

Madman Butterfly: a Life in Holidays

Issue #4: New Year, New Yous

“You’re on Earth, there’s no cure for that!”

—Samuel Beckett

Thomas woke up in his bed and hoped, for a moment, that the last few months had been a bad dream. It was dark out. He knew it wasn’t when he saw his mother sitting on a chair next to his bed, and she asked kindly how he was doing.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. Neither do I,” she said, smiling.

“How’s everyone else handling it?”

“We’re mostly trying not to talk about it.”

“I can’t say I blame you.”

“Did that thing make you...like this? I’m sorry, I don’t mean it to come out like that.”

“No. I meant what I said. It’d be much simpler, wouldn’t it, possession? I think that’s why so many people still believe in it. It sounds terrifying, but it’s simple, and that’s less scary than letting yourself know how awful people can be, or how wrong things go with us without good reasons why or straightforward answers. Like that thing said, certainty is so comfortable for some people that they’d rather know the devil was real than have to live with the doubt that he isn’t. I’d say it’s like Doubting Thomas, he couldn’t believe, he had to know. Except they don’t want to know the truth they had, that life was too complicated to ever be explained easily, but the new truth won’t make them satisfied either. I was never one. I had faith that no matter how bad things got, it was all just people in the end, people and the natural world causing pain, and nature not even being something that could mean to. One big mess that no one could ever get right for everyone. No one answer to everything. Or all that many things. I think, in a strange way, my faith was rewarded. I remember now, telling the angels to leave us alone. I didn’t really have the words to make my case, but I’d seen what certainty about the ways of things could do. I had that idea in my head. And they understood what I would say when I would have the words, and they were so happy to hear it. I’ve been thinking about it a lot recently, but I thought it was a dream. But that was being awake, this is the dream, one that never should have made so much sense.”

“I had hoped it was a phase,” his mother said, smiling weakly.

John had been standing at the foot of his bed, “Our rewards are never quite what we expect, are they? Not even when they are what we had hoped for.”

“I suppose not, John.”

Thomas' mother looked at the empty space her son had responded to.

“John Brown is here, huh?”

“I don’t know that either. Don’t ask me what Jesus is like; I don’t think anyone would like those answers. Manuel seems to find ways to entertain himself, at least.”

“He did seem easily entertained. Didn’t John Brown hack people up with a sword?”

“It’s something we have in common. Why are you here, mother?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“I suppose so, but I’m used to not having your help. I don’t know what I can ask from you. Maybe someday, and I know I haven’t been alive a long time, but for most of my life, you hurt me. And when I got mad, you said I was like my father. When he thought of moving out, you threatened to send me with him. We can’t just go back to you being my mom. I don’t think either of us has an idea of what that looks like. I’m not trying to be mean, but I think we need to start trying to get along before we can be close.”

That was how Annie Durango lost her youngest, not because of a great tragedy, but like so many parents had before her, by having been present only in a physical sense for all the smaller ones. In a way, it was a relief to let him go, in the way that finally letting a gangrenous limb be amputated was. It wouldn’t be pleasant, but there was unburdening in accepting it anyway. Starting again would be difficult, but if there was an opportunity to leave some baggage in the past, it could be worth it. She wept gently, but she smiled through the tears, “I think I can live with that. We’ve both lived with worse.”

“I’ve been dealing with a lot of heavy stuff lately. I could use something stupid. I’m going to go see what The Twins are up to.”

She snorted, staying seated in the room as he left.

“Look after him, if you’re real,” she said.

Keith was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“You’re awake, good. And you’re you?”

“I’m not on fire.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like I was on fire.”

“That’s tough. You know what I found in the basement? Grandma gave me a little crucifix for my room when she was flirting with Catholicism. It’s interesting, isn’t it, all the detail?” he said, holding it up cautiously.

Thomas looked between the little Jesus and his brother. Then he took it and held it, both waiting for a few awkward moments.

“Do you feel any different?”

“No.”

He ducked his head around the corner, “Is that a good sign or a really bad sign?” he asked Kathleen.

“I think it’s good,” she said, standing beside her other, not better half.

He hugged them both.

“Oh no. He’s had a personality change from the trauma.” Keith said, alarmed.

“Please shut up,” Thomas said.

“Oh, good, he’s fine other than the possessed thing,” Kathleen said with a sigh of relief.

Sarah walked into sight from the living room with Lena. She smiled, but seemed preoccupied.

Thomas let Sarah’s thoughts wander and said, “Oh, you’re still here.”

“They’re holding me a little hostage, but nice to be somewhere where people want me to stay,” she said cheerfully.

“Is that true?”

“Not in a serial killer way. It’s like making sure we all have the same alibi,” Kathleen said, “we’ve been waiting to see what’s up with you.”

“How long was I out?”

“Uh, day and a half.”

“That’s...crazy.”

“They let me call my uncle, and there’s a lot of food. No biggie.” Lena said, holding out her arms and making a pincer motion with her hands.

“What does that mean?”

She pushed through The Twins and put her arms around him. He felt the strings threaten to go out of his leg, but he reminded them not to ruin a good thing. Although he was suddenly quite concerned with what the standard length for an embrace was, before letting go on a quick count to three.

“I thought you’d be more freaked out,” he said.

“I’m not going to give up on the guy that helped me pass freshman year that easily.”

“I think the visual dyslexia diagnosis did the heavy lifting.”

“But you were the first person to think my brain was fucked up and not that I was a dumb-dum.”

“...You’re welcome?”

“I don’t like that other dude, though. He seems like an asshole.”

Thomas reflected on some of his returning memories, felt quite ill, and concluded, “I’d say that’s an accurate assessment.

“Are you feeling okay?” Kathleen asked.

“He eats people,” Thomas said weakly.

“Come again?” Keith asked.

Thomas rushed to the bathroom.

