

## Madman Butterfly: a Life in Holidays

### Out of the Mouth of Babes

*I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think vainly, flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.*

-It's in the quote

*How did the man put it? "Second verse, same as the first!"*

-Ghost of the above

Thomas knew he was in a dream. He knew because he was moving without lifting his legs. Normally this would wake him up, but he could tell from the dull plausibility of it all that this was a dream he needed to pay attention to because it might come true. He was third wheeling with some nice couple who thought he needed to get out more on their big seasonal shopping trip, fancy lunch in the middle. Except they didn't want to be out either. He could tell from the way they watched the entrances and exits of everywhere they went, how they both kept looking out any window they crossed. They were paying attention like he did. They were buying a gift for the woman's nephew when some road ruining troop carrier pulled up. Unlike everyone else Thomas could hear all the other ones stopping up and down the long street, doors opening, boots stomping into buildings. The couple pulled close to each other. Thomas picked a remarkably small teddy bear off a shelf. The man was trying to comfort the woman. The woman pushed his hand off her shoulder. She told him she was glad it finally happened, that they didn't have to wait and see anymore. There was a sorrowful giddiness in her voice. Anxious energy strained by a choking sob unsuccessfully trying to escape, but getting close. Men in uniforms told everyone to stay where they were and get ready to show identification. The couple did so. Thomas played with the limbs of the bear. A man with a regulation mustache and a clipboard approached and asked for his card. Thomas told him he had left it at home. The man started writing a day pass on a pink slip of paper that'd let him go unhassled, but insisted that Thomas needed to be verified as soon as possible. Thomas knew this was not a courtesy that would be extended to anyone the man didn't like the look of, but Thomas looked the right sort. And mostly harmless other than the scars on his face and knuckles that communicated a higher than usual amount of experience with being harmful in the past. It was all so typically authoritarian, and Thomas wondered what the hook of this particular dream was. Then a voice began to speak over the store's speakers. It was an unremarkable voice. Flat, controlled, saying something along the lines of this not being an emergency but the new way of things.

Thomas knew the man instantly. A man who hadn't been in the marines for a long time, but had kept the flattop haircut. Clean shaven, taking a little something extra to ward off the natural flabbiness of his advanced age so his inferiors wouldn't think he was going soft. He had

marginally tasted action in Grenada and led men in Haiti twice. That all burned him up inside. Some people might be grateful they were part of another country's Thanksgiving so soon after their own Thanksgiving, but not him. He had found the idea of "upholding democracy" in such minor states farcical. He wasn't cynical of the narrative. He simply didn't understand what the point of pretending they had sovereignty was. They could have saturated Grenada with more troops than there were citizens. What was the point of pretending that it was a country that could stand on its own? They could have cleared it out except the bare minimum to keep the agriculture and tourist operations running without breaking a sweat. Other than the hiccups in communications that had been exposed during his particular intervention. They could have turned that little Mickey Mouse nation into one big Mickey Mouse park in a year if the private sector was on the ball about it. And Haiti? Put a man back in power, pull him completely out in a decade's time. Might as well stop pretending and stick around to beat the whole sad mess into shape. He was missing the War on Terror to play tiddlywinks the second time round. There was a challenge, a frontier to be tamed. A war between worlds.

Then that wild woman and her followers had canoed W and the veep, and burned down part of New York doing it. Suddenly everyone was looking for yet more robust solutions to the domestic part of "enemies foreign and domestic." He was first through the door to be part of the newest military-law enforcement bridge. Maybe he wouldn't get the fight he was looking for, a chance to prove just how great and terrible a great nation could be, but the next best thing was a chance to lock up the parasites who didn't value freedom. It wasn't some contradiction to him. He had grown up living roughly, and he knew freedom wasn't some peacenik bullshit about being allowed to do what you wanted; freedom was being able to take and everyone else knowing it. It is how he had made his own little world orderly, and now it would be the order of the world. No more cities, states, and federal governments dancing around each other. Order and orders superior to the tangle of Law. And then it would extend beyond the old borders into the world beyond. Not a single order, but spheres of worthy enemies who had control rather than needing to fight with proxies and negotiate with those pretend countries of the world. It's a dream he would believe in even as the nation ate itself alive, always looking out over the carnage with a knowing smile, thinking whoever was left wouldn't know anything but taking, shocked and broken when something he failed to anticipate rolled over the wreckage and washed away his freedom with a ruthless, perfect, awful justice.

He was a man already judged, and it was up to Thomas to find a way to fulfill the sentence before he made things worse. Even though it was a dream, Thomas felt a fierce anger boiling up inside him. A contempt for this unnamed, babbling idiot.

"You want to see a bad man go away?" He asked the teddy bear, nodding its head with his pointer finger. He pushed the clipboard wielding soldier against the shelves and bit into his skull. Then he woke up, his teeth clacking hard against each other.

“Owie.” the twelve-year old said as he rubbed his jaw.

“You know, everyone having their own bed is a recent development. In my time, I got punched by active sleepers like you a few times. You gotta do something about that before you hit the dating scene, know what I’m saying?” a non-descript Middle Eastern man wearing a robe said from the foot of Thomas’ bed.

“Jeez!” Thomas exclaimed as he pulled up sheets over his already clothed shoulders.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out..” Jesus Christ said as he got off the bed to look outside. He went to the bedroom window, standing next to another bearded man with a less cultivated beard and more modern, but still antique, suit. “What are we looking at?”

“Nothing in particular. All of it.” the man murmured, there was a distance to his gaze, a melancholic whimsy.

Thomas rolled over in bed and let out an annoyed moan, not bothering to correct Christ that he hadn’t actually said “Jesus.” His older sister flung the door open.

“Are you talking to someone?” she asked.

“Myself. Hopefully.”

“Oh. Um. Bad dreams?” she asked, confused but not wanting to press too hard.

“Sure.”

“Oh, man. That sucks. You know what sucks more?”

Thomas pulled a pillow over his head to block out the afternoon light. “I don’t, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.” he said with muffled dread.

“The Twins are here and Mom wants you to run interference with Grandpa.” she said with a smile that was both sympathetic and betraying her joy at not being saddled with the responsibility. The Twins were their older siblings, a brother and sister who had a good five years to build a repartee of their own before Sarah had arrived, and never bothered to bring either of the younger siblings into it. Sarah and Thomas had never had much in common, but their bafflement at the older two had been a reliable source of bonding. They were nice and all, too nice, really, but no one had figured out how their parents had produced them. They were like

characters who had been transported from a saccharine musical to the real world, complete with the tendency to break out into song and dance. This annoyed Thomas, but it was worse with Grandfather, who was such a jerk about it Thomas felt a general humanist impulse to stand up for them against his bitter harassments. They took that general defense as a specific defense of their habits and leaned into them, turning family events into a small, occasionally tap dancing hell.

“I thought I was supposed to be convalescing?” Thomas asked.

“Doctor says you’re also not supposed to hole up in your room until you turn into an anti-social cave troll, so...”

“I appreciate your support.” Thomas said flatly as he tossed a pillow through Jesus, who had started humming loudly now that the attention had strayed from him for more than a moment.

