and decode the cipher, but he's dead fucking wrong if he thinks Daniel's actually going to show up at the graveyard in the middle of the night on his whim. Dead wrong.

## Chapter Nine: Grave Young Men

So, naturally, Daniel goes. Finds himself walking uphill on an unlit forest road, in the middle of the frozen night, with the chill digging its teeth into his skin. He's not thrilled about it, but he's there, the charcoal church ruins rising up over the trees. The note balled up in his fist in the pocket of his jacket — mostly because he's been carrying the fantasy of throwing it at Lachlann's beautiful fucking head the second he gets up there.

Daniel stops at the wrought-iron gate. There's a long stone wall closing off the cemetery and the church from the road, but it's been left to decay and crumble where it backs onto the forest and the steep downhill drop. The gate is tall, and seems impressive from the road, but a closer inspection reveals that the right side is held up only by the thick, rusted chain linking it to the left side. The hinges are broken off from the wall, and one push is all it takes for the gate to fall open with a screech that makes Daniel cringe. He shifts through, feebly trying to set the gate back up in its place, before turning around. A graveyard at midnight. Dramatic bastard couldn't schedule their rendezvous for a reasonable hour. Had to go for the cinematic flare. Well, Lachlann sure has the desired effect. Daniel has never believed in ghosts, but he feels like he should tread carefully all the same lest he disturb the graveyard's last occupants. He feels like a trespasser.

Daniel scowls as he walks through the stone avenues, searching for a familiar shadow. He's a few minutes early, he knows. He checks his watch — 11:54pm. Leaving from his place, he'd have thought it would take a little longer. Not that he'd have done much with an extra six minutes, wired about this meeting as he was, but it's an extra six minutes he wouldn't have to wait alone, in a graveyard, at midnight. The church makes a cut-away silhouette in the dark

across the yard. After a few minutes, the quiet starts getting to him. Daniel walks through the graveyard, peering around monoliths and statues, stepping carefully over tombstones.

So, maybe Lachlann's not coming. Maybe it was a joke, a pillar of salt on old wounds, but even Daniel can't wrap his head around Lachlann being so cruel. Maybe he decoded the message wrong? The doubt starts sinking in at 12:08am. Daniel is close to turning around and trudging home when he passes the statue of an angel carrying a sword, and a hand clamps over his mouth. Daniel shouts against a gloved palm, thrashing against the arm thrown around his chest and dragging him backwards. It's only two seconds of struggling, but it has his heart racing as his assailant releases him and flashes a wild grin.

"Motherfucker." Daniel gasps, folds over with hands on knees, feels his heart in fingers and toes.

Lachlann holds his hands up. "I didn't think you'd actually come," he says, far too thrilled.

"I didn't think you'd give me a *fucking* heart attack."

Lachlann, half manic in his excitement, can barely keep it bottled up. "Regretting your decision already?"

Daniel pauses, glares up at Lachlann, and before he can think to stop himself he's already laughing. "Haven't decided yet," he says as he pushes himself upright. There's the urge to push Lachlann, but he takes an offered hand instead to stand up, and Lachlann brushes a hand over his arm so briefly he's wondering if he didn't imagine it. In any case, Lachlann is already walking ahead of him.

“So.” Daniel falls into step beside him. “What’s your big plan?”

Lachlann pauses and squints through the dark. Shuffling through the pocket of his jacket, he takes out a flashlight. It flickers to life with a dull, gold halo thrown onto the ground. “Told you,” he says. “We’ve got business to settle with Dorothy McNabb.” Too many questions from that half answer alone, and Daniel doesn’t know where to begin. Lachlann looks back over his shoulder at him, all devilish eyes and excitement. Clearly, he knows. Lachlann grabs the sleeve of Daniel’s jacket and tugs. “Come on,” he says. “If anyone catches us, we’ll look like grave robbers.”

“Instead of?”

“Grave borrowers,” Lachlann replies. “Grave academics. Grave tourists.”

“Ask for me tomorrow, and you’ll find me a grave man.”

Lachlann stops between tombstones, and Daniel takes the chance to free himself from his grip. Lachlann doesn’t seem any less pleased. “*Romeo and Juliet*, Dan? Romantic.”

“Fuck off.”

Headlights streak across the graveyard. Daniel and Lachlann reach for each other at the same time, hands grasping at sleeves as they tug each other down. The car rolls down the hill until the rattling engine has faded and the lights are gone. They hide there behind the tombstones until long after the car’s vanished.

“Okay,” Daniel breathes as he slowly stands. “Alright. Just... tell me what exactly it is we’re looking for.”

Lachlann turns in a wide arch, until the beam of the flashlight lands on a mausoleum ten feet away. “That,” he says.

The mausoleum stands in the middle graveyard with the façade of a Greek temple. The structure is covered in dead moss and black stains running in thick, drooping rivers. The stone is weathered and feels like honeycomb when Daniel runs an idle hand over one of the ionic pillars on either side of the door. The flashlight moves along with Lachlann’s hand, as he traces his fingers over the carvings surrounding the door. He stops at the door itself. It’s copper-plated at a guess, with the way it’s gone green with time, and tied firmly shut with a thick chain. A few links, Daniel notices, are dented as if struck by a heavy object — and hard.

“We need to find a way in,” Lachlann whispers. “Look around.”

“For what?” Daniel hisses as Lachlann starts walking around the mausoleum. “A window?”

“Maybe?”

“The fuck are the dead going to do with a window?!”

Coming around the other side, Lachlann points up at the tall walls. Daniel peers around. Sure enough, there is a row of dark, square windows lining the back of the mausoleum.

“Okay, you made your point,” Daniel says, “but there’s no way either of us are getting through there.”

“I think we could manage it.” Lachlann stares at the dark windows but even the tone of his voice suggests he doesn’t believe a fucking word coming out of his mouth

Daniel stares deadpan at him. “Not with your drag queen hips.”

Lachlann nearly chokes on his own tongue he laughs so hard, desperate to keep quiet before they — well, wake the dead, apparently. He slaps a hand on Daniel's shoulder, snorting into his palm, and Daniel has to admit he's feeling a bit smug. "Fair point," Lachlann concedes when he finally has the breath to do so. "Getting in through the front's a bust, though."

"What makes you say?"

"Tried." Lachlann shakes his head. "Ehm... last time, I mean. Couldn't break the chain."

Daniel casts about them. Aside from a few scattered rocks, there isn't much to work with. He takes the flashlight from Lachlann's hand and looks around in a wider arc, still coming up with nothing as he walks along the side of the mausoleum. When he makes it to the front again, the flashlight falls on the rusted chain securing the door shut. He reaches out, feels the dented metal in the centre link, as Lachlann comes up behind him.