“Oh, good god, you don’t think he’s throwing up a person, do you?” Keith asked.

“Probably not a whole one. That wouldn’t make sense, um, space-wise?” Lena replied.

“I don’t think that only being some of someone is much better. How do you know him?” Kathleen asked.

“Through Sarah for a long time. We’re friends now. I think I’m going to have a lot in common with girlfriends, if you know what I mean, but that’s fine.”

“All, uhm, alright then. Cool, I guess?” Keith said.

Sarah was sitting on an arm of the living room couch, kicking her legs and picking at her nails.

“Are you feeling like having a breakdown, or are you doing okay?” Lena asked her. Sarah shrugged.

Thomas stumbled out of the bathroom to get a glass of water from the kitchen. Sarah hopped off the couch and leaned on the doorframe. The others waited for her to say something.

“Did you know about him?” she asked.

Thomas stared at her faint outline in the window glass, “No.”

She stared at his reflection. It was more face-to-face than they usually talked plainly about serious matters, but this time, more was not enough.

“Look at me, Thomas,” she said.

He turned around, “I got flashes from the house. But it didn’t seem real; most of what I remember from down there was the feeling. I remember feeling like I was going crazy. It wasn’t

like repression, but they injected me with something to make it harder to fight back, which made it all hazy. And I took some hard hits to the head. I almost lost it a couple of times. I really didn't remember much, and I thought I was remembering some of it wrong. I think sometimes we were working together, sometimes he was driving, sometimes it was me. He did kill that agent and Darrell and his men, I remember that now. I think I was sleeping in some way when it happened, my mind wasn't really here or aware."

"Would he say the same thing?"

Thomas' reflection turned around to look at her again, "I could fill out the details, but for present purposes, he has the shape of it."

Everyone straightened up a little, tensing. Except Thomas, he knew when it was better to keep loose, after all.

"Jumpy, aren't we? I promise I have no intention to harm any of you. Think of me as the secret child, without any of the complications of sharing a father, not a terrestrial one anyway."

"Couldn't you leave him?" Sarah asked the living reflection.

"No. It's a sort of god and man arrangement, but with the pieces less incorporated. A little cruder, a little more primal, a little more mixed than a whole. Couldn't say why; there are mysteries even to me, but it must be terribly tedious to know everything. To have nothing to learn," Tom said, crossing his arms on the bottom of the frame and resting his head on them, a distance to his gaze like he was distracted.

"Do you have to eat people?" Keith asked.

"Not for sustenance."

"What does that mean?" Kathleen asked.

John said something to Thomas, and he told them, "John says monsters are things that can't be anything, but what they are, it is granted to all men to choose."

"He has the right of it, strange that I can't hear him, though. You are a curious child, Brother Me. It's a hunger. I won't ever starve if I don't feel it, but when I do, I must satisfy it eventually. As long as the wicked and I exist, we play our parts."

"And what would happen to Thomas if you were dead?" Sarah asked.

“Sarah?” Kathleen asked reproachfully.

“The dreamer awakens from this little sleep to the endless dawn of whatever eternity has in store for him. I can’t say if it’s endless or nothing, but both are equally inconceivable to such limited things, so I wouldn’t think about it too hard.”

“You’re not my brother,” Sarah said.

“Hurtful. If I’m not, neither is he.”

“Is that so?” she asked.

“Of course. The boy who was just a boy died a long time ago, relatively speaking. He died so that we may live. Destroy us, and his sacrifice would be in vain, which it might be anyway.”

Thomas hung his head.

“I don’t believe you,” Sarah said.

“No?”

“If change is dying, then we die all the time, so who cares? You’re still you, whether you like it or not. Maybe we die every time we go to sleep, and somebody else with the same memories wakes up. I don’t care, it’s still another me. If you want me to worry about it, tell me how believing you is supposed to change my life. Somebody has to do the laundry, and the new me will regret it if I put it off until tomorrow, just like I did when the old me put it off.”

Thomas looked back up. “We’re all phantoms, it’s just a matter of degrees.”

“Something like that,” Sarah said, a sad smile on her lips, “and there’s all kinds of family. I don’t care about most of them, but I wish I knew my brother better. I’m glad he’s around. I barely know you, and the more I see, the less I like you.”

Tom was not irritated by this response, but instead raised his head and pointed at Sarah, “It sounds simple when you put it that way. It has a little ‘chop wood, carry water’ zest. We’ll agree to disagree. Keith, I do love your antics more than most, but you can put the crucifix down. I’m not some petty demon that will cringe away from the cross.”

“Unless you’re lying, like a demon would,” Keith said as he inched towards the mirror.

Tom flicked his tongue absentmindedly, plucked the crucifix from the hands of Keith’s solidifying reflection, and waved it around, saying some quotation from the Bible in Latin. Keith lowered the real crucifix with an equally relieved and disappointed, “Oh.”

“Why don’t you like me?” Tom asked Lena with a wink.

“Ew. I’m still a minor, dude.”

“I’m younger than he is,” Tom said defensively.

“But aren’t you timeless and know more than anybody?” Kathleen asked, frowning with disapproval.

Tom looked to Lena, “You said the experience of time-”

“Don’t use my words at me, you’re not even people! That’s who that was about!”

“Don’t be creepy,” Thomas added, turning his head to give Tom a mean side eye.

“I was only trying to be friendly. You are all curious creatures.” Tom said, shaking his head in befuddlement.

With that, the reflection became just a reflection again, the crucifix appearing back where it should be in Keith’s hands again.

“What, can he always hear us?” Lena asked.

“I think so. He can probably see into my head better than I can see into his. His is pretty...alien.”

“What a DOUCHEbaaag,” Lena said. Everyone else nodded along.