“Sorry about not knocking. I’m not used to you having your own space yet, I guess.” Sarah said. She opened her mouth to say something else, but the words died before they could escape the mind into shared reality. She slumped and hung her head, weighed down by something she couldn’t express. They had both hated sharing a room, and visiting friends thought it odd that the sharing had continued after both of them had reached puberty, especially after The Twins (everyone accepted they were some strange, inseparable gestalt duo, not like twins on the same wavelength, but rather a “possibly some sort of twinned alien species” way) going off to college had left space for them to have their own rooms. Sarah and Thomas hadn’t thought much of it, they were family after all, until Thomas had escaped from that stupid house. At first his parents had been worried for him, but as Sheriff told them more details of what they had found in the house and its unapproved, extensive catacomb expansion they became worried about him. Thomas didn’t feel like telling anyone exactly what had happened. It would just raise more questions without sane sounding questions. But speculation abounded. While Thomas could technically be considered a victim of that sordid affair, the speculation had suddenly forced his parents to think of him as a being capable of sexuality. They tore down the home office space, moved Thomas into the room, becoming suddenly particular about little things like who could handle whose laundry and who could close or leave bedroom doors open at night. Thomas enjoyed the space, but the shift as a whole had felt accusatory. He had tried to broach the subject, but Sarah brushed it off as parental weirdness not worth thinking about since she’d be off to college soon anyway and they’d probably unclench.

Thomas tried to shake off the awkward silence with a bit of uncharacteristic crudeness. “You really should though. I’ve been, you know, uh, really, uh, going to town with all this privacy.”

Sarah chortled with amused disgust. It might have simply been disgust if not for the fact she knew Thomas a little better than their parents and could see how uncomfortable he was simply alluding to masturbation out loud to another person.

“Well, if you wanted me to never come in here again, mission accomplished. I’m going to be in the basement if you need me. Don’t need me. Byeee.” She said, closing the door as she slunk away to privacy with a speed that only comes with practice at maneuvering around prying eyes in a cramped space. It was a skill they had both picked up.

“You should cherish the time you have left.” John Brown said as he finally turned his head from the window to stare placidly at Thomas while managing to glower at the mumble-singing savior with nothing but the side of one eye.

“I didn’t think of you as sentimental.” Thomas said.

“I had a family, and I lost plenty of family. I know what it's like to wish you had a little more time.”

”She’s going to school, not dying.”

“No. But you have embarked on a peculiar path. A man’s footsteps can be followed, I’m not sure about a monster’s.”

Thomas rolled out of bed and onto the ground with a dull thud. He exhaled into the carpet.

“I appreciate both of your support.” He said with a strained neutrality.

“Don’t listen to Gloomy Gus. I did, and it’s not going well for any of us.” Jesus said. John grunted noncommittally.

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and found himself standing perfectly upright when he opened them. Little oddities like that had been stacking up since that night. Ones that made him question how imaginary his new “friends” were. Given the Lord’s behavior, he really hoped he was going insane. Or was stuck in some dying dream. At least he wouldn’t have to go to school when the weekend was over. Unless he dreamed of himself going. That’d be the worst of both worlds.

He shook off the tangent and descended the narrow stairs to the perpetually one degree from boiling over pot that was the Durango family holidays.

“What was that thump?” His mother asked, head popping out from behind a kitchen doorway.

“I tripped.” He said, staring her in the eyes. She said “oh” and went back to cooking. She had never figured out Thomas was a good liar because she never realized he had learned his own tells years ago. They occasionally manifested when he felt guilty about something, but honesty wouldn’t spare him from sniping and screaming, so he had simply stopped feeling regret over concealing from her the sources of minor irritations. If anything, it was for her health. That was the truth of it, but he had never bothered to justify it himself that way. He simply didn’t have a reason to interact with her beyond polite necessity. He had become the designated polite child not because he cared, but because he didn’t. He didn’t have conversations exactly, but instead cycled through “Please, thank you, fill in whatever the parents wanted to hear to move a conversation closer to its end.” He told this to his siblings when they had inquired about how he managed to avoid getting in trouble at home, despite all the trouble he caused outside of those four walls, during a grousing session about being kept up by the parents fighting into the early morning once again. They had agreed it was smart, and also that he sounded like a psychopath. Then one of The Twins had started singing a little diddy about being kept up and Thomas decided to start vacuuming the stairs. The house had remarkably clean carpets.

He walked past the small enclosed kitchen and into the living room. Keith was showing Grandfather pictures he had taken of his girlfriend on his fancy new iPhone. Grandfather had a sneer that indicated he was either going to express a rude doubt over the authenticity or call the woman a hussy, coin toss really, and Thomas plucked the McCain ‘08 hat off his head. The old man had been wearing it as some kind of challenge to Sarah yesterday, and now with The Twins, over her presumed support of the failed Kerry/Napolitano ticket—thank you market crash—and had been upset that it failed to get a rise out of her. He had hoped Thomas would be game for some riffing on the incumbents, but Thomas—attention split by one third of the Trinity explaining how the games of electoral politics distracted from his authority—had an error in his nonsense processing and loudly declared “I don’t believe in boats.” When asked what that meant he didn’t care enough to explain it away and simply said “I don’t.” Grandfather had kept his distance since then. Sarah had thought it a more intentional denial of conversation and tried unsuccessfully to not crack up at the dinner table. Their parents chastised her for laughing at his recent difficulties. He had flipped the bird to the back of their heads while they were distracted, an unprecedented act that put a suitable look of startlement on her face to seem sufficiently chastened by their anger. Grandfather missed it, busy poking at the food to look for something to complain about. When he opened his mouth to register distaste for the mashed potatoes, Thomas simply grabbed

it off his plate with his hand and started eating it, getting it all over the arm of one of the spiffy suit jackets he always wore and ending all dinner table conversation for the evening.

Grandfather made some exclamation preceding a tirade, but Thomas tossed the hat back on the old man's lap and calmly said "bad manners to wear a hat indoors." He conspicuously ran a finger over the bullet-shaved bald streak in his hair and stared down at the man who had almost made it to 80 with no scars worth mentioning. Grandfather nodded his head and said "that's right", justifying his being cowed by a child dressed like a college professor trying to be hip by telling himself that it was a rule he'd passed down, and the boy was a bit off after the incident, so there was no reason to be upset over a few odd behaviors. The old man grumbled something under his breath and went to bother Thomas' mother.

John Brown let out a snort like a bull ready to charge from the hallway "What a sour man."

"That's what happens when a man forgets to make lemonade out of life's lemons," Jesus said as he flopped down in the vacated seat, "right, John. Do you know anything about John?"

"You want to see my girlfriend?" Keith asked his little brother.

"No."

"Nobody in this house has any interest in romance I see," Keith said with a bothered hitch in his voice that turned into a dismissive chuckle, "I'm a big hit with the ladies, you know. I really am."

Jesus craned his neck to look at the phone and whistled, "Now that's the type of gal people would say I hung around, know what I'm saying?"

"I heard." Thomas told Keith.

"Well, you didn't just hear it, it's true."

"I heard when you had them over a few times." Thomas said, pulling out of storage a glare he'd been sitting on in case the sleep interruptions ever came up.

"Ah, well. Uh-hmm. That was..that was horse play. I'd never...in the house? With other people? Me, never. What?"

"You did. You both did. Separately, thank goodness."

He shrugged. "Okay. I did, but I thought you were out on one of your night walks."

Kathleen emerged from the basement, no doubt dislodged by her sister. "Hey, Tommy gun!" She exclaimed, shooting double finger guns at him.

"Please don't call me that."

"Okay, Tom."

"Not that either."

"Moody today, huh?"

Keith interjected, "I was just telling him about my new lady."