Daniel pictures him at seventeen — smashing one of those rocks desperately against the chain, his cut and bruised fingers as he beat stone against iron. He pictures the graveyard slowly brightening, too gradual to notice until the smell of burning wood swept over the meadow. Daniel steps back now, looking up over the rooftop of the mausoleum at the blackened spire of the church. How it must have appeared like a holy beacon. How Lachlann must have felt like he was watching hellfire.

"Wait here," Daniel says, already striding away from the mausoleum.

Lachlann doesn't give his command a second thought as he follows after him, though he hesitates a few paces behind when he realizes where Daniel is going. Daniel walks straight into the husk of the church, the doorless archway leading into the nave. The sky is clear overhead, stars dotting the black-blue veil the longer he stares. The vulnerable openness of it. Daniel

sweeps the light over the church floor, kicking over scraps of charred wood and fallen stone that no one's bothered to clean up. He glances behind him to catch Lachlann standing uncertainly in the doorway, eyes on the sky.

It's no easy task, but Daniel eventually comes on a piece of re-bar sticking out from underneath a pile of stone. He picks it up, tests the weight in his hand. "Come on," he says, shouldering past Lachlann.

At the mausoleum door, he hands Lachlann the flashlight. "Hold this."

Lachlann takes it without complaint or clarification and aims it at the chain on the door. It isn't an easy fit, but Daniel wedges the re-bar inside the loop of the dented chain link. He tests out a few awkward options — planting his foot on the stone column and pulling, turning it sideways, but eventually lands on tugging it free from the door just enough that he can twist it in on itself. Daniel turns the re-bar over and over until the link is tight and tense. The rust rubs off on his palms, rough metal biting into his skin, but he grits his teeth and forces the chain to turn over on itself until the tension makes each turn harder. He feels the strain on the bar, and any moment now, it's either the chain or the metal in his hands about to break, until —

A glaring headlight sweeps down over the graveyard. Daniel freezes, nearly lets go of the bar, but one move will send it flying back at him. Lachlann's head whips around toward the road. The car slows on the side of the road, the patch of dead green before the cemetery wall, and stalls there. "Shit, do it before they get out," he hisses in Daniel's ear.

Daniel strains against the bar. "What?!"

Lachlann doesn't answer. He shuts off the flashlight, shoves it in his pocket, and places his hands over Daniel's. Together they force the bar over one last time, and the chain snaps with



a thunderous clang just moments before the idling engine turns off. They pull the chain away, throwing it hastily on the ground. The rust on the door doesn't give away easily, but between the two of them, they manage to pry it open just enough to be able to squeeze inside. Daniel tries to force the door shut again, and sees two figures step out of the car, its headlights still throwing out beams onto the tombstones. Lachlann pulls him away from the opening and onto the ground just as one of the intruders walks toward the cemetery gate.

“Did you hear that?” A young woman's voice calls out to her companion.

A man answers. “It was probably just an animal.”

“You said no one would be up here.”

Lachlann and Daniel lie on the mausoleum floor in a layer of filth. They lie on their backs, heads turned, facing each other in the flashlight's golden beam made thicker by the disturbed dust settling in the air. Daniel opens his mouth to whisper, he isn't sure what, but the moment he breathes in, Lachlann turns on his side, pressing a palm over his mouth, and Daniel stops breathing all together.

Shadows block out the light outside, a puppet show on the mausoleum walls. “Baby, no one *is* up here. Don't worry,” the man croons.

“I've heard it's haunted.”

“Get real.”

Daniel feels his heartbeat hammer against his ribcage as he waits to be caught. Midnight silences settle in the graveyard, wind rattling in the budding trees. For a moment, Daniel thinks their guests might have left. Until he hears one long, feminine moan. Lachlann's eyes widen at

the same time as his do, and they're left staring back at each other as that moan turns into another, turns into another, brings a man's haughty groan with it. Daniel shifts and crawls to the door, peering out across the cemetery wall and the car, where a young woman is sitting on the hood with her gentleman friend affixed between her legs.

Lachlann shifts closer, trying to look out the door too. "Are they..."

"Uh... yeah. Yeah, I think they are."

It takes only one shared look for Daniel and Lachlann to dissolve into stifled snickering.

"I think," Daniel wheezes, "I think they're a little distracted."

"Just a bit."

"God, I can't believe..."

"I know."

"This is so wrong."

"I know. Safe to say, we're probably okay," Lachlann laughs as he turns over and crawls onto his hands and knees. He puts himself behind the door and pushes. When it creaks, loud enough for the both of them to flinch, the lovers across the yard don't even pause. Daniel sits up, and between the two of them, they're able to close the door, taking care not to push it fully shut and risk locking them inside.

"Right." Lachlann reaches into his pocket and pulls out the flashlight again. His thumb hesitates only a second over the switch before the beam flickers on. For the first time, they see the inside of the mausoleum.

It's narrower than Daniel would have thought seeing it from the outside, about four feet of clearance down the long aisle between the crypts on either wall. The windows let in no moonlight, glass tinted over with decades of grime. The walls on either side are stacked high with black granite slabs, carved with names and dates and epitaphs, one on top of the other. Crypts, lined with thin shelves holding figurines and vases that might have kept flowers but now only collect dust. Daniel coughs into his sleeve a few times as he stands.

The crypts are smaller than he expects. Too small, it seems, to fit any person into. Not someone who, just days before their body was crammed into a hole in the wall, had been breathing and taking up space. Sure, maybe now that their flesh has rotted away, they may fit snug inside, but what about before the blood pools and the skin tears away? He imagines peering inside to see their limbs all contorted, necks bent at odd angles. Daniel can't help but think that it would be awfully uncomfortable. He would hate to spend an eternity like that. There's no breathing room in there.

Lachlann walks slowly down the aisle, light bouncing between slabs. Daniel follows close behind, his fingertips grazing over the names, squinting in the dark where the light can't reach to read them. A thick stain has dripped down from one of the higher crypts, and Daniel retracts his hand quickly before he can touch the sludge formerly known as Orpha McNabb.

"Here," Lachlann whispers. Daniel wipes his hand on his shirt. The flashlight beam has stalled over a slab crypt in the middle row. *Dorothy McNabb* is printed in large letters that may have once been gilded, but now barely hold the impression of the name.

Daniel stares at the crypt and waits for the revelation. It doesn't come. He steps closer, and nearly thinks better of it, but puts his hand on Lachlann's shoulder anyway. "What were you expecting to find?"

"Something," Lachlann exhales, despairing. "*Something*, I-... I don't know. Anything. A clue, a sign."

He'd expected the denouement. Lachlann turns away, shoulders himself free from Daniel's touch, and rakes a hand through his hair. Daniel does nothing, just gives him the space he needs and lets his hand fall to his side. Whatever it was Lachlann had been expecting, it wasn't here. Maybe a message chipped into the granite, a note with a congratulations for solving the riddle, a treasure chest with an X to mark the spot. But there's nothing there, and Lachlann is at the end of whatever thread he'd been following.