The spirit of camaraderie lasted for a few moments but wilted in the quiet. Thomas sat up on the counter and watched their faces with placid anxiety. The worry that comes with a problem that seems so insurmountable that it’s hardly worth getting worked up trying to figure out a solution. Solutions were tantalizing, maddening things. Details to sweat, next best moves to weigh, probabilities to calculate, and contingencies to consider. It can be relaxing to be lost in the woods before you fully come to terms with the fact that you are.

“What do we do?” Thomas asked.

“War is mostly a question of patience, vigilance, and supply,” John added truthfully and unhelpfully.

“Do you think we could...destroy him? If it came to that?” Sarah asked, opting to handle the most uncomfortable question first.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we have the tools if they do exist,” Thomas replied.

“Do you have any control over it?”

“I think I could stop him from doing things he wants to, not things he has to. It’d be like trying to hold your breath until you suffocate. Once you pass out, the lungs take over. Now that I know what him, uhm, surfacing feels like, I think that’s what I can’t remember, when he needed out, and I wasn’t letting him. That’s what it feels like now that I can see it. Maybe I could kill myself, us, if we are one.”

“Let’s try some other theories first. That’s my vote.” Keith said.

“He is killing people.” Thomas retorted.

“It might be hypocritical, but thinking about who he killed, I don’t want you to die over it,” Sarah said.

“I wouldn’t say he’s in the habit of eating innocent people, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah, so I’m not saying we do nothing, but I don’t think we need to do anything, you know, irreversible,” Sarah said.

“Should we ask Pastor Dole?” Kathleen asked.

“I don’t know what it will accomplish, but we could try talking to someone. Probably not him. He’s not really one for risks. Or leadership. Or knowing things.” Thomas said, a brief montage of the preacher ducking out on uncomfortable encounters and minor conflicts playing through his mind.

“True,” she said.

“If we ever need to go to the pyramids or whatever, I could get us there,” Lena added.

“I appreciate it, but I’m not sure there’s an Indiana Jones answer to all this,” Thomas said, “Keith, is Audrey still here?”

“Down in the basement. She’s been reconsidering, uh, existence is probably the best way to put it.”

“Should I talk to her, or stay out of her way?”

“She’s curious. And terrified. I don’t know, I think living with you has been good training for dealing with things of this nature. Death. Catastrophes.”

“That’s hard to hear,” Thomas said.

“Mmm. It is what it is. I don’t know what that is, but it definitely is.”

“So is Dad gone forever? He has threatened to shoot us before. Is that something we should worry about him trying if he comes back?” Kathleen asked.

“He said he’d kill you guys?” Lena asked.

“He said lots of things, you just had to get on with your day and not get too hung up on it,” Keith answered Lena.

“I don’t think he has the... strength of character not to do as he was told,” Thomas said to Kathleen.

“Sarah, we gotta get your mom full custody, divorced, hun.” Lena offered. Her parents' friends, no doubt, knew good lawyers in the field.

Sarah often declined Lena’s offers out of friendship for fear of the economic gap between them coming into sharp focus, but sometimes there was a wisdom in taking every advantage. She nodded, “Sure.”

Thomas asked Kathleen, “Hadn’t you met a guy?”

“I did. It was fun for a bit. I’ve met a few more since,” she said.

“...Oh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I have no thoughts on that, other than I don’t need to hear anymore.”

With that, Thomas got off the counter and descended the steps to the basement, stopping by Manuel and Jesus, who looked grumpy halfway down.

“What’s with you two?”

“Our zone of relaxation has been turned into a female living space. I don’t like it.” Jesus said.

“I’m telling you, man, you gotta stop saying female like that.” Manuel chided.

“I’m not running around calling women females, I’m using a particular term for a particular type of place. Where ladies, you know, let it all hang loose. That’s their prerogative, but it’s not my scene, and I’m falling behind on my stories.”

“Shouldn’t you already know how they go?”

“We all mostly know how these shows go, Manuel. It’s the how that gives it flavor. And I’m not my Dad.” Jesus said.

“Aren’t you, though?”

“You know, I wish the guys who said I wasn’t had won that debate. It doesn’t even matter if it’s true; the amount of time you people have spent puzzling it out is sad. Let the mystery be; if we’re calling it one of those, I say. Not to the living, but, among, between us guys, the fellas.”

“Are you really married to all those nuns?” Manuel asked.

“Hey, you never see me at the altar, and if someone says I have been, they’re a liar. Besides, I’m a man of chastity, and friend to all, it’s not like “marriage” marriage. Although Sisters have been known to get crossed wires over it now and again. Usually ones that could stand to get out more.”

“As relieved as I am that you’re not lingering when you shouldn’t, but it’s a bit sad you can’t handle it,” Thomas mocked. “Didn’t you have siblings growing up?”

“Clever. But you’re not getting me to come down on the side of dumb debate about anything. That’s most of what people talk to me about. ‘Oh Lord, should I embark upon the path to becoming a brother in a Quiznos franchiseeship and please let the Cowboys get to the Super Bowl this year.’ I don’t care. You have the tools to work things out on your own, but it’s like your other you says, people can’t hack it. My eternal kingdom for somebody flipping Dave Ramsey’s studio desk over. Don’t rope me into buying a house. How is the less-than-holy Dyad thing treating you, by the way?”

“You know, maybe you guys could use a more feminine influence. Give you some perspective outside of the fellas. We got a donkey. Maybe I could bring your mother here the same way everyone else got here.” Thomas taunted.

Manuel laughed at Jesus' gasp of surprise.

“You do not threaten to bring a mom into guy time just because you’re feeling cranky. That’s a party foul, way out of line. And I swear by all that is related to me in a good way, if you have a single blasphemous thought in her general direction, I will smite your fig tree so that not even a miracle can raise it again.” Jesus threatened, finger jabbing at Thomas’s nose.

“You cursed the fig tree for not being fruitful.” Thomas pointed out.

“Don’t be pedantic, we both got the reference and the point.”