"Trying to. And failing." Thomas corrected.

"Oh my God, he will not shut up about it." She said, smiling and rolling her eyes.

"Don't get me involved, there's nothing I can do about it." Jesus said from his chair. Thomas suppressed the urge to ask him out loud if he was going to do that every time.

"I met a pretty interesting guy, too." Kathleen continued. Thomas let out a groan.

"He's great. We went rock climbing together. Talk about a workout!" Keith said.

"You know, Tom, I was reminded of something. I know you said you weren't interested in musicals, but I think I found one you'll really enjoy. It's got a little more edge than what Mom and Dad let us listen to. It's called Avenue Q."

"Absolutely not." Thomas said. Musical recommendations by The Twins always turned into musical performances. Keith nodded his head to Kathleen. The words "Everybody's a little" managed to make it out before Thomas speed was in the kitchen "Ihavetogohelpmotherwithsomething" hanging back to cut them off. In his rush to escape he had forgotten Grandfather had also gone there, and was poking at the food for a taste while Mother tried to politely shoo him away with an attempt at a pleasant expression that failed to conceal the rising, homicidal anger. Thankfully for the peace of the home, Grandfather was completely oblivious and thought they were having great fun. John slipped in through the hallway door and sneered at the old fool. Mother, having a more acceptable target for current and multi-decade



frustrations that came bubbling to the surface during the holidays—and semi-regularly outside of it—present itself, snapped at Thomas.

”What do you want?”

”I thought I’d see if you needed any help.”

”I could use less people.”

Thomas nodded and went to the fridge. He took out a bottle of beer. He opened it on the kitchen counter not with the slap technique Keith taught him in a fruitless attempt to make him seem more “cool”, but with a single violent motion that hooked and removed the cap, a little foam flying out of the opening. He didn’t bother looking away from Grandfather as he did it. He held the beer out the man, then pulled it away.

“It’s very pleasant on the front porch right now.” Thomas said with a grin that was a little too toothy. He turned to his Mother and told her “I’ll be helping clean up later anyway, don’t worry about it” as a preemptive strike against her next snapping. There was a lack of warmth in the smile that she had seen before, experience making her bite her tongue despite the conscious desire to tell him off. An instinctual threat assessment made her realize for the first time that he’d already outgrown her, and whatever had happened at the house proved he knew how to throw what weight he had around better than anyone else in the house. Except maybe Sarah, but she was merely persistent and headstrong. Thomas, on the other hand, well, he had the capacity for murder, and what exactly made him willing to do it was unknown. She had grown wary of his maturation since he’d brushed off a therapist’s prodding with a nonchalant “I’m alive, they’re dead. Why should I feel bad, I won?” It didn’t sound like a statement of childish ignorance, but the authentic statement of someone who had seen enough of the world to judge it a cold, dark place. He was the right age to see things that way from a place of moodiness. But he spoke then from a place of undeniable experience. To his mother’s ears he had spoken like a man, one she wanted to stay away from. She had looked at him with scorn and disgust even before then, sometimes for reasons she couldn’t explain,--sometimes for reasons she didn’t want to admit—but for the first time she was afraid of him.

As Thomas steered the old man out of the door, she remembered getting angry at him for being so particular and fussy when he was younger. He couldn’t stand to have anything sticky or grimy on his hands for more than a moment, would stand on the sidelines with the girls at school while boys played and got dirty. One time he had been helping her clean, but stopped every few minutes to wash his hands and she had mocked him. Occasionally she had called his manhood into question when his peers were still worried about cooties. She had thought he never listened. Now she worried he had been a good student. She nearly dropped the turkey as she recalled how

he had been found and nausea threatened to overwhelm her. He hadn't been found, was the thing that drove a spike of guilt through her heart. He had walked into an all night cafe, tattered and covered in things that belonged deep inside people. The staff told her Thomas had been apologetic and tried to make as little mess as possible as he told them to call the police. He had put a hand on the counter to keep himself upright without thinking. When he pulled it off he had begun to apologize again. Then he stopped and chuckled at the nearly perfect print. He stuck a pointer finger in his mouth, then pulled it out with a pop. He swallowed the gore without a thought and made a little smiley face in the blood, then made it a little stick body with the resoiled finger.

"It's like that movie. With, uh, Tom Hanks. Hi, Wilson." He said. They had all described it differently, but none of them liked the laugh that came out of him. He returned to his senses and finished his apology. He had tried to wipe it off and made more of a mess before they insisted he lay down on the ground, his feet propped up on the footrest of a high stool. The turkey was saved by a memory that bolstered her and would torture her for years to come. She recalled suddenly that he had been more typically boyish once. She thought it might have been good to moderate these tendencies so that she he wouldn't turn out as a careless young man. She taught him how to clean hands thoroughly and made sure to stress how important it was to not leave messes for other people when we can. He'd shown how thoroughly he could clean his hands with an innocent pride for a few days until the novelty was lost and it became a habit. The memory was clear, so...normal. The feeling of uncomplicated affection was alien now, and she tried to cling to its ghost. But then she had, at some point, also decided the world was cold and dark, that he needed to be ready to face it and put away his soft ways. Her apparent success would be her greatest regret. She slowly became a kind woman again after that moment of fright, but Thomas wouldn't be around to see it.

Thomas sat Grandfather down on a chair outside to look out at the barren treetops in the distance. The house sat by itself on a small hill. They used to live in town until The Twins had been busted with pot and Thomas' parents decided that they needed a little distance from the fast-paced, worldly ways of a city of fifty thousand people. Sarah had never forgiven any of them. Thomas thought of them as having a sort of diminished capacity, perhaps the atmosphere was a little too thin compared to their homeworld. That's what he told Sarah to try and cheer her up. She punched him in the diaphragm so hard it knocked the wind out of him and told him to stop trying to make her feel better, one of the few familial sins she had ever profusely and specifically apologized for. It was a moment that was formative for her, freed from the fear that she could be as guiltlessly, causally violent as her father, resolving that—unlike him—she would confront the sources of her anger directly. Being a teenager with a chip on her shoulder, this manifested as her kicking Keith in the shin and calling Kathleen a dumbshit asshole when they were slacking off during the move, but it was generational progress nevertheless. The point had been somewhat moot given Thomas had gotten money to hire help after solving the case of the

disappearing dogs. Some budding psychopath from a few towns over had been killing them, it turned out. Sold videos to fellow sickos. But dereliction of duty was a recurring problem of theirs anyway, so it felt justifiable, and the lesson learned had helped Sarah get past frustration to a place of understanding when Thomas vehemently opposed getting a family dog soon after. The hell house may have left him worryingly unaffected, but he still went a little pale whenever he saw someone disciplining a pet.

John had asked Thomas why that was a few nights ago. Thomas told him that, being in his head, he should know the answer. They sat in silence in the empty living room together for some time before Thomas said “People can understand what’s happening, animals don’t.” To his surprise, John found this a reasonable discomfort. Maybe he heard John was an animal lover before conjuring him up or something. Jesus sat up from the couch to unhelpfully add that he had always hated being associated with such a dull animal as the dove. The conversation turned to monologue.

Thomas had perfunctorily dusted off a seat for Grandfather. The old man sat down. Thomas took a drink from the beer, washed his mouth with it, and spat it on the porch before handing it over. Grandfather stared at him with bemusement as he took his first sip. Jesus and John both chuckled from behind a window, although John then straightened up and reminded him it was impolite to spit on premises and in the presence of women, voice muffled by the glass. Jesus said something and they began to quarrel. Thomas sighed and went inside, tuning them out and warding off the The Twins attempts to get a board game going. He went down into the basement to get away from noise and unpleasant company.