Daniel's hand once again brushes over the stone. He feels the gaps in the polish where it's worn down, and frowns. "There's no death date."

The flashlight coming back to a steady spot on the crypt. "What?" Lachlann asks, suddenly right on Daniel's shoulder.

"Look." Daniel points to the space underneath Dorothy's name. "1927 to... nothing. There's no death date."

Lachlann's fingers press over his on the granite. Needy fingers, feeling along the letters. Just like that, the life comes back into him, and he turns with wild eyes back to Daniel. "She isn't buried here."

Daniel can feel the smile creeping onto his own mouth. "So, that means..."

“She didn’t die in 1962.” Lachlann grins back at him. If there’s a shine in his eyes, Daniel convinces himself it’s a trick of the light. Lachlann returns to the slab, sets the flashlight on the ground, and feels along the sides of it.

“Then why would she...”

“Help me.” Lachlann finds a groove in the side of the slab and tugs. The granite grates along its stone casing.

Daniel’s hand shoots out around Lachlann’s arm. “We’re not opening it.”

“If she’s not here, then it’s empty.” Lachlann grunts with another tug.

“That doesn’t-”

“Just help me.” There’s a plea in Lachlann’s voice, sharp as it is. Daniel fights down every instinct ringing “*grave desecration*” through his body. With a huff, he takes the other side of the slab, and he pulls hard. The unholy screech of stone against stone resonates through the mausoleum as the slab comes free. Daniel fumbles to catch it, but just barely manages to soften the fall as it slips from his arms and clatters to the ground. Lachlann’s head shoots toward the door. The dissonant moaning stops, replaced by whispered bickering and the unlocking of a car door. Lachlann creeps to the door and peers out through the crack. Daniel can’t see whatever Lachlann does, but he hears the revving of the engine, and sees the lights of the car fade as it tears down the road. He slumps back against the opposite wall and lets the relief rattle its way out of his chest with a sigh and a half-hearted glare in Lachlann’s direction.

Lachlann shrugs it off easily enough. He offers his hand, and hauls Daniel to his feet. Together, they turn to the open crypt. Daniel braces himself as he peers inside for any

nightmarish possibility: a skeletal face screeching back at him, a half-decayed corpse preserved in its own dust. What they find instead is a largely empty vault and small wooden box. Daniel steps back just as Lachlann takes the box, drags it out like he's holding a landmine in his hands. He lays it flat on the edge of the crypt and eases the lid open. Inside, stacks of weathered letters sit in compressed bundles. On the top lies a cream envelope, with one phrase written across the front:

*You may forget but*

*let me tell you*

*this: someone in*

*some future time*

*will think of us. - Sappho.*

Daniel reaches out, plucks the envelope from the top of the pile, and opens it. A dried violet slips out, and the moment Daniel catches it, it crumples into fragrant dust in his grimy palm. Lachlann begins shuffling through the other letters, years of correspondence between Dorothy and Arthur ending in 1962. Daniel glances over the letter in his hand, nudges Lachlann and passes it over to him so they can read it in the acidic beam of the flashlight.

*“Dear Arthur,*

*I leave this behind now as it is perhaps the only evidence I have left of my existence here, burying one life for another. I have the deed to my flower shop in the city and go now eagerly to start over again. Still, I find myself unable to move on until I record my gratitude toward you, the only person I have ever met who truly understood me. Without you, I would never have been able*

*to leave my husband once he learned of my affections for the gentler sex. Your companionship these years has been my only respite, and I fear I will never be able to thank you properly.*

*Please, visit often.*

*Your dear friend, Dorothy.”*

He reads the letter over Lachlann’s shoulder. Reads it over again, and by the time the words have settled into him, like sediment to the bottom of still water, Lachlann is already watching him. The flint grey of his eyes. The sharp spark in him slowly igniting. Lachlann isn’t smiling so much as he is giddy. And before the feeling’s fully gathered, Daniel grins back at him, breathless. He feels like he’s been punched in the gut. The soreness there, the swooping in the pit of his stomach. “Arthur was the one to hide her in here.”

Lachlann drops his head back and laughs. “He helped her escape.”

This would be a good place to kiss him. Not a *place*, holy shit, not in the middle of a mausoleum. Lachlann’s always appreciated the Gothic, but Daniel can’t quite get past the morbidity of the corpses watching from their cubby holes. But it would be a good time, maybe. He panics like that for half a second, wondering if he should, if it’s the right move, but Lachlann as ever seems to be on the same page, a sentence ahead. He’s laughing just before the sound is rung like an answering bell tone from Daniel’s chest, knocking their foreheads together. A piece of paper and a disintegrated violet between them. And Daniel for that moment can’t, and doesn’t bother to, find the irony there, as he presses back, his hand on the junction of Lachlann’s skull and spine, as the borderline giggles ring through them both.

Because, this woman they’d never met, and yet felt like they’d known so intimately — she’d won. And it didn’t matter what the struggles were, whatever tragedy another reader might

find from her story to dissect and name, she won because she was here. She had loved. She was remembered. It hadn't been for nothing. None of it had. One step ahead as usual, Daniel found Lachlann wiping stubbornly at his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket moments before his own began to sting. This victory, however small, they will take with them.

. Together, he and Lachlann lift the slab and shift it back into place. When they're certain it will hold in place, they quietly remove themselves from the mausoleum, push the rusted door shut, and make a half-assed arrangement of the chains over the handle. It doesn't really matter. No one will notice.

Outside, the night is cold and clean. Daniel breaths it in, and the world does not end. Closes his eyes, lets it fill his chest, the whole theatrics of it. The wind is still sharp, but the sky overhead is clear, and the stars bleed through the black. The moon shines through sparse clouds bright enough now that Lachlann can safely pocket the flashlight. There is a silver wash on everything it touches. Daniel steps onto the grass and takes an extra moment to appreciate the air after the suffocating interior of the crypt. Lachlann seems to have the same idea, at least until he walks straight past Daniel, and keeps walking to the edge of the graveyard, around the front of the church ruins. He stands underneath the open maw that was the church door, the jagged teeth of leftover stone and burnt wood, the cyclops eye of the empty bell tower.

Lachlann reaches into his pocket. He takes out his lighter and holds it up at arm's length, right in line with his one open eye, squeezing the other shut. And he flicks it awake. One little flame. He tilts his head, aligns the fire. When Daniel approaches from behind, he can just barely see the fire engulfing the church ruins, before Lachlann lets go, and just as quickly as it came, it flickers out.



“You really didn’t do it,” Daniel says.