“That might be the best advice you’ve given me. Other than that, you cursed the tree because you were hungry and tried to turn it into a life lesson after the fact, like a complete tool.”

“I Am. And I am many things. A tool is not one of them. Forgiving is, but, Thomas, sometimes I hope you don’t ask for forgiveness so I can see you in hell.”

“Hey, man, that’s going a little far. Personally, I always thought it was a little far to exist at all. Couldn’t you just do a jail sentence or something?” Manuel said.

“You can look down with Aquinas and the deathbed confession of Hitler and be happy with the perfect fairness of your judgments.” Thomas mocked.

“That is a low blow. I never talked about the guy. He didn’t exist yet, and I didn’t think anyone would be so tasteless as to turn him into a popular point about mercy. I’m Jewish, it’s a weird pull to me, too. And you Thomases, you all talk out of turn to or about me. You’re a vexing lineage. Churlish.”

“Are you also technically the first Christian?” Manuel asked as Thomas pushed past them.

“That is a good question, Manuel. It is important to believe in yourself. I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t.”

Audrey was sprawled out on the couch, looking up at Thomas with mild alarm at hearing one third of a conversation.

“You have some crazy stuff going on, don’t you?” she asked.

“I didn’t think someone majoring in psychology would use that word,” Thomas said.

“The books suggest not using it, but real-world experience tells me that sometimes it’s appropriate. It makes people feel less normal to never hear it.”

“Yeah. It…captures a feeling the clinical ones don’t.” Thomas said, thinking about all the ones he had heard while he was recovering.

“I’ll have to use that line. How are you dealing with this?” I don’t feel like I’m dealing with this.” Audrey asked.

“It’s easy. For me. I can’t not deal with it, so I’ll adapt. Or die. I think it’s harder for people who could walk away; they have to keep choosing to be around me. The hard part is dealing with it in a way that doesn’t kill me slowly anyway.” Thomas said.

“I have thought of running away and living in the woods. I’m not sure committing to a full education is worth it if the world is going to end or something.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Why not?” Audrey asked.

“Before now, you found something to fill the time before death; it could fill the time before everything dies just as well. And I think I’m trying to put off the final end, so maybe you’ll still have a full life. Maybe hold off on any plans about having kids.” Thomas said nonchalantly.

“That’s bleak.”

“I was aiming for encouragement.”

“Oh. I appreciate the attempt.”

“What’s the deal with immaculate conception, though, as one of the guys? Why couldn’t God just do it for everyone in the womb, like a, uhm, a vaccine for sin?” Manuel asked Jesus.

“You know, I’ve never met a psychologist I liked. And I met a few even before the stuff at the house. They’re all so pessimistic. They’ve all treated horrible things like something you can never get over. One time, I saw a dog find a steak bone in a bush. It took him a long time to get over that; he checked the bush every day for months. I never got over how funny that was. It still makes me laugh, and sometimes other...things I saw also make me a little sad whenever I think of dogs. It used to be worse, but I’m getting better. But the bad things will probably always pop up again sometimes. I don’t think we get over much, but we learn how to handle more. Maybe it’s the same for trauma sometimes. I don’t think it all needs to be healed from; maybe sometimes we should learn how to use the hurt. I think I would handle this worse if I had a regular life. Plenty of it has been far-fetched or difficult, so impossible isn’t exactly diving into the deep end.” Thomas rambled.

“Well, if that is what happened, it was necessary for the greater fulfillment of me. There was a promise to be fulfilled, special circumstances to be met. And if dad didn’t fulfill his promises, a lot of people would say he isn’t big ‘g’ God then. Although they may say that about developments with that one down there, all the people who had different ideas about the eschaton. It’ll be a real theological quagmire. They might be mad that we didn’t do global immaculation if we were going to change up the end anyway. Ah, well, can’t please everyone.” Jesus told Manuel in the background as Thomas talked.

Audrey thought for a moment and nodded, “Well, it’s like every job, there are plenty of people who aren’t very good at it. Which is a problem, given what the job is; that’s why I want to be a good one. I haven’t met many I like either. I’d like to help people sort out what’s useful, you know. I’m skeptical about whether getting over things is the same as getting better, too. It definitely makes people judgmental rather than understanding sometimes. They process their feelings so much that they forget what feeling raw about things is like and don’t understand what people who aren’t like them are going through inside anymore. Maybe that’s just using good tools wrong, but maybe there’s more to it. I don’t know.”

“Most people wish you said more, but what if it’s the opposite and you said too much the first time around? And what’s an eschaton?” Manuel asked as she was speaking.

"I've never made a mistake in my life. Or death. In that way. I'll admit I wasn't going to get world-famous as a craftsman. Eschaton is like the capital E End, the plan all coming together." Jesus replied.

"Why'd you decide to date Keith?" Thomas asked.

"He asked," Audrey laughed, "I mean, I wasn't sure about him at first. He can talk too much sometimes. But when we started talking about family. I. I had a little sister, and we didn't have a great home either. But it was just the two of us. I tried to explain that I had to go so I could help her get out, but then she didn't really have anybody to take care of her. So she did it herself. She turned out okay, but she never forgave me. We haven't talked in a few years. He was worried about that happening with you. We ended up talking about family a lot, and I decided to see where it'd go since we had things in common that can be hard to explain to people who don't. And then it turns out we like being quiet together too. I thought coming here as...moral support might have helped."

"Really? How much would it take to get you to marry him right now? Ten million? I'll find a way to get it together." Thomas joked. Audrey rolled her eyes.

"He's not a bad guy," she said

"No. I guess not."

John Brown interrupted the duo, "Perhaps you should have these conversations in more private chambers?"