“I told you not to need me.” Sarah said without opening her eyes to check. She didn’t need to. Thomas’ footsteps were identifiable by the lack of sound. It would be totally quiet, and then there was a presence. Startled the bejesus out of most people. She had been pretending to be asleep in a “fake it till you make it” way, hoping the day might mostly pass her by.

“I don’t need you. I need the basement.”

She opened her eyes and managed to keep some very unkind words to herself, but Thomas could see a glint of anger in the drowsy once over she gave him. He retreated to the far corner of the room. Her boyfriend, Manuel, was blowing skunky smoke through a tube packed with dryer sheets and out a cracked open window. Sarah liked a little chill.

“What’s up, little dude?” He asked.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

“Right on, right on. Don’t like crowds?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Never bothered me, but I get it. Maybe give her some space? Or, you know, talk to her about the thing.”

Thomas mumbled “I haven’t found the right time.”

“What was that?”

”Nothing.” They both said. She grunted and turned on her side.

Manuel leaned close to him and whispered, “It’s always been my philosophy that it’s never a bad time to do a good thing.”

Thomas looked back at his sister and shrugged again.

“There’s good hurt, little dude, trust me. I always hated getting my shoulder, what do they call it? Relocated? But if I didn’t I wouldn’t get to use it much. Know what I’m saying?”

Thomas nodded. He walked over to his sister, but was interrupted by a pair of four legs clomping down the stairs.

“No. No. Get back out, the basement is for people who live here. You know the rules.” Thomas said, waving both arms towards them emphatically.

”We want to talk to Grumpy Glinda before she sits silently at the table and disappears again.” Keith said, grinning his cheesiest “let’s have a family rap session” grin.

“Leave it. It’s not like you won’t be bothering us all for Christmas soon anywa-Glinda? Wizard of Oz, really? Have you nothing else in your life except musicals?”

“I have a pretty cool girlfriend, but nobody seems to want to talk about that.” Keith said, with another strange chuckle.

“That’s because we don’t care, Keith,” Thomas said, “so, please, let’s go. Vamoose. Upstairs, let’s set the table before Mother asks us with, you know, a volume and anger most would describe as yelling.”

This got the duo moving, but Kathleen began a favorite bit of theirs.

”Oh, Keithinald, We mustn't anger Mother.”

”Dear sister Kathleenington, what a shame it would be if we were to anger Mother. Can you imagine something so unseemly? So undignified. What will the other families think of us?”

“We would be like common rabble, disrespecting their Mother and forgetting to use their grape scissors. I would simply die of embarrassment.”

“Mother is not an old-fashioned word.” Thomas told them. Jesus tried to trip him as he followed behind them into the living room. The dining room was not a separate space, but rather an oversized nook that always felt too small for more than two people at a time, but every holiday they piled in together, literally rubbing elbows with the extended family guest while trying to avoid it metaphorically as much as possible. Yes, they were somehow the most put together branch of the family, a bar that could be passed over by moles. The Twins may have be aliens, but, being from another planet, they were not accustomed enough with Earth racial politics to feel the need to go on long rants about “The Spanish”, a somewhat inexplicable term for anyone south of the border, but not Spaniards, who were part of the collective “Europeans” other than The French (especially hated for unspecified reasons) and The British (especially beloved for no certain reason). This was all made slightly more baffling still by the family’s heritages being German on Mother’s side and Basque on Father’s. Thomas had long harbored a vague suspicion the Durango family was kicked out by their fellows rather than being part of a broader diaspora. His evidence was having spent his life around their descendents. Although, when abyssally deep in his cups, Father would sometimes accuse Thomas of being the bastard spawn of a “Gypsy” who was pretending to be Greek at the time. The specifics of the allegation never laid out soberly, but it mostly came down to him being ever so slightly—what was the word Father loved when he was smashed?—swarthier than the rest of the family. That this made him look more like his father than the other children was a point totally lost on the man. Well, it had occasionally been taken, but taken in by a mind that would forget the details of its eruptions almost entirely by dawn and well before the next big binge.

“It’s old fashioned how you use it.” Keith said, chuckling as closely to normal as he ever did this time. It still sounded as if it should be accompanied by a word balloon, being a single, perfectly onomatopoeic “Ha!”

“It might not be as bad if it wasn’t for your whole, well, your whole thing.” Kathleen added.

“What’s my whole thing?” Thomas asked as he dipped into the kitchen to load up with as many dishes and get out as soon as possible.

Kathleen was waiting in place with a “do you really want me to answer that?” cock of the head. Sarcastic smile, hands on her hips, one knee bent out and the other very straight. He knew the pose well. It unsettled him. If he had taken five minutes to come back out she would have stayed like that the whole time. This was not conjecture. He had once stenciled an unfortunate double entendre onto a white tee and talked to her, waiting for her to bring it up. He left to “get something” from another room, and watched her with a mirror through a crack in the door. She held it for half an hour until he came back out to hear a fifteen second explanation of what other things “spunk” could mean. His continued surveillance revealed that, in general, if you left her midconversation she would maintain her general posture to continue when you got back. If you cut her off mid-sentence she’d leave her mouth open and pick up with the exact syllable you left on. He’d never seen anything like it, and wondered if it would be of any use to her acting aspirations. Unfortunately, despite this...talent, she was horrible at memorizing lines in the first place. Or maybe fortunately. If it was ever documented on camera, she might be sold to NASA, and nothing they might discover from the research could be of any benefit to humanity. The Scientologists of Hollywood might take it as proof of something or another.

“Look at how you dress, guy. You’re dressed like a little uptight businessman who can’t commit to casual Friday and you’re not even going out today.”

“You dress well.” John said, offering moral support from the living room, where he was once again staring out a window.

“Men got away with skirts in my time, I don’t really know what’s going on anymore. Maybe you should try that, see how your Pa takes it.” Jesus said sardonically from his new favorite chair.

“It’s a nice jacket and tie with pants more suited for outdoors. I have a business. I have to walk a lot of places. It’s perfectly sensible for my needs.”

“You still have a business?” Keith asked, concerned.

“Like I said, it’s your whole thing. Are you still taking a briefcase to school?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like I carry everything in it. I have a backpack for books.”

“You’re still in business? Do Mom and Dad know?”

“See. If you keep talking like you do and carry a briefcase to school, people are going to make a lot of assumptions about what you’re like. You look like somebody who’s more annoying than you are.”

“Why are you still in business?”

”

“Why wouldn’t I be, Keith? I don’t have the briefcase because I think it looks good, it works for me. It has pockets I can put assignments in, and for pens and pencils. I’m not the weird one. I’m organized, I don’t accidentally crush my papers and think I lost them. Why should I change what I’m doing?”

“You almost died, you little psycho!”

“I know it’s not something you’d expect me to say, but it’d be easier for you if I went with the flow a little more. You don’t need to change everything. Just leave the briefcase. You look like a douchebag.”

John chuckled dryly at her first statement, and Jesus snorted at the last.

“I didn’t, and I won’t.”

The Twins sighed in sync.

“At least call them Mom and Dad, maybe?” Kathleen asked.

“Our relationship isn’t that warm.” Thomas said.

“You say very worrying things very often, you know that right?” Keith asked.