There’s no resentment. No anger in the line of his shoulders, no frustration, none of the pent-up energy that’s been keeping him half trembling on the verge of an implosion. Lachlann simply lets his hand drop back down, the lighter lifeless in his fingers. “No,” he answers like it’s the first time he’s said it instead of the hundredth time he’s been asked. “To be honest...” Lachlann pauses, shrugs the lighter back into his pocket, and looks back at Daniel. “I think it was just a freak accident. Had nothing to do with either of us.”

They’re standing right next to the low stone container wall. Daniel nods, and hikes himself up to sit on the edge, his back to the church as he faces down the wide expanse of highway, stretching through trees and the last rolling hills dying out toward the lakes. Lachlann folds his arms on the wall and leans against it. When their shoulders touch, they don’t shove. It’s a slow lean.

The cards are out. Daniel can feel the church burning into his back, but he doesn’t need to look around. It has been so difficult to let go of his anger up until then. He’s held onto it like a signal fire. He can’t, even then, fathom letting it go out, even as he’s watching it turn to embers and coal, a warm, sustainable heat in his chest. There should be disappointment, he thinks. Like he’s waited for his own denouement and watched it tumble head over ass over heaes in a crumpled heap. But he just can’t summon it. The answers aren’t aligning themselves perfectly and he has to be okay with that.

But even still, he can’t seem to take the final step. Whatever he’s on the edge of, it’s a leap he has to be sure he’s ready to take. He needs to choose it.

Daniel licks his lips, finds Lachlann already watching him with kindling in his eyes. Daniel laughs, just an exhale and a smile, and drops his head. “I need some time to think.”

Whatever Lachlann is thinking or feeling, Daniel can't read. But he doesn't seem heartbroken, from what little he can tell. All Lachlann does is nod, like it's the answer he'd been expecting. “Take it.”

## Epilogue

Father Arthur John McBride, 1939-1987, is buried on a clear day in the cemetery behind St. Anthony's Catholic Church. His brother and his nephew are among the pallbearers who carry him to his final resting place in the spacious field of newly-broken earth. There aren't many graves in the fresh field, but year by year the cemetery has begun to grow. Arthur's is another polished rock in the billowing field of uncut grass.

After Daniel, his father, and the handful of volunteers set the casket down on its mount, poised over a six-foot drop, they rejoin the crowd of mourners. They sit on lawn chairs arranged on the green, listen to Father Pat say final words over the casket. The wind is too loud to hear the eulogy as Father Pat clings to the flapping pages of his bible, but still everyone listens with solemn poise, staring down at the final resting place that waits for them all. Beyond the field behind St. Anthony's, the highway stretches to the east with glimmering asphalt and motor drones. A semi-truck blares its horn as Father Pat blesses the sign of the cross over the casket, lowered with pomp and circumstance into the ground. When the casket comes to rest at the bottom, after a moment of silence, the spectators rise from their seats and chatter among themselves. There's talk of dinner plans and condolences, complaints of the loose spring earth and yesterday's rain splashing mud on their shoes. Daniel sits with his family in the front row, until Father Pat comes to shake their hands and trap them in small talk. He slips away with a cordial smile, stands on the edge of the grave and stares down into the muddy hole. When no one is watching, he kneels down with the dirt soaking into his pants, digs his fingers into the earth, and throws a handful into the grave.

He's at peace, and if you asked him why, he wouldn't be able to describe it if he tried. Daniel lifts his head into the brisk wind cutting over the field and breathes like it's the first time he's filled his lungs in days. He hadn't slept much the night before and his muscles ached pleasantly, heavy and lazy where sinew met bone. After creeping his way back into the apartment, he'd spent the night awake in bed staring at the blue lace patterns of moonlight slip through his curtains and onto his ceiling. His mind still in the mausoleum, in orbit around an empty grave and a dried violet. Peeling apart every word, reliving the brush of Lachlann's fingers, his close breath, his eyes gleeful in the acrid glow of the flashlight on the dusty floor of the crypt. Satellite insomnia draws out the early morning hours.

For the past three days, Daniel has been waiting for his own breaking point. Anticipating the inevitable crash, like standing on a beach and watching the wave of a tsunami crest overhead. In the end, it never came. Daniel has spent so long tensing for the bruising blow that he doesn't feel it when it comes as a caress to his cheek. He'd gone to church that morning for the final service and found that the movements and rituals came naturally in spite of the fact that he hasn't been to mass in years.

Daniel stands. Brushes the dirt off his pants. Behind him, his mother and sister chat with the filtering crowd. There will be donuts and coffee in the parish hall behind them. Donations left in Arthur's memory will be accepted inside. All over and done with. A man is in the ground, and it is with somewhat guilty relief that Daniel thinks this is the most alive he has felt in years.

Irving steps up, next to him at the edge of the grave. Daniel watches his face carefully for any trace of expression. Standing next to him, his father seems smaller now than he has before.

“I’m sorry,” Irving says, and the unexpected words sink straight into Daniel like the shovel the gravedigger uses now to fill in the hole.

Daniel blanks, swallows, tries to speak and swallows again. He’s never understood the way his father communicates, or the way he doesn’t, but he’s come to realise he doesn’t have to understand. Daniel breathes in, lets the clean spring air fill his chest to bursting, and exhales in one go. “Yeah,” Daniel pats his father on the back, “me too. You gonna be alright?”

Irving nods. “I’ll get by.” Saying no more, he turns from the slowly filling grave, and lets his wife take his arm as she joins them with a kiss to Daniel’s cheek.

“I’m putting in a casserole tonight,” she says as she idly brushes off Daniel’s shoulders. “Around six I think, but come by whenever you want.”

Just behind her, a woman with beautifully combed silver hair and a violet in the lapel of her black coat approaches the grave with a bouquet of green carnations.

“Dan?” Bonnie says, stepping into his line of sight. “Are you coming?”

“Uh, yeah,” Daniel blinks, tearing his eyes away to smile at his mother. “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

With another kiss to his cheek, and a bit of fussing over his hair, she and his father take their leave, navigating the trampled grass to their car. Daniel searches the cemetery for the woman, but all that is left of her are the flowers placed neatly on top of the headstone. On the far side of the green, Lachlann hangs back in the shadow of a dogwood tree. He lifts his hand in greeting. Daniel waves back, and with a last silent goodbye to Arthur, he goes to him.

They end up taking a walk together. Down the train tracks, the long stretches of budding woods carved out on either side of the weathered rails. Neither of them talks much. The branches rattle and birds call out to each other from somewhere deeper in the bush. They scuff their shoes along the weathered boards, try to balance on the thin rails, shove at each other with wild laughter. They aren't kids, never will be again, and lost time is not so easily found, but they have this. A wide strip of abandoned track, and an opportunity to make something of their newfound understanding.

Veering off before the old bridge spanning the gorge, they climb down the rocks on the bank of the river, take off their shoes and roll up the hems of their pants to stand in the shallows. Daniel sheds his suit jacket and tie, folds up the cuffs of his shirt. They skip rocks, watch them peter out and disappear into the churning rapids further upstream.