"Hey, don't be such a sourpuss. I don't think I ever told you, Manuel, but this guy helped shape the new plan, him and others from all around the world. He's very humble about it, but don't let that fool you. There he was, down on Earth, shaking foundations and loosing his own terrible, swift sword-bit of a hatchet job in execution—pushing history along as much as such a wild man can. And he was always happy to explain why. It got us thinking upstairs, maybe too much mercy would keep things from improving. Maybe clearer corrections were in order. Not testing, trials." Jesus said, a hint of condescension beneath the breezy compliments.

"I had merely hoped to stay consistent with what I believed. Shame what I believed in wasn't as consistent as what I believed." John said with the tone of someone who had been asked if they had regrets.

“Hey, on the bright side, maybe it’s one of the things I don’t know, and this was going to happen all along. Nailed the consistency, pun intended, but wasn’t all merciful. Like this guy said, hell’s already raised questions about it.” Jesus said dismissively.

“I am scared of you,” Audrey said.

“That seems like a healthy response.”

Thomas’s other vision extended much farther than it had before. A sickly yellow sun around which many colors swirled was still, but Thomas felt intent. It would be here soon, coming down from its big house at the edge of town.

“One moment. You should come up to hear this, apologies.” Thomas told her.

He went up the steps three at a time.

“I think you guys should get out of here. Eddie’s coming, right now.”

The overlapping questions drowned each other out. Thomas let the strange, distant but loud voice speak, and it said, politely but firmly, “Quiet. Please.”

It was not a command, but it was the tone of a request to be turned down lightly.

Thomas followed up, “I wouldn’t ask if I thought you being here would help, but I’m not in danger like the rest of you are, am I?”

Mother had come downstairs. “What are you going to do?”

“Hopefully, just talk. I know your numbers. I’ll call when it’s over, but you should move quickly. You’re going to have to trust the both of us.”

That was how reality settled in. They didn’t have to worry over Thomas as they had. He wasn’t a child not wanting to worry them; he had grown not only a little older the past few days, but into something stranger, and from that strangeness, confidence. The words were like ones he said before, but in his changing, the meaning changed also. Annie Durango had seen it before, a proud and heartbreak moment, like when Sarah had first gotten her driver’s license and a job. Her mother had come down with a bad cough over the weekend, before her weekly grocery trip. Sarah had been happy for any reason to drive, and so offered, “I can do it.” Four little words, said without the faintest idea of how momentous they were. She could. She could go into the store herself. Carry it all by herself. Pay for it herself, if she had wanted to. And she could take herself

there and back quickly, rather than having to spend an hour and change trudging back and forth, completing the whole of the task without much effort. She had said the words “I can do it” plenty, but this time she really could, no trouble at all. Sarah didn’t understand why her mother had seemed so overwhelmed by the offer at the time, but she was hit with a milder shock of the same feeling when Thomas added, “There’s plenty to be concerned about. This I can handle.”

Dissent was stirring in the air, but Sarah quelled it, just one word this time. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Thomas asked.

She nodded. She grabbed her keys. She was the closest family he had. She had the most right to contradict or agree, and she agreed. The rest followed her lead and gave him well-wishes. He watched them depart from the front porch. He sat. He waited. Fifteen minutes later, a little convoy arrived at the foot of the hill. Five men followed behind a sixth, an unassuming man with a loose suit and red-tinted glasses. He didn’t care that his combover had gotten wispy, or his chevron mustache a little corny, as tastes changed. The man spread out as they approached, half-circling Thomas as Eddie stepped onto the approach. The snoop took notes frantically, from a distance.

“Where’s your family, Thomas?” Eddie asked calmly.

“Restaurant. I’m grounded.”

“Too bad. Where’s mine?”

Thomas rolled the question around his mind for a few seconds before bursting out into laughter.

“Sorry, Eddie. That’s the problem with holding on tight to something slippery, it’ll pop right out of your hand eventually.”

“And you don’t know anything about it?”

“I truly do not. How’d you manage to lose both of them?”

“Talia convinced me she wanted to have the family together for the holidays rather than be stuck at school, problems or no. What, she didn’t talk to you about it? If she did, you ought to tell me about it. I say this from a place of experience, women are trouble.”

“If that’s all they were, I’d be the belle of the ball rather than stuck slow dancing with you.”

“Uh-huh. So if I took a look around your house, I wouldn’t find any surprise guests?”

“Mi casa es su casa, but why don’t the guests enjoy the night air?”

Eddie sniffed and snapped his fingers. The men circled the house while Thomas led Eddie inside, who helped himself to a self-guided tour while Thomas sat on the armchair he supposed he took by right of conquest.

“You wouldn’t keep them here, though, would you?” he eventually asked.

“I might. Why not? It’d be hard to fight for your property if you risked breaking it.”

“Is that what you want? I kill you, I go to prison like in a movie? Something like that? Is that why you’re calling in anonymous tips, putting flyers about my business up? Was it you that threw a rock through my window, because that seemed beneath you?” Eddie asked.

“I was still a little fuzzy after getting out of the hospital. I couldn’t think of anything more creative. There’s a hole in your boat, too.”

“Why?”

“To make your life difficult.”

“Sure, but why do that?” Eddie asked again.

“To make your life difficult.”

“Revenge then?”

“The answer isn’t going to change if you ask the question enough times, Eddie.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“Fine. If you’re looking for an explanation, the first person I ever got arrested was some creep cousin of a friend in the first grade. He told me about it and made me promise I wouldn’t tell anyone else. It’s something I’ve run into a few times. Some people will say to speak up, and some people will tell you that you have to wait for the victim to be ready. There aren’t good

options. You drag someone through all that unwillingly, and it'll hurt them; you wait around, and other people could be hurt that didn't need to be. What if you have a dozen victims and none of them want to speak up? What if one does, and the rest leave them out to dry? It's a hard call. I choose to say something. I chose to do something and collected some evidence to back it up. I lost that friend. The cousin got away with it for a little longer anyway. I don't regret it. I don't think he was wrong to be mad; I don't think I was wrong to act. If that doesn't make sense, too bad. I promised Talia I wouldn't give up on her if you came knocking. I also promised I wouldn't get myself killed when you did. So here we are, I can't let you go, I can't take it too far. You want to take it to the next level anyway, fine. I tried."