Thomas shrugged and walked away. He went out from the living room onto the back porch. His Father was sitting on a chair next to a small glass table, smoking a cigar.

“Hey, Tom!” the man said cheerfully.

Thomas said nothing, recalling how the last table had been broken when his Father threw him into it as a “joke.” He still had a little scar on the side of his left hand where the glass had cut him. Father told Mother he fell into it while helping with yardwork, winking conspiratorially as if Thomas should have been grateful for being yelled at with slightly less intensity than if he said the boy had been horsing about. That was years ago, and it was the first time Thomas realized he hated the man.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

Thomas said nothing.

“I want you to know I’m proud of you. I know I’ve been hard on you sometimes, but I think it was a good thing. I love your brother, and sisters, but they don’t understand like we do. They don’t understand how a man’s supposed to act.”

“And how’s that?”

“You saw something wrong and stood up for yourself. You looked out for people. We have all of these illegals and terrorists running around, men dressing like women, women dressing like men, and most people can’t even call it wrong. Everybody gets upset even if you just call someone fat anymore. But you did something about it.”

Thomas had an urge to ask where his father had been when he should have been looking out for his son, but he knew the answer (bar) and, being a child, thought the question to be a childish one rather than a fair point. A pointless appeal to an unbending authority. He then thought to question who these fat police were since it was a common source of derision within any classroom he’d ever been in. But that would be deflected to some nebulous “they.” A meaner part of him had the impulse to point out that his father had grown a few pants sizes in the past few years. A million responses tried to thrust their way to the front of the mind, but he settled for a simple “Smoking’s bad for you.”

Father chuckled, anger flashing across his face for a moment, but he was in a sweet spot between not having drunk that day because there was company, but having still gone out the night before because it was family, a place of relatively unstressed sobriety that tempered his urges both to fury over the smallest slight and random acts of violence against his youngest.

“Let’s not stand up to our old man too much.” He said, punching Thomas on the shoulder with a little more force than was friendly.

Thomas said “Dinner will be ready soon.” His Father put out the cigar and headed inside. The two Js slipped out as he went in, John making sure to shoulder check him as he passed. Thomas could have sworn Father stumbled from it, but tried to pay no mind. He walked out into the empty little field they called a backyard. It had once been a little pasture before the man of the house who previously occupied it drove his family off a cliff. On purpose. It was a good price for the acreage, being seen as a murder house by the locals despite the deaths happening in another county.



Thomas had a sour feeling in his stomach. Father's approval was the first thing to cause any doubt about his actions. The man had tried to instruct him in the matters of being a good, upstanding Christian man who stood firm against evil, with less of the grousing about fatties and what have you, when Thomas was very young. Thomas had taken it to heart, and had continued to take it seriously despite the fact that the font of this moral instruction had not. He tried to live by the rules a hypocrite of the highest order had laid out for him, and whenever he reflected on that fact he felt like an idiot. But then there would be even more bodies piled up in the dark if he hadn't.

He walked a circle around the house as he brodded, running into a man they called Charlie Thunder slinking about.

"Afternoon, Charlie. Been here long?" Thomas said.

"Afternoon there, Compendium Taupe. I was needing to talk to you, thought I'd do a lap to see if I could get your attention through a window or something without having to go through your folks. I wasn't going to stick around though, that'd be strange." Charlie said. He had been a confusing figure for Thomas when he was younger and more literally minded. He'd been investigating who had vandalized Charlie's house and asking him all kinds of questions—Charlie insisted it was a thing he'd rather handle himself, but Thomas had been looking into a separate incident for someone else in the first place—about what it was really like being Native American. After a dozen Charlie had told him "If you want to know about Indians, I think they have a Bureau for that. Of course, I never could figure out how some old drawers could handle anyone's affairs. But maybe that's why I'm not in the government."

Thomas had stared at him blankly, wondering if the man was some kind of mad. Charlie slapped him on the shoulder and said "They call that Indian humor."

"What's that?"

"Well, being an Indian, I suppose it's whenever I say something funny."

"Oh...Okaaaay?" Thomas had replied with a befuddled wheeze. He learned from that point on that Charlie only replied to the most simple questions with anything approaching a straightforward answer. Thunder was not his real last name. The two most common theories are that people started calling him that because he did some electrical engineering back in the day (Thomas had asked him if lighting would have been more appropriate and he replied "maybe I was bad at it. Caused a lot of booms.") or because he was a loud person (he was not). There were many more theories, all of which originated from Charlie himself and were mostly mutually

exclusive. Thomas had his first crush on Charlie's daughter, and first heartbreak when Charlie mentioned her getting married in passing two years ago. Thomas had spent the rest of that day lying face down on the basement carpet, moaning woefully for reasons he could not fully articulate, feeling despondent despite his awareness that things wouldn't have worked out, her being nearly two decades older and all. She had told him that Charlie had dodged the draft during Vietnam—and helped burn some official paperwork locked up in a draft office—before leaving for Canada, eventually coming back but never slipping back into his old identity.

Thomas had spent a fair amount of time with the man. When he was eight, Charlie found him up a tree after having been chased by a guard dog. Charlie was a practical man outside of his speech, and decided to teach Thomas some practical skills. Shooting. How to do a shoulder toss on someone larger than him. He had sighed forlornly and told Thomas that conscience demanded he teach the odd little man how to fend for himself if no one was going to stop him playing detective or teach him themselves, but only on the condition that Thomas wasn't looking for a father figure. He hadn't been, and Thomas had been to his house regularly for "karate lessons" ever since.

"What do you need?" Thomas asked.

"You going back into business? You shouldn't, but are you?"

"Yes."

"Thought I'd waste your time with a suitable case for once. Real stumper though, somebody's been stealing my daughter's gardenias."

"You mean destroying?"

"Nope, went into the greenhouse, scooped them out with the soil. Hell of a thing. Should keep you out of real trouble though."

"With my luck it will probably involve an international drug trafficking ring."

"Probably. Seems like a good reason to quit, personally."

"I promise I'll let the DEA handle it if that's the case."

"That reminds me. Why I came here, I mean. You know how I keep an eye on the Sheriff?"

“I did not.”

“There are some feds sniffing around him. Shiny new feds.”

Thomas groaned. The Special Bureau for Countering Domestic Terrorism, a hybrid military-law enforcement blah-blah-blah that'd been slapped together during the brief Hastert presidency before Kerry skated to a default victory, the GOP letting the man who'd invented the “Free Winona” T-shirt run against him because he was the only one left alive who'd technically gotten votes in some kind of primary. Between public revelations about the new president, the embarrassment of having another Major National Security Failure in New York City, and Kerry having been put in a wheelchair by an affiliate of the successful assassins, the dreams of the party to use the tragedy to lock down the office had to be sublimated into a more bipartisanly agreeable expansion of a seemingly quite incompetent security state. It had struck Thomas as a bit like rewarding bad behavior on the promise good would follow, but he'd been told he didn't understand the intricacies of politics yet when he said so, and so did not say out loud anymore. Although he liked to think he was thinking it loudly enough to be heard whenever someone over-enthusiastically tongue shined the newest goon squad's shoes. They were a particular breed of public safety villain. Very good at locking up Joe Schmoes, enthusiastic in their wheeling and dealing with murders and other sordid characters who promised that they could keep future violence pointed at the right people within while making sure only the right kind of cooperative killers managed to trickle in from without. That hell house was the sort of headline catching bloodbath they loved to sniff around even if it didn't fall in their intentionally fuzzy jurisdiction.