“So, she was a lesbian,” Lachlann says as he plucks a river stone, smoothing his thumb over the surface. “Father Arthur just wanted to help her escape once she was found out.”

“Think so,” Daniel says as he chucks a rock unsuccessfully into the water.

Lachlann flicks his wrist, and the stone skips once, twice, three times before plunking into the water. “But why go to all that trouble?”

“Hm?”

“To let us know. He set up this whole thing knowing he was going to die. Why not just tell you?”

Daniel considers the question as he peers into the water for a suitable contender. When he finds a smooth stone that fits in his palm, he takes it, lines up his throw, and flicks his wrist. One,

two, three, four skips. He stands back and watches the ripple spread out before the rush of the water erases it from sight. “Don’t know,” he says honestly. “If I had to guess... it’s kinda like the poem in the crypt. Dorothy might’ve left it behind just because she wanted to be seen. Maybe he did too.”

“He must’ve had help, setting it all up.”

Daniel thinks back to the woman with the violet, the lemons and the dancing men.

“Yeah.”

The sunlight slants sharp and golden across the gorge. Over the heights, the sun sets behind the blackened silhouette of St. Jude’s, throwing vivid orange and pink against the early evening sky. Daniel stares up at it until the sun sinks down, another small fire on the horizon. “Hey,” he bumps Lachlann’s arm as he turns to his suit jacket shed over a rock on the bank, “give me your lighter.”

Lachlann fishes into his pocket and passes it over. “Why?”

Daniel doesn’t answer immediately. He takes the rough watercolour sketch of St. Jude’s out of his jacket, the coin of St. Anthony tumbling out along with it and into the water. For a moment he just stares down at it, thumbs the pencil lines of the billowing smoke. With Lachlann peering closely over his shoulder, Daniel flicks the lighter on, and holds the flame an inch from the back of the sketch, close enough that the heat touches the paper. Before their eyes, lines burn themselves into letter, into words.

*“Daniel. If you ever see this, I want you to know. I saw you. The night of the fire, I saw you and Lachlann together. The alibi I could have given him, I thought, was worse than the blame could ever be. I want you to know that I was wrong.”*

Neither of them speaks for a long while. Dorothy's confession had been left behind as evidence of her existence, and Arthur had led them to it — for closure, Daniel assumes, but it wasn't his own closure. His confession wasn't buried in a grave. Daniel reads it over one more time, before folding it carefully and putting it into his pocket. He reaches into the water, plucks the fallen coin, and tries to skip it across the river's surface.

“Alright, I'm going to ask one more time,” he says, and Lachlann stiffens at his words but does his best not to show it. Daniel softens his gaze as he turns from the river to Lachlann, and sinks his toes into the mud. “Why did you come back?”

Lachlann pauses, features cut into sharp clarity in the evening light. “For a second chance with you, I guess,” he grins at Daniel. “I just don't know how to let some things die.”

Daniel laughs. “No. Neither do I.”



## Queer Communications, Queer Love

Coded Language and Overcoming Death in *Trying For The Kingdom*

You may forget but  
 let me tell you  
 this: someone in  
 some future time  
 will think of us  
 – Sappho, 60.

You can file it in our archives, Watson. Some day the true story may be told.  
 – Sherlock Holmes, “The Adventure of the Retired Colourman”

Being queer involves a *lot* of homework. To be more specific, being a queer writer involves a lot of detective work. When dealing with queer stories, histories, and characters, a writer has to learn how to navigate the vast array of references, symbols, and codes used to disguise same-sex love. It feels at times like trying to jump through impossible hoops just to justify a queer reading of any piece of literature earlier than the mid-twentieth century. Queer folk of the past did not make it easy to find them or to find themselves. It was a matter of survival. Learning to adapt symbolic language, and indeed literal codes, is how queer communities not only survived, but sought out their own kind. If not for records of indisputable same-sex love and gender nonconformity, queer history may not have survived at all. These records act as the key in a cipher, allowing historians to decode concrete evidence of these stories. One outstanding example is Anne Lister, perhaps one of the most famous lesbians in history, who circa 1821 wrote the diary of her sexual exploits with women in a code “she called her ‘cryphand’ ... developed from numbers and Greek letters” (“The Lesbian Dead Sea Scrolls”

37). Out of a coded practice started from necessity grew a tradition in queer literature that remains relevant even in modern stories when such precautions may no longer be necessary to hide instances of same-sex love. The resilience of queer culture has historically been due in part to a shared method of communication, coded language, references, and symbols. The passing down of these codes is how queer communities formed and connected generations in a sort of mentorship and keeping track of these methods is vital to how queer folk recognize their own histories. The breakdown of these generational ties, such as happened during the AIDS crisis, disrupted the line of communication. Rediscovering these methods of communication ensures that a vibrant aspect of queer culture does not fade into obscurity. Queer language is an artform, and a pleasure to uncover – frustrating as it may be at time. It is this frustration that I funneled into *Trying For The Kingdom*.

Set in a rural Ontario town in the spring of 1987, *Trying For The Kingdom* follows Daniel McBride as he comes to terms both with the sudden death of his uncle Arthur, a Catholic Priest, and with the two intertwined mysteries Arthur has left behind: what really happened the night that St. Jude's church caught fire five years prior, and the decades-old mystery of Dorothy McNab. Through a series of codes and ciphers, Daniel is unwillingly reunited with his ex-boyfriend and prime arson suspect, Lachlann Mills, as they uncover truths Arthur left behind in a final confession. Themes of shared culture, religion, and death culminate in the significance of queer-coded language.

The importance and significance of coded language used in queer culture stems in part from a desire to find likeminded communities. Queerness is generally invisible (although this is not always the case, depending on individual gender performativity, identity, etc) and therefore seeking out relationships or encounters by learning how to decode behaviour can be both a

dangerous task and one necessary for survival. RJ Gilmour in his essay “Murmurs of Desire” highlights the importance of these queer communities when he claims that anyone “who is different knows that once we can [acknowledge our sexual and gendered identities to ourselves], we begin the search for others from our tribe; we search out our clan” (Gilmour 16). There is a measure of safety in numbers, to be sure, but the allure of these communities lies primarily in the shared culture and kinship that cannot be found elsewhere in the isolation and rejection of a society that demands our silence. The purpose of creating codes and symbols in order to communicate to other queers our own same-sex desires have become more than a means of protecting queer communities from outside scrutiny. They are an art form on their own merits. The passing-down of these means of communication became a right of passage, where “[coming] of age in the gay community meant learning to navigate the symbols and language of being queer” (Gilmour 21).