"It's that simple, huh?"

"Let your yes be yes and your no be no."

"What if I asked you if you know where they're hiding?"

"No."

"But how can I be sure?"

"Burn the house down and break my legs, the truth won't change."

"And if I asked your family?"

"Same answer, but I'd have to take it personally."

John was standing in the kitchen door, watching closely. Thomas summoned up the preacher that he had once hoped he would become.

"You know, Eddie, there's an easy way to solve this."

"Is that so?"

"Give them up. Give it all up."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"I'm serious. As long as you keep doing what you do, I'll be there making problems. I'm not a big believer in the power of confession. Guilt doesn't want us to do the right thing; it wants to be soothed. If there's an easier way than the right way to feel better, a lot of people will take it."

People will confess to all kinds of things if the consequences aren't too bad, because it still feels good getting it off their chest. When the pain is greater than the relief, they're more careful with their words. But I do believe in contrition, and part of contrition is penance. I'm not going to help the medicine go down by implying that maybe things will all work out for the best if you told everyone what you've done and accept the consequences. It might kill you. But I would leave you alone. That'd be enough. I don't have the right or desire to take my own bite out of you, unless you don't leave me any options."

"Seems like a bad deal, kid."

"Is it? Do you feel like you're in charge of your life? Do you feel powerful?"

"I'm getting a sermon from a fucking twerp detective that won't leave me alone. I got Uncle Sam telling me how to run my business like I'm an appliance manufacturer. I got two men killed like something out of a horror movie. I got played by my own fucking daughter. I feel like I'm losing my goddamned mind."

"It might be," Jesus said in a singsong voice from the top of the stairs. Eddie readjusted his tie, feeling like he'd given too much away.

"It started before now, Eddie."

"Did it now?"

"You killed your wife, Eddie."

"I took back what was mine. It's not my fault if she couldn't handle it."

"And if someone sold Talia or Felix heroin, you'd say 'that's just business', right? A bad decision on her part."

"I'd say the dumbass should have checked who he was selling to first."

"Don't be stupid, Eddie. It's just us. I don't need the big man act. You haven't been in charge in a long time. You were never a good man, but you could have at least been a family man. Instead, somebody dangled some money in front of you, and you did one of the things she couldn't forgive. That's not ambition, Eddie, that's just greed. And it's going to run your life. It already has been. The right thing might be a worse time, but it'd be you making the decision. If a man's supposed to take charge, well..."

“I think it’s a bit late for all that, even if you were right.”

“I thought you might say that, but I thought I’d make the offer.”

“What a friend you are. I have a problem, though, if I could wax poetical for a moment. People will tell you it’s better to be feared than loved if you can’t be both. Others will tell you it’s best to be respected. The truth is, fear is a type of respect. I think that’s why you were never afraid of me.”

“I’d have to agree.”

“Nobody seems all that afraid of me right now, and I’m not ready to give up what I have just yet. That means I have to solve some kind of problem. My problems led me to your door, and you just missed my Christmas generosity. So, how about we make a deal? I won’t keep asking after my kids or do anything for your family if you agree that this is over. I don’t mean we leave each other alone, I mean I give you a time and a place, and a few days to take care of personal business, and we ring in the new year together.”

“Well, I tried. Let’s do it your way.” Thomas agreed.

Eddie left with his men. Thomas called his family back. He told them his plan. He made a long call and waited. It was a quiet few days. Audrey and The Twins went to see her parents. Lena’s own swung to take her to New York. Sarah, Thomas, and Annie tried to enjoy the quiet, as morbid as the reason was. Sarah had friends over, and Annie did too. Thomas stayed out of both their ways so they could have a little bit of normal. He was picked up from his home by two exceptionally disreputable deputies and taken to a clearing out in the woods where Eddie and a few men waited. Of course, he’d already seen where he’d be going and had made one last call before his departure.

“So what are we doing here? Quick draw?” Thomas asked.

“No. I just take my time.” Eddie said.

“I might have something to say about that,” a voice said from the woods.

A man who could have been Eddie’s cousin walked into view with Creech, Hector, and a fair few men in tactical gear appeared. He was clean-shaven and had cared enough to let the top of his hair go. Thomas hadn’t called them, but he’d seen the tendrils of their peeper and had a feeling they might arrive. He’d deal with that one after the main event.

The man looked over the drama and sighed, “Eddie. I get it, the kid’s a prick, and you’re having a hard time, but this is not a thing a reliable partner does. You two have a public conflict, then he disappears. It’s a headache. You try to besmirch a kid, and there could be some blowback; you do nothing, and that looks suspicious. The worse you look to the public, the harder we have to work. And you’ve got Deputy Tweedledee and Tweedledumbshit involved, they aren’t reliable! You bribed them after all. We can find a couple of missing kids. We can deal with this one. All you had to do was sit tight, now it’s a pain in my ass.”

“I know how to handle my business,” Eddie said.

“Again, I would point out that this is the end of a feud with a twelve-year-old. There has been some mishandling,” the man said.

“Vacation’s never what you hope for, eh, Thomas,” Hector said. Thomas shrugged.

“So are you here to stop me?” Eddie challenged.

“We’re here to make sure you don’t manage to turn a shitshow into a circus and have a long talk about how you operate.”

It was then that much quieter footsteps announced the arrival of the final members of the party. Men in shambolic imitations of tactical gear crashed into the clearing, a few then scrambling back behind trees. One needlessly swung himself over a log. Their leader tripped, somehow knocking the magazine from his rifle, which he scrambled to retrieve as he also tried to show his badge.

“I am placing you all under arrest for treason as a duly appointed officer of the peace and citizen of the United States of America,” Constable Bowers, paranoid extraordinaire, announced.