“Mmm. Aughwhy was just about what I was thinking too. Great minds, huh?” Charlie said with a commiseratory dryness that was as close as he got to a comforting tone with anyone that wasn't family.

“Do you know what they want?”

“I try not to be in the hearing range of lawmen. They're a skittish creature, best to watch from a distance, like birds. Or mean beavers.”

“Could you kill me now?” Thomas asked.

“No, euthenasia isn't legal around these parts. And I like to keep my nose clean.”

“What if I paid you?”

“Tempting, but I don't think Crystal would approve.”

“What if you told her it was an act of mercy to get me out of the holidays?”

“She’d probably ask why I didn’t kill parents instead.”

“There’s an idea.”

Charlie rarely laughed at jokes, his own or anyone else’s, but that got him, “Heh! Then I think she’d be mad at you for winding up in jail. That’s a show I’d pay to watch.”

“I think she might kill me. That’d be nice. Bring it full circle.”

Charlie’s daughter took after father in many ways, which left Thomas feeling detached from reality whenever he had a conversation with both of them at the same time, but she had a wider serious streak and felt a need to occasionally bring Thomas back down to ground by insisting he promise to not get himself killed or otherwise permanently screw up his life. Not until he was grown up at least. Thomas felt a slightly romantic warmth at the memory, still carrying a spark despite his best efforts to extinguish it. Normally this frustrated him, but it was a decent antacid of the heart to the gnawing pit in his stomach at that moment. He didn’t feel better, but he didn’t feel bad. He decided to ask a vague enough question that he thought it might bypass Charlie’s usual firewall against white people trying to ask him about “affairs.”

“What do you think about Thanksgiving?” Thomas asked, looking up at the grey sky.

“I think the first one went pretty well. Afterparty’s gone on a little long though.”

With that, he walked away, hopping over the low fence with a surprising ease for a man of his size and age. Sarah called out for Thomas. She was even more annoyed than he was over the family tendency to yell for each other, and worked on projecting rather than hollering. Thomas was in the kind of not neutral but not any particular feeling either sort of mood where he probably would have let someone else go on yelling. Jesus and John were debating what exactly the quality of mercy was in an unfriendly agreement as he approached the porch. John held it had earthly limitations, with Jesus insisting it was quite strained due to how often miserable tides of humanity tested it. John bristled at this parallel “yes, and-ing” more than Jesus’ usual contrarianism, and they seemed close to blows. Thomas asked Sarah “You needed me?”

“No, but dinner’s almost ready so come back in.”

“So thirty more minutes of everyone standing around wondering what Mother’s definition of soon is?”

“Hey, she's the only one cooking.”

“She’s the only one cooking because she’ll throw you in the oven if you try to help.”

“It’s a special occasion. I don't know.”

“Is it? She’s like that about everything. I think I was in Kindergarten the last time she taught me anything. She just gets mad that you don’t know how to do something, does it herself, and gets mad again because you didn’t learn how to do it.”

“You know what I mean, asshole.”

“You don’t have to defend her, she might have a terrible husband, that still doesn’t excuse her being a terrible mother. I have a terrible father and you don’t see me making it her problem.”

“You don’t have to sleep with him.” she mumbled.

“You’d be surprised at what I’ve had to do.” Thomas said flatly. Sarah searched his eyes for a sign of grief, but there was nothing. Not even anger. John and Jesus went silent.

“We should talk.” She said, taking her brother by the sleeve of his jacket. It was in those little moments of empty despair that he didn’t look like a child dressing like a grown up anymore. The clothes fit him well suddenly, and she hated the part of herself that saw him like that. He didn’t seem like he was growing up when he was sharing some new piece of interesting knowledge he had acquired, or showing enthusiasm for a simple joy. Only when he was looking struggling with something awful and letting it wash over him. It was what her world had always told her was what innocence was, nothing more than ignorance. Once you had learned enough, you were innocent no more, you were a man or woman, women prized like meat and men like butchers. One demanded to always be delightful to the senses and one demanded to not be too squeamish about all the blood. She hated that part of herself because it felt like something alien worming into her mind. It made her want to scream sometimes that everyone else was so very concerned about what kind of man he would become that they’d forgotten to make sure he turned out human. And somehow, by being the only one to notice this error, this instruction became her duty rather than anyone who should have been bringing him up coming to their senses. The damned, secret tragedy of it all was that he hadn’t been human in the literal sense for a long time. The saving grace was that she had done a better job keeping him human than she ever could have been expected to in the realms of metaphor and spirit. That it had taken him so long to have his first taste of flesh, and that it was of someone so undeniably wicked, was a testament to that. She never would be given due credit for saving the world from a worse fate than the one that would befall it, from anyone other than Thomas that is.

The humanity shown through in a small way that day. Thomas saw that slight wrinkling around the eyes that gave away when she was deeply concerned and the hollowness was filled by bashful regret. "I'm sorry. We might actually have a Thanksgiving without a disturbance this year. I'm better now, I just...I need to get better at letting off steam sometimes. I've kind of been cooped up lately."

"I know. I've had to listen to your special projects or whatever at night."

"I'm trying to make some different kinds of earthen ovens in the backyard."

"Of course you are. I want to talk now though. And it'll still be better than hanging around a table for a half hour while Grandpa tries to grill me about whether or not I'm a dyke because I wear jeans."

"I think you're just supposed to say lesbian now."

"It's not what he'd say."

"Fair point."

She steered him through the house. The others were standing around the table awkwardly, as expected. Grandfather was chewing sunflower seeds as he scowled at The Twins. Father was babbling at him about something in an attempt to get an indication of approval.

"What's up, kids?" Keith asked.

"Nothing much until I get my pool back, Keithleen." Sarah told him as she pushed Thomas along towards the basement stairs. They hated being referred to that way.

"It was an above ground pool! Inflatable!" Keith shouted at her.

"You can literally get another! You can't hold it against us forever!" Kathleen followed up.

Sarah sat Thomas on an old beanbag chair. She sat on the couch next to him. It was how they had serious conversations best, having to make an effort to make eye contact. Neither handled sincere, open feeling well, having seen it so rarely outside of rage. Thomas smiled weakly at Manuel, who sat on a cheap folding chair next to the old tv.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to have a conversation about Father. I don’t want you to feel like you need to stick around to help me with him.” Thomas said.

“I was thinking about it, but then I thought it’d be better if you had someplace to go sometimes. I’m trying to find a place rather than dorms. You could visit. God knows you get around anyway. Unless you want me to kill him for you.” Jesus and John had been hanging around at the foot of the stairs. Jesus had opened his mouth at the opening, but John grabbed him by the scruff and let out a growl like a hound from hell.

“No. I was planning to get around to that myself sometime. Things keep cropping up, unfortunately.”

“I don’t know if you’re joking or not. But I’d really hate for you to swap jails rather than get free. Or whatever.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

“That’s not what I wanted to talk about though. This time. I dunno. I’ve been trying to figure out how to ask this. You killed people. People who tried to kill you. I don’t know what’s true about what they found down there, I don’t know what you saw. But it...it really fucked you up, right?”

Thomas leaned his head back and sank into the chair.

“You could say that.”

“So why don’t you act like it? Okay, mom and dad might not be able to handle it, but you gotta tell somebody how you feel.”