This coded language is a hallmark of queer literature – specifically early queer literature, wherein poets ranging from Shakespeare, to Byron and Whitman disguised the subjects of their work from hostile eyes. Margaret Morrison credits this ability to turn a phrase and lay subtle hints as a “double movement” which is inherently “familiar to queers trying both to communicate with those ‘in the know’ and to disguise themselves and these attempts” (Morrison 4). Within the context of my novella, Lachlann represents the queers “in the know,” with his easy attitude toward his sexuality and his knowledge of the metropolitan gay scene. Not only does he answer the call of the codes left behind by Fr. Arthur, but he relishes their challenge as a chance to reconnect with Daniel. Lachlann understands the importance of codes within queer spaces because he has opened himself up to that aspect of the culture.

In contrast, Daniel's resistance to engaging with coded language may read as not only a rejection of his sexuality but also as a rejection of his former intimacy with Lachlann, as well as his childhood attachments and interests. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that "for many of us [queer folk] in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the [social] codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival" (Sedgwick 3). Taken in a literal context, Daniel and Lachlann's latching onto their childhood interest in ciphers and codes in order to communicate in secret became their mode of survival as young gay men in their later teenage years.

However, in a more theoretical context, Daniel and Lachlann's interests, influenced by Fr. Arthur, comprise a small albeit closeted queer community of their own by meeting the requirements of such a community: a "shared culture of gay men and women – their history, geography, literature, art and music" which Robb argues "was not a passive store of knowledge" but "a vital means of communication" (Robb 143). Fr. Arthur shared with the boys his love of *Sherlock Holmes* stories, coded languages and ciphers, and music by The Velvet Underground. Beyond the verbatim use of coded language, references to culture acted as suggestions toward same-sex love in conversation. Lesbian women "made their feelings known by referring... to the small number of texts in which lesbians were mentioned" such as the poems of Sappho, whereas gay men "enjoyed a wider range of reference and were more likely to be able to find cheerful [sic] examples of male love: Achilles and Patroclus in *The Illiad*" for example (Robb 143-144). This 'double movement' in communication, the underlying messages alluding to same-sex attraction, the overlying messages presenting as safe cultural references, is a pleasure just as much as it is a tool.

The most frustrating aspect of claiming these codes by far is that although they circulate as common knowledge among many queer social communities, finding concrete evidence of their historical use as a mode of queer signaling often seems an impossible task by definition, and riddled with doubt and even with uncertain motivations in their wielders. This obscurity is due to the nature of queer communication – that it has often been hidden in plain sight, with anodyne explanations easily available should suspicions arise. Consequently, “the richest sources of information on the gay past [have] to do with the capture and punishment of homosexuals: laws, court records, and criminal statistics” (Robb 17), creating a false positive in the minds of the public in associating ‘convicted’ homosexuals with dangerous and violent criminals. Robb credits the public trials of Oscar Wilde not as the cause but rather as the symptom of the shifted attitude toward homosexuality from a perverse medical condition to a degenerate and famously ‘indecent’ criminal offence. The treatment of Oscar Wilde was due to an early mindset of the twentieth century, rather than the late Victorian age during which his arrest occurred: “As far as law enforcement is concerned, it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Dark Ages began” (Robb 31).

This queer ‘Dark Age’ mirrors more than just an increase in hysteria and persecution surrounding queer folk in that it also embodies the loss of generational knowledge passed down through the queer community. Increased hostility and the rise of the AIDS epidemic broke the line of communication between generations of queer people. RJ Gilmour memorializes the eve of the AIDS crisis when he writes: “I did not know it at the time, but I learned later that the magical world of queer desire and queer culture that I had discovered was slowly unravelling in the face of an epidemic that would decimate an entire generation. Sitting at the feet of these older men and queens I tasted a world that was evaporating” (22). The tragedy of the AIDS crisis, not to trivialize in any way the millions of lives lost, led to the breakdown of knowledge passed down

between queer generations. Robb goes so far as to claim this “lost heritage of gay men and women mislaid, not destroyed” (Robb 253); nevertheless, there is much work to be done by survivors of the epidemic, and queer historians and theorists to recover and share this mislaid heritage.

Daniel’s reluctance to engage with queer methods of communication within the narrative stands in for the misplacement of this knowledge, out of a sense of shame and the very real fear brought on by the epidemic. This shame forced many queers back into the closet or prohibited them from ever coming out due to the danger of rising conservative rhetoric against gay men. Within my narrative, this reluctance also stems from a breakdown in communication between Daniel and his uncle, presenting *Trying for the Kingdom* as a narrative in which the conventions typical of twentieth-century queer literature are reversed; the queer love is visible on a surface level reading, while the shame is found at a greater depth through the subtext. Daniel’s shame, the rejection of his sexuality, and his unresolved romantic feelings for Lachlann, unfold in his initial denial to cooperate with the grand mystery Lachlann’s reappearance ignites. To communicate is to participate in queer culture. Daniel’s shame manifests in his initial refusal to participate in decoding the communications left to him by Arthur, only gradually opening up after additional communications from Lachlann and from Dorothy McNabb.

Shame is an aspect of queer culture that Margaret Morrison presents as intrinsic to queer experience, not antithetical to queer pride but rather as the backbone of it. For a large portion of history, and relevant still today, queerness has been inseparable from shame. Morrison claims that the mainstream culture’s “blatant demand for... silence was a kind of symbolic violence” (Morrison 1) during the mid-to-late twentieth century, and so seeking out other queer folk through coded language became vital to the formation of sub-communities under the oppression

of noncommunicative silence. The problem comes in modern discourse, “when LGBTs pretend that queer shame does not exist, sometimes by using the cover of pride and/or by attempting to assimilate to the heteronormative mainstream” (Morrison 2). To act under the illusion that shame is something to cast off disregards the beauty of the culture that grew in its shadow, as does the tempting integration into heteronormative ideals for social protection. The protection of performing heterosexuality versus the deeper draw toward queer forms of communication, and therefore queer love, is a conflict that Daniel struggles with throughout the novel. He does not have to confront his shame if he does not confront his sexuality, or so he has come to believe. Morrison, however, argues that “instead of denying or repressing queer shame, as painful as that may be, LGBTs should aim to accept our difference from the dominant majority, acknowledge our shame, and make creative use of that shame...” (Morrison 2). One method of acceptance lies in first accepting the cultural language shared by queer groups, the reasons they were created, and the reasons they are necessary.

The greatest hurdle Daniel faces to this acceptance is his family’s involvement in his local Catholic Parish. The Catholic Church stands throughout the novella as a dual force. Through the relationship between Daniel and Arthur, the Church is represented in an idealised light – accepting, welcoming, and nonjudgmental of its confessors. While it is implied that it was not Arthur’s choice to go into Seminary school, Daniel’s memories of him never give the impression that he was in reality anti-religious, more-so that he came to terms with his role. Like Daniel, he never moves away from the small town he was raised in, and lives under the guise of heteronormative ideals (and in Arthur’s case, the accepted celibacy of a priest), in order to survive. The concept of a homosexual man entering the priesthood, where all sexuality is cast aside, is historically not as taboo as it may seem. As far back as the late nineteenth century,

“homosexual priests were less likely than most [i.e., non-clerical peers] to consider themselves exceptional. According to [Magnus] Hirschfield, every confessor knew ‘thousands’ of homosexuals” (Robb 233).