“Son of a bitch.” Hector said.

“Who invited him?” his boss asked.

“I did,” Thomas replied.

“How’d you manage that?” the boss asked.

“I borrowed my brother’s girlfriend’s cell phone. I thought it might not be monitored.”

“Well, Eddie, suddenly I can’t blame you,” the boss said, only half joking. Less than half.

“You oughta simmer down, little man,” Creech said to the constable, hand on his gun, backup with guns at the ready. The deputy constables/militia friends of Constable Bower looked either ignorantly giddy or regretful for coming along, feeling overconfident or suddenly foolish for thinking that noose patches were all that intimidating. They had tried to join larger networks, but failed to pass the sniff test even in meetings that were a half-and-half mix of informants elsewhere. The sheriff’s deputies were considering what the inside of a cell looked like when you had to stay in it.

“I won’t simmer,” Bower had to look to insert the magazine properly again, the shake in his hands screwing with firing range muscle memory, “simmer down. That boy told me everything about how Eddie was working with Satanists to do some evil, fucked up ritual.”

“You weaselly little shit,” Eddie said.

“I like to think of it as guile,” Thomas said.

“Young man, I’d like to ask what it is you think this accomplishes other than making a big mess,” Hector asked.

“Did you actually ever read the War for Terror Manifesto, Hector?” Thomas inquired.

“I did.”

“She said something that stuck with me. She said that even if what they did got nothing else they wanted, even if it worked against their goals in the end, there was one thing that made it all worth it. If they succeeded, they wouldn’t have to worry about what Dick Cheney thought about it. ‘When dreams don’t move people, pettiness can.’”

“Smart lady,” Eddie said. He shot Thomas in the chest. In the following exchange, two of Eddie’s bewildered men were killed. A militiaman was injured by the Bureau goons, and Creech put one clean through Bower’s head. The group panicked and sprayed; everyone went for cover. The two sheriff’s deputies had their guns out, but were hoping to sit tight. Thomas stumbled through the crossfire, collapsing against a tree next to the boss.

“Well, you’ve really gone and fucked it, haven’t you?” the boss said to everyone who wasn’t with him. He looked at the hole in Thomas’ chest. To his surprise, a finger was poking out.

“Oh no,” he said.

The finger slid back in. An eye was looking at him.

“Oh fuck.” he said. Thomas's upper body split open, the golden creature grabbing the man who had spent his last days on Earth negotiating with the unhappy company of Edward Rogers by the head, holding him in place as it tore huge pieces off him. Thomas' human head vomited excess human porridge as the powers tore faster and faster. Everyone directed fire at the sight. Less hit the target than one might expect. It was still too many. Tom laughed. The militiamen were not enjoying their ostensible vindication.

“Why did you think more holes would help the situation? Give a man a gun, and his imagination suffers,” both heads said.

Arms and wings sprouted from every angle on Thomas, the lunatic ball of limbs, which spun and twisted through the SBCDT team, plucking favorite organs out. As it passed, it took an arm and a leg off Creech to add some bulk. Hector made the smart decision to give up on a martial solution and focused on getting out of the way. The rest of Thomas was shaken off as it ate the morsels, his body and clothes just camouflage on yet more wings that disappeared with a flap, gold like the rest.

Everyone else ran. Once Tom was done with that course, he charged, and glided, and hopped between tree trunks until only the screams faded and only Hector and Eddie were left to wait for their fate.

“You should have taken my offer, Edward. It was, well, not man to man, but human to human. And now all that inhumanity has led to me. Bad break, and you may be too rotten even for me to enjoy.”

The thing descended gracefully from above. Hovering in the air, wings flapping gently, it chided him, “I promised not to get myself killed, Eddie.”

The tongue began to unfurl. Eddie opted to not see what would happen and shot himself. The tongue retracted.

“Never had them do the work for me,” Tom said.

Hector was trying to see if a slow crawl might get him away. Then he heard footsteps approaching. He turned his head. Odd, it walked on the balls of its feet.

“Well, hey now, Thomas. I know when to cut my losses. You win. So let me ask you a question: do you want the world to know about you?”

“Not quite yet, I don’t want to be the one to tip my hand. So you don’t waste your breath, it’s one thing to offer redemption to a person like Eddie, repugnant as he was, I demanded that I do. But a lawman? Titles demand standards. Much given, much expected, that sort of thing. You are more...vulnerable to me. I still have some issues with it, but I have to eat sometime.”

“Recent events have made me reconsider my career. Maybe I’ll go grow fruit trees somewhere a little more friendly. But first, you use help covering this up, right? We just have to work out an explanation, do some work on the bodies so they’re a little more... typically destroyed looking. I’ll cover the paperwork and go home to my kids. Eddie over there knew some nasty Nazi types. No big sin if they get the blame, right?”

“Propaganda of the deed to consider, some will find it inspiring,” Tom said, leaning against a tree, towering over the agent even as he stretched up to his full height, “I had a reason for my invitations. Bower was the sort of animal easily led by the nose by a clever one like Eddie. Negotiations with your boy’s club broke down; he pulled a desperate ripcord with stories of demons and devils. Swine and sheep autoslaughtering themselves. With a few duplicitous, dirty cops of a different khaki pant color in the mix to really show the depth of corruption and incompetence. And, of course, you predicted this was a terrible decision that would end in tragedy, but your superiors are dead set on making poor decisions.”

“I can work with that.”

“We have an accord, then. A word of advice, my little songbird, don’t try to play the parent card too often. It didn’t stop you from winding up at this merry party, after all.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Hector said. The thing laughed at that for some reason.

Tom went to work on the bodies. Fireworks filled the night in the distance.

It was morning when Thomas arrived on his porch. Sarah was sitting on the chair, bundled up in about a dozen blankets, waiting for him.

“How’d it go?”