“I try. The therapists. Pastor Dole. All the people they send me to talk to, but they all think I regret going there. It’s the one thing I don’t. I stopped it. All of it. Put it to a permanent end. I couldn’t even tell you how. I get flashes. Using things Charlie taught me. Biting into someone’s neck to get them off me. It’s terrible. It was terrible. But everything they did was terrible, and now they can’t ever do it again. I wouldn’t take that back.”

“Why does it always have to be you though?”

“Because it has to be somebody. And I can do it. And the people who should have done something about it wouldn’t. Some things don’t just end, they have to be stopped. You would have stopped me, because it’d be the right thing for you to do. But I had to do it, because

somebody had to do it. I don't think I'm a special boy genius. I just try to be the person I would want to be around if I was in that kind of trouble."

"Don't let it go to your head, but you are a little bit of a genius. It kind of sucks having to ask somebody in junior high for help with my AP classes. "

"At least you're in AP."

"I guess. It doesn't bother you that you killed people?"

"It does. I wish I didn't have to, but they didn't give me much in the way of options. I don't like that I did that. But it's what was going to happen eventually.. You don't want to know everything, but they weren't going quietly. They would have eaten Sheriff alive, that's for sure."

"Literally?"

Thomas looked over at Manuel "Like I said, you don't want to know what they would have done."

"I still don't understand why you went. Not you, Thomas, the kid that solves crimes. You, Thomas Durango. Takes a briefcase to school and corrects teachers on their lessons. Little dorky guy who feels bad when he sees flies trying to get off flypaper."

"What is your people's obsession with my briefcase? It's perfectly practical."

"Don't avoid the question."

"Flies don't understand." Thomas said, propping up his head on a forearm to look at John, who looked back at him with stern approval not because of what he said, but was going to.

"I said don't avoid the question."

"I'm not. That'd make sense if I told you...it's not important right now. It's hard to make people understand. Do you remember how they covered Martin Luther King Junior and Ghandi in school?"

"You've read all the books I have, nerd."

"I always thought there was something funny about nonviolence. As a term. I get what it means. That they weren't violent. But it always seemed off. It's why I went to that house when I



could have let somebody else deal with it. I didn't even know it myself. But I talked to somebody while I was in the hospital. Or maybe I imagined it. It finally made sense, why it felt wrong. This person and I...we talked it over and it's... There is no nonviolent option dealing with...everything. You can not hurt people yourself, but that doesn't stop people being hurt. You can hurt what seems like the right people, but what happens to the people they leave behind who didn't do anything wrong? The Nazis had babies and pets. We killed some of them. But if nobody stopped them, they would have kept killing, and killed plenty of their own anyway. If you choose not to fight when fighting could save someone, the blood is on your hands. But even if you're trying to do the right thing, all the other blood is still on your hands. And if it's something like war, there will always be other blood. Martin Luther King didn't avoid violence. He knew people on those marches would get hurt. He thought that hurt there could help prevent more later. I don't know better than him. But I know there was violence. He chose to not do it. He let it be done to him and convinced other people to do the same. He accepted that responsibility. People riot all over the world knowing that maybe it will make things worse, but hoping it'll get better. People talk about pacifism and war like there's a good option and bad, but there isn't. They talk like it's a switch that can be flipped. Everybody has blood on their hands, the only choice we have is how it gets there. When somebody dies in a sweatshop to make your clothes a little cheaper, it's on your hands. And when I say things like that people think I'm a dumb kid all of a sudden, that I don't understand all the nuances, but what if I'm not? You can't save the world on your own, but if everyone keeps telling themselves the problems are all too big for them to do much, not much will change, and it might get worse. Somebody has to be the first. Maybe it'll drive you crazy if you think about all the awful things that make the world as we know it possible all the time, but maybe crazy is what we need sometimes. To change things. Reasonable people are how this all happened. Sheriff and the town police saw those missing strangers and drifters and told themselves "I can't solve all that. I have to look out for my town", and then people went missing from town and they wondered how it could have happened. Maybe it could have all turned out differently if he cared from the start. But the problem grew and grew until I said enough. Me, your dork brother who dresses like a...a...a dingus, apparently. I didn't have many options because he didn't want to hear how bad things were. So I took the one I had. I went there myself. And that's how it is for the world. People have reasons to fight. They have reasons to not fight. People have not been caring enough for thousands of years and we all have to deal with it. I didn't do the right thing. I didn't do the wrong thing. I did what I could. We can't even know if we did the right thing until it's over. Maybe the tanks will roll over everyone if we don't take a shot now. Maybe taking a shot is what gets them rolling in the first place. Maybe marching for peace will save a lot of lives and also get the people marching next to you killed. Maybe them getting killed will start a war, maybe it'll prevent it. Nobody knows. So people argue over what will most likely happen, over and over so they never have to make a choice. They fight over what's the next best step so they never have to take it. But people were dying then, Sarah, doing nothing would have gotten more killed. I didn't even know what I was going to do. I played it by ear. And I didn't think I'd survive, but I tried to until I did. It

happened. It was the worst night of my life, but it's over. I'm still here. And I'd rather be someone who made a wrong choice than somebody who chose to do nothing and lost friends anyway. I can live with that blood on my hands. You can't stop evil without somebody bleeding, and the longer it goes on, the worse it gets. I bled. I made them bleed. This time, the sin was purged. If I died trying, maybe that still would have at least made somebody have had to do something."

There was a long silence.

"Why didn't Charlie help?" Sarah asked

"Huh. I didn't think to ask. I just don't know his mind."

"You didn't even ask?!"

"I know you're upset, but I'd point out that it somewhat proves my point about fallibility."

Thomas suddenly felt a hand yanking on his hair.

"You almost got killed and you didn't even ask for help from the man you said helped you not die, you jackass!"

"Ah! Sarah, I thought we had put physical violence behind us!"

She thrashed his head, "You almost left me alone with this freak show and you didn't think to ask!"

"I didn't know we were close like that!"

She slapped him across the face.

"We're family!" she shouted.

"In my defense, we're part of this family."

A vein bulged on her forehead, then subsided. The anger left, deflating her.

"That's true." she said.

"I always like you. I'm not sure I know what love is, but you're basically my favorite person. I didn't know you felt similarly." Thomas said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"You say very concerning things very often."

"I've been told that."

Sarah mumbled something.

"What was that?"

"I love you. I'm not saying it again."

"Oh, that's. That's, uh, good to hear." They both sat in awkward silence. Manuel coughed.

"Right. I have something I've been meaning to tell you. There is something I'm sorry about. Two things, really"

"What?"

"I'm sorry I didn't save your boyfriend. And I'm sorry that with all the fuss over me nobody else in the family has really seemed to care. I know you've been mad with me about that, and I understand. I, uh, I think it's messed up. I think Moth...I think mom might care if you reminded her. She always, umm, disliked you the least."

"I'm not mad at you."

"You are."

"I am! I shouldn't be and I am! I hate it!"

"It's okay. If you'd actually been a jerk about it that would be rude, but grief is weird. I don't mind you feeling mad. Mr. Garcia tries to run me over sometimes."

"What the fuck?"

"I did kill his wife."

"She stabbed you!"

“It’s bad behavior, but he is very upset. She died, and it turned out she’d been cheating on him. And she was going to kill him. I think he wishes she had rather than going through all that.”

Sarah hugged him. “I’m calling the police once dinner is over and you’re not going to be doing any detective shit as long as I’m living here.”

“I guess I can live with that. Your boyfriend was cool. He let me try weed.”