In contrast, Daniel’s strained relationship with his family signifies a less positive relationship with the institution of the Catholic Church and its stance on homosexuality. The novella does not set out to demonize the Church. To do so would be to oversimplify the complex association between Christianity and its prevalence in even secular western society. However, its constant presence looming over Daniel in the backdrop of his home town is a contributing factor to his hesitance toward his sexuality that does not need to be explicitly named, a sort of code in its own right that any queer reader would understand. A scoff or a look of disgust when confronted with homosexuality, such as the one Daniel witnesses as his father reads about the 1981 Bathhouse Raids in Toronto, is as potent as any violent diatribe. Daniel does not have to ask outright whether his family would accept him should he come out as homosexual. Not only would verbalising the question of whether they would accept him or not negate the reason to ask it in the first place since he would out himself in the process, but the answer is moot. It is necessary for his own survival, or so Daniel believes, that he assume his family would not accept him as “Christian condemnations of homosexual love have always reflected the moors of a particular society” (Robb 234), in that they are subject to the social trends of a particular time.

The conservative political climate of the 1980’s, with the rising stigma attached to the AIDS crisis, did not instill much confidence in anyone who was looking to come out and still maintain ties with their religious family members. Daniel’s own faith or lack thereof never comes into play in his decision to not come out. His sexuality is not a religious crisis in that he fears eternal damnation or punishment from an all-seeing God. The crisis, and the shame that



comes with it, finds expression in the fear of rejection from his family and hometown. Nancy Jo Cullen writes in her *Queers Were Here* essay “Permission”: “It didn’t matter what my rational mind understood, my Catholic indoctrination overrode any sensible response to my own desire and curiosity. Catholic programming was like an antibiotic-resistant infection that once it had its grip on you was nearly impossible to shake off” (Cullen 121). Likewise, in-so-far as social acceptance goes, it does not matter that homosexual relations were decriminalized nearly two decades prior. Bill C-150 was a band-aid solution to a larger issue of social and mainstream cultural homophobia. Editors of gay newspapers such as *The Body Politic* were still intimidated, gay spaces still raided. The underlying message of the conservative landscape was clear: decriminalization did not equal acceptance.

To communicate a desire for change, a challenge to the social norm, was to break the silence that the heteronormative mainstream demanded and to risk a dangerous outing. This dual nature of the Church throughout the novella (Fr. Arthur McBride as what the Church ought to be versus Irving McBride as what it is) creates a difficult position for Daniel. Yet, it is one with which many queer people brought up in religious environments can sympathise: “this sense of not belonging that has given rise to the idea of the Sacred Monster: the queer person as something deviant and beautiful at the same time” (Ganev 11). Furthermore, Arthur’s role in implicating Lachlann as the culprit of the fire at St. Jude’s along with his refusal to out Daniel shows a deeper reaching religious trauma that stems from Arthur’s own experience in being outed, and his hope to shield Daniel from the same fate. These narratives cannot be separated from the far-reaching influence of Christianity in Canada, particularly in rural towns where religious communities have more prominence.

The town itself remains unnamed throughout the novella both in an effort to better represent the general experience of an upbringing in a small, religious Ontario town, and for the plain reason that any existing small town is attached to the history of its Church. Picking a small town at random and symbolically burning their church in a fictitious history would understandably not bode well, and moreover come across as disingenuous. However, the unnamed town also brings about the opportunity to bring into play the symbols and hidden languages of Catholicism, such as the invocation of Saints and their virtues.

There are two churches in Daniel's hometown; St. Jude and St. Anthony. The first, St. Jude, is the church that burns down five years before the story begins, the catalyst for the events that follow. St. Jude is also the Patron Saint of lost causes – as in the lost cause of discovering what started the fire that took the Church. Daniel discovers with certainty only that the fire was not started by Lachlann, the out and “in the know” gay man, a certainty mirroring back the hostility that Christian conservatives threw onto homosexuals in the wake of the AIDS crisis. The fault was not in same-sex love but in the powers that did nothing to protect it.

The second church, built after the devastation of St. Jude's, is named for St. Anthony, the Patron Saint of lost articles. At the beginning of the novella, Daniel's mother gives him a coin with St. Anthony's image, believing that it will help him find his lost jacket. These coins are trinkets that anyone with a Catholic upbringing might recognize. Their symbolism lies not in a hidden meaning, but in the recognition that the person holding it is a Catholic and can communicate that fact to private parties without confessing their faith outright. On a subtextual level however, the coin does invoke its patron, setting in motion a theme of Daniel's finding more ‘lost articles’ than he had initially been searching for – a lost boyfriend, a lost interest in coded language and its mysteries, a lost connection to his deceased Uncle, and eventually, his

lost jacket as well. Much of Daniel's growth as a character comes from finding these lost connections and reclaiming them in his life, overcoming his own cultural and social death as a gay man. Thematically, this reclamation is also coded throughout the setting of the novella: a train track reborn as foot path, a barn as a bar, a newspaper office as a café, etc. Daniel's hometown reflects a place of death and rebirth, in the sense that loss thematically equals death.

Death remains inescapable in Daniel's life, as it was in many gay men's lives in the 1980's. This is not a novella explicitly about the AIDS crisis, nor does it pretend to be, but to ignore its impact entirely would be to discredit one of the great tragedies to strike the queer community. Death is therefore reflected as a constant presence through the loss of Fr. Arthur, the supposed death/disappearance of Dorothy McNabb, and various settings riddled with decay and abandonment. The partially-omniscient narrator also gives the reader insight into Daniel's mental state, consistently describing him as feeling like he is dying or already dead: "the sudden sensation of Daniel's organs shutting down, going rotten in the encasement of his dirty skin. Because he was in love with a boy, which meant he might as well be dead anyway" (44). With death looming over every page, the narrative allows for a deeper look on how we confront our own inevitable endings – literal or otherwise. What do we leave behind?

The mystery that Arthur leaves behind for Daniel and Lachlann to uncover through the clues and codes that he conspires with Dorothy to create acts as a sort of final confession. Part of the last rites of the dying in Catholic tradition, the final confession is meant to absolve the dying person of their sins in preparation to enter Heaven. While Arthur's death occurs off screen, his final confession functions to bring the reader to his death-bed and that moment of absolution as he expresses regret through his final message for inadvertently pushing Daniel further back into the closet. The tradition of these scenes of final confessions, whether the religious rite is

performed by a clergyman or through conversation in a character's last moments, have roots in queer tragedy: "Death-bed scenes," Robb argues, "in modern gay literature have roots that go far beyond the advent of AIDS. Gay tragedy is a tradition, not just a circumstantial feature" (Robb 211) of queer life ending in tragic death.