“Bloodbath. Went my way.”

“Hmm. I kept a secret from you.”

“Yeah?”

“Your other family made one mistake. They sent you a letter. I found it in the mail. No return address.”

She handed him an envelope. He opened it. She studied his face as he read. He took a match from the box and lit it on fire.

“What’d it say?” she asked, already having an idea.

“Oh, you know. Thanks for the good times. Don’t try to find her. Let it go with her father and move on.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Same as every other day. Terrible. Happy New Year.”

A ghost of Tom sat down in front of the porch, still having to bend his back and neck so one eye could peer under the porch roof. The light snow fell through him. Only two arms and two wings this time, an angel painted by a mad hedonist.

“You shouldn’t feel too remorseful. An abattoir is always a grim place, but the slaughter was quick. I have seen many could-have-beens, and the same can’t be said of those men in any world they helped consolidate. And you don’t have to ask who I am to judge, unparalleled in qualification as I am.” Tom spoke with a different voice now, two voices, a man and a woman lost in thought, speaking in harmony.

“I don’t think you are,” Thomas said out loud.

“Who are you talking to?” Sarah asked.

“Myself.”

“Oh, that asshole,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Of course I am. I am a potentiary among all awful, in the classical sense, forces of the world. A world I have lived in as a boy. That’s where my opinion differs from God’s, isn’t it? It’s not people who make and rule the world who are best fit to judge its qualities; the best judges are those who have to live in it. And I would have Him ask me for forgiveness for making such a

world, one where so many terrors are possible, before I asked Him to forgive me for what terrors I've done. Free will sounds nice, but what a strange man that'd come up with a thing like rape, make it able to happen. There's plenty the species can't do. The real question of evil is not why does it exist, but why is it so lovingly detailed and fully featured?"

"But now I'm not human, so how can I judge anymore?"

"I don't have to, but it is in my nature. As the poet said: I am vast. I contain multitudes. If I contradict myself, well, contradiction is in the nature of morality, isn't it? What does consistency mean? Majestic equality, inconsiderate of circumstance, all circumstances weighed, some happy medium in between? It's inescapable; the best you can do is wrestle with it honestly rather than turn your face and pretend it isn't there. Morality isn't relative; it's a little fluid, is all, shaped by the vessel it's put in. It's the purpose of the vessel that makes it useful. It's decorative for some, but I drink deeply. Its bitter, clear waters make me strong. The iniquitous drown others in it, and drown themselves too, sometimes, on purpose or by accident."

"But why should I let you keep doing it?"

"Oh, this isn't a small thing like crime. If I don't do it, if I do not pass judgments now and again, something else will. Something that must, even more strongly than I, without discretion. Something of a more violent nature. Besides, I have learned some moderation. I could show myself all the people of the world, all the time, in all the colors of the rainbow and far, far beyond. I could see the worst sins of the best people and all the rest, too, all the time. But it would drive me mad, so I will show discretion. That would make me a god more than a power, to judge all things all the time, and the only thing smaller than humanity is its gods. I am too big a man for that. The prisoner can live in his cell, the reformed (in public), and the remorseful can be offered mercy. But the unrepentant in halls of power, or hiding amongst the polity behind polite masks, who aren't willing to change? If they will not be burdened by the judgment of man, here I am, there I will be. And their transgressions will be laid out plainly. It might cause great ruin, airing all those skeletons hung up in the closets of the common folk and in the mansions of leaders. The species comes up with such elaborate stories to justify looking anywhere but at home for ills and evils. But they will be humbled. I shouldn't worry if it will destroy this world, though. I want nothing from this world, or much from the people in it. Why would I? How could anyone? Few do, deep down. It's not a virtue to save such a world exactly as it is. The question is, what's the best way to end it? As I said to stubborn old Eddie, dear Sarah, and poor mother, there isn't one way to go about things, and we won't know what's the right way—if there is a right way—until the striving is at its end, and this end may be a place we never arrive at. A place that may not exist. I'll stumble into the dark, for auld lang syne and the future."

"What would I see if I looked at myself like that?"

“Me, all of me, and nothing more, of course. I am not a shadow, I am not a mere thought dreaming a world onto the canvas of a cosmos that could not care for my passing, or even want to. I am real, like everyone else. Form and shadow. We are all both. I am only moreso, a terrible and miraculous thing, just as it always is.”

“So we’ll just have to see what happens, as usual,” Thomas said before turning to Sarah, whom he felt he was neglecting in favor of internal dialogue, watching him as he listened to the air and having the decency not to mawkishly pity him for doing so, “What was the hardest part of losing Manuel?”

“You remember how I was mad at you? I was mad at him, too. I’d see something I wanted to talk about with him, and then I remembered I couldn’t. Even though he was dead, I wanted to cry with him about it. And then I’d realize just how gone he was. I was angry at him for not being there, and I hated myself for feeling like that rather than thinking about the good times. It didn’t last long, but I hated him for a little while. Even if we weren’t going to be together much longer, he was still my friend. He was around so much that he was part of what I thought about when I thought about myself. I was friends with Manuel, and I couldn’t be that anymore.”

“Did it get better?”

“It did. I had to get used to him not being there. I don’t feel exactly like I did before. I’m not still friends, but I’ll always have been, if that makes sense. Unless I get Alzheimer’s or something, I guess.”

“You don’t want to know about him now, do you?”

“No, Thomas, he’s still gone to me. And it’s easier that way. I can move on, and I hope he’d want me to. But don’t tell me.”

“Let you believe what you want?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a good person, Sarah.”

“So are you, and you’re a monster. I think I might want room to adjust to that. If you really need something, I’m here. And you can need me, but some space would be nice, for a little while.”

“New Year, new us, huh?” Thomas asked.

“Yep. Unhappy New Year, bud. Let’s hope the rest of it’s better.”

“I’ll toast to that.”