“That kind of thing is why I was planning on breaking up with him.”

“Oh. I guess I can avoid any new trouble, but Eddie Rogers is kind of already gunning for me.”

She squeezed tighter “I think you might be suicidal.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want to die. It’s just a strong possibility.”

“If you do, I’ll find a way to kill you again.”

“How long is this going to last?”

“It’s not over until you hug me back, loser.”

Thomas gave her a few moments before he did. Sarah released him and went upstairs to interact with the others at last. Manuel took her seat on the couch.

“See, that wasn’t so bad, little dude.”

“Are you real?”

“We’re all just phantoms, man. It’s just, what do you call it, a matter of degrees.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said, “Yeah.”

Thomas looked to John, “You probably could have said all that better.”

“The point was made. That’s the important thing.”

“Did you get along with Indians?”

“I would like to think I did my best.”

“That sounds like something a figment of my imagination would say since I don’t know. I really hope none of you are real. I don’t need ghosts on top of everything else.”

Jesus cut it “See, that proves you’re sane. If you were crazy you would completely believe I was real. I’ve seen it a million times.”

“Shut up, Jesus.” Thomas replied. The Lord shrugged and turned on the TV, sound off, watching the images of the world pass by.

Thomas climbed the stairs to join the rest. The food was placed down. Prayers were said. In a rare moment of unity, all the siblings exchanged eye rolls at the piety of the decidedly impious as they mouthed along. Suddenly a strange but increasingly frequent thing happened to Thomas. A chill went up his spine. Suddenly the normal world was gone and his vision hovered above it. The world and all the things in it were made flat, shadows cast across paper. The only things with full dimensions were strange wisps, souls of all kinds. One stood out and was close. Coming up the driveway, a white, writhing mass of smokey tendrils. Thomas informed the room that someone was at the door. The normal world reasserted itself. He was up and opening it before the man could knock. His fist hung in the air as he asked “Are you Thomas Durango?” with the tone of a man who knew the answer.

“Speaking. You are?”

“Special Agent Talbot. Special Bureau. I’d like to have a word with you.”

Keith had come to snoop and told Thomas “5th amendment, Tom. Don’t say anything.” The man didn’t react except to clench his jaw, causing his temples to flare out and flattop hair to somehow look pointier. It was like a lizard unfurling frills. To Keith’s credit, his response to the display was a snooty “Hmph.”

“Will you give me a second? Keith, can you tell everyone I’m going for a walk, you can start without me.”

“Eh. Fine. Don’t admit anything.”

“Maybe don’t make it sound like I have anything to admit.” Thomas said as he closed the door. He led the agent down the lane that ran up the hill to the house, a car with government plates parked outside the gate at the bottom.

“You guys want to get in on the hell house, huh?”

“Some of us. I’m more interested in something else. You know Edward Rogers?”

“I do.”

“Yes, you do. Your sheriff tells me you have some kind of grudge. Can you tell me about that?”

“His children were like family to me, his wife left with them because he’s an awful man, he killed her, sent them away, and set up shop in my town. We want each other dead. The usual.”

The agent whistled. “Tall order for a small fry.”

“I get that a lot.”

Thomas opened the gate and led the man into the treeline.

“I won’t disagree with your assessment of the man, but I thought you might do my organization a favor and back off.”

“Why?”

“I don’t expect you to understand this completely yet, son—and normally I wouldn’t let you know this much—but you seem ahead of the curve of most boys your age. Sometimes the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t. We know Eddie well, and he knows about all kinds of other devil’s business. It might not be good, but it’s useful to have him out in the world.”

Thomas stopped and the man halted beside him. The sun was setting. “Have you ever been to Grenada, Mr. Talbot?”

“How’d you know?”

A few minutes later Thomas came whistling up the hill. Ol’ peepaw was pacing on the porch. He had never liked the law despite how much he liked people going to prison. Tom skipped up the steps of the porch.

“What’d you talk about?” Gramps asked. There was something even more off about the boy than usual.

“We debated how many compromises a man can make before he is compromised. I’d say I wo-” Thomas suddenly heaved midsentence, retching until he threw up red-black bile and an old USMC ring. He reached down and picked it up, admiring it under the porch light

“Tacky,” he said with a big smile, “here you go, grandpa. Don’t say I never got anything for you.”

Thomas held out the ring. Grandpa reached out to grab the ring with a shaky hand. He flinched when Tom pulled it back. He flicked it into the air and snatched it the moment it started to drop without looking. His pupils were wide as saucers.

“Thomas, what happened in that house?”

“Nothing anyone wanted, more than anyone could imagine. You know, your father was wrong about you.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“You’re a bigger disappointment than he thought. I mean, what made you such a mean sucker? Was it because life was hard? No, it was because being mean made was so easy. And your boy is even worse! What a worm you are. Don’t worry though, even the invertebrates have a place in God’s mysterious ways. But one must know their place. So I don’t want any nonsense from you at the dinner table. Isn’t that what daddy always told you? You better have a good time, little Davey, my boy, or else?”

Tom slipped the ring in Grandpa Dave’s front pocket. Suddenly the loose, breeziness that had struck Grandfather as unnatural was gone and tightly wound Thomas was back.

“Oh, hey. It wasn’t anything interesting. Let’s get back inside.” Thomas held the door for him. The food was untouched.

“I said you could go ahead.” Thomas said as he took his seat.

“We weren’t waiting on you.” Mother replied, staring daggers at Grandfather. Everyone clenched, but Grandfather apologized with an unusual profuseness.

“What’d the man want, Tom?” Father asked.

“Just told me to stay out of trouble. I was thinking of doing that anyway.” Thomas said.

“Don’t blame me if you get arrested. Now that’s out of the way, Dad, did I tell you I have a new girlfriend. I actually have a picture.”

Sarah and Mother made sounds of disgust. Kathleen tittered at the reaction. Thomas had a strange urge to shield the mystery woman from Father’s gaze as long as possible. “Let me see your phone.”

“I thought you didn’t want to see it, Tomathy.”

“I want to see what the fuss is.”

Keith handed Thomas the phone. He looked over the photo for a few seconds.

“I know her. Kind of.” Thomas said truthfully.

“What? How? She’d never be mixed up in your, your...griminess.”

“Calm down. I said kind of. She was at this party where there was a kind of spiked punch bowl situation. There was a rash of them. Caused a few car crashes.”

“Oh, that’s not so bad then. About her. How’d that one ever turn out?”

“Symphorophilies that watched this movie called Crash a few too many times and thought they’d have a good time ruining people’s drives home.”

“I don’t know what that means and please don’t tell me.” Keith said.

“Anyway, Keith wants us all to know he tricked some girl with an absolutely back-ruining bosom and no shyness about the cleavage into giving him the time of day.”

Kathleen and Sarah both snorted. Father tried to suppress his disappointment at Keith stuffing the phone back in his pocket. Mother chided Thomas for his inappropriateness, thinking it rude sincerely, but was too amused at Keith’s shock to get mad. Keith called his brother a grubby troll with a mind in the gutter. Grandfather chewed away dutifully at his mashed potatoes, trying to think up a compliment. Then Sarah said “I watched that with Manuel.”

She broke out into a sob. Mother acted like a Mom for the first time in years, getting up to wrap her arms around her daughter. Another Thanksgiving with tears, but this time it was from a good hurt. A hurt that would heal.



Now, Christmas, that would be a disaster.