Religious language therefore lends itself to retrospective explorations of queer death and what a final confession means when one has been unable to communicate in straight-forward language their whole lives. These narratives of death and gay tragedy "build on discussions of both historical trauma and cultural trauma to assess collective trauma in one queer community" (M. Kelly et. al 3). To ignore these tragedies, traditions, and indeed the collective trauma of queer communities, would be the death of our shared culture. This is why religious language is particularly resonant in this type of narrative, "with religion in many spheres crumpling into itself, withdrawing itself, we still hear the signs and rites of faith, spoken in darkened hospital rooms and at still gravesides. This is due to the fact religious language has attended to the temporal moments of dying and thus provides a language not just to speak death but to touch it as well" (M. Kelly et al 13).

Queer tragedy is not the only form of storytelling our communities have space for, and to claim otherwise would be to paint a dismal and inaccurate picture of queer love in all its vibrancy. However, just as shame does not counter-act queer pride, acknowledging the tradition of tragedy in queer literature does not suggest that tragedy is how every story must end. Rather, the tragedy would lie in our stories not being told at all.

Stories of queer love throughout history have been shrouded due to the nature of their necessary concealment through the coded language used to protect their authors and readers both. Here I have been arguing that this concealment is a contributing factor to queer readers'

desires to claim historical, mythical, and fictional figures as queer, in a bid to prove that same-sex love is not a novel invention of the last century. The massive success of Madeline Miller's *The Song Of Achilles* is one such example, owing in part to its unflinching and passionate stance on the romantic and sexual love of Achilles and Patroclus, figures who for over two thousand years have represented masculine strength and unwavering loyalty. The erasure of queer love has created a desire for symbolically resonant queer stories.

On the note of *The Song Of Achilles*, there is an echoing sentiment in its final pages to support the trend of reclaiming queer love stories, and the importance of acknowledging them; the spirit of Patroclus, lover of Achilles, is barred from moving on from the mortal plane to the underworld because his name has not been recorded on his grave. It is only when Thetis, mother of Achilles and Goddess of the Sea, etches his name underneath Achilles' on their monument that Patroclus is granted passage into the afterlife (Miller 369). He is able to conquer death only when his queer love is made known. Queer stories have been obscured for centuries and face erasure if their same-sex love is not acknowledged. This is the fundamental manner in which queer stories overcome death – by utilizing coded language in the hopes that future generations will read the silent and persistent truth.

The conquest of tragedy in queer narratives culminates in how I use coded language and communication throughout *Trying for the Kingdom*. Much of Daniel's character arc is devoted to accepting the shame and fear that come as baggage with his sexuality and in doing so learning to read the symbols and codes around him, engaging in queer culture and thus not allowing it to die. I find that these themes lend themselves to the mystery genre, reflecting the aforementioned desire for queer readers to decode and uncover queer love in the past. For example, one of the four ciphers featured in the novella comes from "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," a short

story from the collection *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Daniel's interest in detective stories was fostered by his uncle. The beginning of the novella sees Daniel reading the first story from the collection, "The Adventure Of The Empty House" (the story in which the narrator, the steadfast Dr. Watson, is reunited with his dear "friend" Holmes, after a long disappearance/presumed death).

The great detective's sexuality has been a subject of interest to his followers since his creation. Even Graham Robb, in his treatise on same-sex love in the nineteenth century, delves into the murky waters of Holmes's sexual orientation, Robb claiming that his "observations are not a sly attempt to ensnare the great detective in the elastic web of gay revisionism. Everyone already knows, instinctively, that Holmes is homosexual" (Robb 260). Therefore, it follows that Sherlock Holmes himself has become a symbol of homosexuality, and his presence serves as a coded suggestion of same-sex love. "The wearing of masks, the street-wise reading of signs, the ability to operate in different milieux: these were the qualifications of the urban homosexual and the private detective" (Robb 268), and so they are too the skills that Daniel and Lachlann must learn and use in order to gain closure to the mystery of their teenage obsession.

The codes exist outside the confines of the narrative as well, including a cheeky wink toward Arthur's being a "friend of Dorothy", a common euphemism used by gay men in the mid-twentieth century to identify themselves to other gay men. The phrase itself stems from the outspoken support of queer rights from Judy Garland, whose character Dorothy in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* also resonated with queer audiences. Dorothy McNabb, like Dorothy Gale, is whisked off from her rural hometown and dropped into a colourful world – the gay village of Church Street in Toronto is a far cry from The Land of Oz, but the sentiment is the same.

Another code that I use include the use of flowers. The language of flowers and their symbolic meanings date back for millennia, with possibly the most famous use credited to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of the books Daniel keeps from his Uncle's office: "OPHELIA: There's rosemary, that's for remembrance: pray, love, remember" (4.4.184). Through Dorothy, in her new life as a florist in the gay village of Toronto, flowers appear throughout the novella – namely green carnations and violets. Reputedly, Oscar Wilde habitually wore "a carnation artificially coloured green, a distinctive emblem which he knew to be worn by homosexuals in Paris" (Hyde 57). Violets are likewise used "as a symbol of sapphic love" (Luu). Arthur is implied to have requested that Dorothy make certain that green carnations be present at his funeral, while he is still able to make a small number of plans for his own burial before his death. The language of flowers is used by Arthur and Dorothy as a form of communication between Arthur and Dorothy in their kindred friendship. Flowers in the novella signify a gap between their generation and Daniel and Lachlann's, and function not as another cryptic message for them to uncover, but as a celebration of queer culture – a sign to be witnessed and understood rather than unravelled.

By the conclusion of *Trying for The Kingdom*, with the truths uncovered and a certain amount of closure found, Daniel is finally able to accept the shame he has felt toward his sexuality. He walks out of the crypt with Lachlann, a metaphorical resurrection, with the knowledge that Dorothy McNabb lives too. His frustration with the lack of outright communication has until then bound him. The persistent silence of his father, the deaf chatter of his mother, and even Lachlann's disappearance without a word of goodbye formed so much of the anger that he is now able to acknowledge and conquer as he rediscovers the cultural value of coded language. It is the knowledge that his same-sex love does not literally equate to a death

sentence that finally allows him to grieve the loss of his priest uncle. Graham Robb cautions that the “celebration of specifically gay forms of communication runs the risk of making love itself look like an accessory. The point of secrecy was not to declare independence of a homosexual state but to find a means of expressing love” (Robb 153) and it is because of this resilience and creativity in communication that queer stories live.



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